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# **CROSSINGS**

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### **A Journal of English Studies**

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## ***Editorial Note***

The tenth volume of *Crossings* is special for us. Ten in numerology signifies the completion of a circle, and the determination to move forward with renewed vigor. Over the last decade, we have established ourselves as a serious publishing outlet, attracting scholars from across the globe.

Our international panel of advisors, our double-blind peer-review process and our enterprising attitude towards budding scholars and researchers have given *Crossings* its academic reputation. The challenge now, as we move to our next phase, will be to increase the impact factor of the journal by enlisting our publication with the appropriate endorsing bodies.

The occasional papers, true to their spirits, share some personal ideas on some serious issues. Prof. Kaiser Haq is the most formidable English poet from Bangladesh. He reflects on the shaping influence of British poetry in his characteristic humorous way as is evident in the title that echoes the 1956 film *The King and I*. Mohammad Shamsuzzaman is a regular contributor to local dailies and a big spokesperson for Composition Studies. His arsenal is equipped with arguments to prove that writing is a skill that needs to be acquired; there is no arcane mystery to it.

The Literature and Cultural Studies section offers a myriad voices. Writers from different continents have expressed their views based on both familiar and less familiar texts on issues such as race, gender, environment, and class.

Conversely, the Language and Applied Linguistics section is grounded in local reality. It shows the growing tension within English Studies. Authors have talked about language policies, transition from the secondary to the tertiary, pedagogy of EFL, and the discrepancies between English and Bangla medium students. The ideological concerns reflected in the previous section receive a reality check in this section.

We hope you enjoy our efforts.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

**Shamsad Mortuza, PhD**

Editor, *Crossings* Vol. 10

*Occasional Papers*

# British Poetry and I

Kaiser Haq

*Professor, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Dhaka*

Lest the title of my brief piece seem pretentious, let me hasten to point out in all humility that a writer, even as in the present case a very minor one, has to relate to the various traditions that have a bearing on his work on a one on one basis, largely without the mediation of academic criticism or theory. My aim, in other words, is modest – not to present a comprehensive, critically astute picture of British poetry but, rather, a memoir of my engagement with it.

What “it” is, however, requires some unpacking. It’s only nowadays that one hears of British poetry or British literature. Not that, “Britain” or “British” do not have an impeccable, ancient etymology; but when it came to talking about the literature of the British Isles, it was subsumed under the rubric “English,” which functioned synecdochically, and was not objected to. And so we have Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1919) and its successor, Helen Gardner’s *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972); and Philip Larkin’s *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). Q, to use Sir Arthur’s pseudonym, included not only Irish, Welsh and Scotch poets but a few Americans as well. Helen Gardner, for reasons of space, limited herself to poets born in the British Isles, but included Ezra Pound because he had played a crucial role in the development of modern poetry in England. Larkin too limits himself to “writers born in these islands (or resident here for an appreciable time),” but confesses to breaking his own rule; he includes Derek Walcott, for instance.

“English poetry,” then, did at one time mean poetry in the English language; and if attempts were made to restrict the sense geographically it was more because of the limitations imposed by the acceptable size of an anthology than any sense of cultural exclusiveness. Even when the rubric “British” was used it was used inclusively to cover everything in English from the Empire; witness David Lester Richardson’s *Selections from the British Poets from Chaucer to the Present Day* (Calcutta, 1840), which included Derozio and Kasyprasad Das.

The present usage of “British,” however, is restrictive but not unproblematic. Strictly speaking, it should refer to the British Isles but not to Northern Ireland; and so the editors of the Bloodaxe anthology *The New Poetry* (1993) in their introduction declare their purview to be “British and Irish writers,” and include immigrant British poets. Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison in their anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) include, without any apology, poets born in Northern Ireland, and in fact showcase Seamus Heaney as the contemporary poetic star. Heaney wasn’t pleased, though, and published the reasons for his refusal to be called British in a satiric poem in *The New Yorker*.

But enough of hair splitting. “British lit” is a label that has come to stay, especially after the Thatcher administration decided to promote it rather than “English lit,” which is now seen as divisive and hegemonic. It’s worth mentioning that Andrew Motion in a Foreword to a recent reprint of Larkin’s anthology notes that today the latter’s inclusive use of the label “English” “would be likely to start a riot.”

When I first encountered poetry, or rather verse, in the English language in kindergarten, my teachers and I were innocent of controversies related to labels. The prescribed pieces were memorized rather than analyzed. I was neither enthusiastic about them nor apathetic. I must have

relished the jaunty rhythms that seem to be a sine qua non of poetry for kindergartens.

I had a little nut tree  
Nothing would it bear  
But a silver nutmeg  
And a golden pear

I still remember this opening stanza, no doubt because I gave a recitation of the rhyme (a lackluster performance by all accounts) at a school function.

Delving into the rhymes background I am delighted to find that it might have had something to do with the marital adventures of either Henri VII or Henry VIII. Nursery rhymes are always fraught with significance far removed from the supposed innocence of childhood.

A few years later, in secondary school, we did Walter de la Mare's "If I were Lord of Tartary," a poem conducive to enjoyable daydreams. I think there was something by Longfellow as well though I cannot recall what it was; but I remember my friends and me declaring that his name was memorable.

Till my mid-teens I was not a poetry buff, and any suggestion that I might scribble a poem would have been dismissed as absurd. But I had friends who affected interest in poetry and spoke with familiarity of John Keats and William Wordsworth and Lord Byron. One of them briefly piqued my interest by telling me in a conspiratorial undertone that Percy Bysshe Shelley – a notorious man – had a poem with the line "The golden tresses between her thighs." I asked him to show the poem. He did not have it. We combed a selection of Shelley's verses that we found in the school library. To no avail. Even the internet is no help. But I cling to the belief that such a line belongs in a little erotic gem of a poem that will come to light one day.

Then, in my last year in secondary school, I had some sort of a conversion experience (epiphany would be too strong and pretentious a word to use here). Our literature teacher was Brother Hobart, a loveable Irish-American eccentric who opened up my sensibility to the unique beauty of poetry and at the same time inculcated a key lesson in the art of writing. He would take a poem, read it out or ask one of us to read it out, and then involve the whole class in the exercise of producing a critical appreciation. He would ask us to suggest sentences or phrases, or pause in mid-sentence and challenge us to continue. It became palpable that the business of writing was a game of trying out sentences and revising them till one felt one had got it right. Two very different poems stick in my mind from those halcyon days. One was Robert Herrick's "Daffodils," which left behind an abiding admiration for the delicate Caroline lyric. I hadn't seen daffodils yet, and the Internet wasn't there to provide a visual feast of the exotic bloom. But it didn't matter. The *karuna rasa* evoked by the euphonious lines was perfectly realized.

The other poem was D. H. Lawrence's "Snake." It opened up the universe of free verse, of whose existence I had been completely unaware. The simple diction gave instant access to the dramatic situation presented in the poem. I was transported instantaneously to "the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree." The carob tree was as unfamiliar as daffodils, but that mattered not a whit. The adjectival fanfare, blithely breaking a common rule of good writing, brought the tree to life. Above all, the sinuous rhythms of conversational language, masterfully exploited, brought home to me how great poetry could be created without the pillars of meter or rhyme.

The poetry in traditional forms that I warmed to, like Herrick's "Daffodils," would never have

induced me to essay poems of my own. Their beauty was linguistically remote though they might effectively convey an emotion or feeling or mood. There were a number of such poems encountered in my secondary and higher secondary classes that have stuck in my memory, but I couldn't have taken any of them as a model: Charles Lamb's "The Old Familiar Faces," Thomas Moore's "The Light of Other Days," Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," John Masefield's "Cargoes." Greater poems in the canon, perfect though they were, seemed even more remote: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Shelley's "To a Skylark," Keat's "Ode to the Nightingale" (an admirer of the hard-boiled Hemingway, I couldn't stomach the opening phrase, "My heart aches").

No, it was Lawrence who set me scribbling verse – free verse. I would later learn that Lawrence's inspiration was Walt Whitman, the first great poet to write exclusively in free verse. Surely it was no accident that Whitman was American. Being American, he wasn't – as I am not or any South Asian is not – born to the King's/Queen's English and the iambic pentameter. I know this is a brash generalization, and like any generalization, must be taken with more than a grain of salt. After all, the finest iambic pentameters in twentieth century verse come from Robert Frost. And in South Asia, Dom Moraes and Vikram Seth have proved themselves as skilled at turning out iambs as any poet born in the Home Counties. Still, I think it is undeniable, very broadly speaking, that the "barbaric yawp" of the American vernacular or the spicy intonations of Indian Varieties of English are more conducive to poeticizing in free verse. This is by and large true even of those of us who speak what I would like to call the Maharaja's English. Among British poets, those well removed by class or regional affiliation from the ambit of King's/Queen's English and the iambic pentameter happily take to free verse.

As I began my higher secondary studies, I chanced upon a review of contemporary poetry reprinted from some British paper. One of the poets dealt with was Philip Larkin, a new name to me, and quoted the most famous lines from his earlier period: "Hatless, I take off/ My cycle clips in awkward reverence." I was bowled over. At about the same time I got hold of the Penguin anthology *New Writing in America* and thrilled to Allen Ginsberg's ecstatic chant "Kral Majales": "And I am the King of May, which is the power of sexual youth." It would probably be accurate to place my work in the uneasy no-man's-land between the "cool" poetry of Larkin and the vatic utterances of the Beat Generation, and among the latter the zany performances of Lawrence Ferlinghetti rather than the visionary Ginsberg.

My focus in this brief note ought to be on the British side of my literary inheritance, so let me elaborate on its precise nature. It was in my higher secondary days that I also came upon T. S. Eliot and realized that he occupied a central position in the tradition of modern poetry in English. Despite various attempts to dislodge him, I believe he remains unassailable. I took to heart his dictum that no *vers* is *libre* for the serious poet. His urban imagery and urbane sensibility, his irony, as well as his jazzier experiments, as in "Fragments of an Agon" ("Under the bam/ Under the boo/ Under the bamboo tree") map out the modern tradition as it has evolved till today. But Eliot cannot be seen in isolation from Imagism, which I regard as having laid the foundations for modern poetry in English. It was Anglo-American, linking Pound, Amy Lowell, H. D. and William Carlos Williams with Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint and D. H. Lawrence. The minimalist agenda of Imagism focused on a few essential aspects: the centrality of the poetic image, the importance of cadence, based on "the musical phrase" rather than meter, the emphasis on concreteness, and on a spare idiom shorn of adjectives. Yeats, though not a card-carrying Imagist, absorbed its lessons; his poem "A Coat" could pass off as an Imagist manifesto.

W. H. Auden comes next. Like Eliot he straddles the Atlantic and has been influential on both sides of the pond. A master of traditional as well as free forms, he has extended the stock of poetic imagery to include aspects of modern technology and modern power-play, aeroplanes and barbed wire and filling stations. Dipping into him one can come upon cues for new poems. The same holds, though to a lesser degree, for Louis McNiece and Stephen Spender. Dylan Thomas fascinated me in my youth, but he remains memorable for only a handful of poems; but I learned to read poetry aloud from his recorded readings.

From my childhood till my early adulthood is also roughly the time when the three major collections of Larkin came out. I am sure this is not sufficient reason to claim that we shared the same mental climate. But on the basis of my reading of Larkin over more than half a century I can claim that his wry anti-Romantic poetry is congenial to my sensibility, though his verse forms can never be mine.

Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age.                    (“Dockery and Son”)

Larkin’s dismissal of the “myth kitty” was equally congenial. I do not possess a mythopoetic imagination, and Eliot’s reliance on myth had always seemed excessive to me. Larkin helped me shake off the notion that the mythopoetic method was a privileged one in modern literature.

Among Larkin’s younger contemporaries there were some who formed a group that called itself, somewhat tautologically, “The Group.” Founded by Philip Hobsbaum, it included Peter Redgrove, Edward Lucie-Smith, Peter Porter, Zulfiqar Ghose and several others. For ten years or so the poets met regularly to discuss their work. Several poems by one poet, previously circulated, would be subjected to rigorous analysis. As described in Hobsbaum’s *A Theory of Communication* (1970), these meetings have important lessons for anyone interested in poetry workshops. Besides, I find the aim of these poets to write “frank autobiographical poems” and a “poetry of direct experience” quite congenial.

More directly useful for me was the best-selling (half a million copies sold) Penguin Modern Poets, Volume 10, *The Mersey Sound*. The three Liverpoolian poets Roger McGough, Adrian Henri and Brian Patten were fresh, accessible, and, oxymoronically, lively and melancholy. They were as exciting as the three Beat poets, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Corso, in Volume 5 in the same series. There were other interesting British poets outside the mainstream, like Christopher Logue or Adrian Mitchell or Jeff Nuttall, from whom I could learn something about turning present-day reality, including its political aspects, into direct, non-academic poetry.

As for more recent British poetry, I have not tried to keep up with it, preferring to read desultorily, and now and then finding things I enjoy. But by and large, writers do not find it very useful to make systematic studies of their peers from younger generations; some sort of generation gap opens up; the younger writers differ significantly if subtly in their ways of looking at the world, and in the idiom they employ. And yet, it is important to look at what younger writers are doing, if only to make sure that the generations comprehend each other sufficiently to keep tradition alive. I could put together a substantial anthology of interesting young British poets of diverse hues while recognizing that their approach to the craft of verse isn’t what comes naturally to me when I scribble. Perhaps, in subtle ways, I am also absorbing poetic elements from them.

**Note:** Presented (in absentia) at the two-day international seminar on “Re-reading British Poetry across Time and Space: Themes, Issues and Perspectives” at the University of Gaur Banga, Malda, India on March 12-13, 2019.

# Reflections on My Dilemmas with Writing

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## Abstract

The field of Writing Studies is full of prescriptions and proscriptions. As a writing professional, I'm cognizant of these directives. While I treasure my extensive exposure to the knowledge-base of Writing Studies/Composition, I don't uncritically endorse and enact the theories that the discipline of Writing Studies upholds. It often dawns on me that the discipline of Writing Studies falls short in appreciating the complex composing process that I embody as a second language writer in English. I don't blame the field of Writing Studies for such a lacuna, as I know that the discipline emerged in North America to cater to the writing needs of the native speakers of English. I'm a non-native of the English language, already conditioned by a culture that is entrenched in different epistemology and philosophy of writing. Ours is a culture of so-called writer-based or creative writing, and writing is believed to be a natural endowment. Writing is not taught or learned. It's, instead, absorbed and acquired. Composition Studies predominantly deals with so-called reader-based or academic writing, and the discipline stubbornly maintains that writing is a learned skill. My cultural and linguistic backgrounds contradict with some of the fundamental assumptions of the discipline of Composition Studies. I don't have an absolute allegiance to the epistemology and philosophy of my ur-culture. Neither am I completely colonized by the discipline of Composition Studies. My default writing process spawns some dilemmas as such. I reveal and reflect on these dilemmas in this essay.

**Keywords:** Composition, L2 Writing

My academic interest and expertise revolve around writing. I qualify to theorize the politics and poetics of writing in an informed fashion as such. But every time I attempt to write something, I discover to my dismay that my knowledge about writing hardly enhances my ability to write. I struggle to write. I can't tame the words to frame sentences, which will convey my ideas with utmost cohesion and clarity. Almost always, my writing appears soggy and stilted. I can't breathe life into words. I wonder and worry as to the origin of my difficulties with writing. I'm tempted to attribute my inability to the fact that I've opted to write not in my first language, Bengali, but in a second language, English. A writing professional would argue that this is a lame excuse to refrain from writing. Under normal circumstances, one acquires a language innately. Writing, however, is not an innate skill; it's, instead, a learned skill. If one doesn't learn how to write, she will fail to write. Proficiency in a language eases the process of writing, but this is not the fundamental prerequisite to writing. Writing is thoughts clarified. To learn to think is a cultivated skill, not an innate one. The deduction here is that I struggle to write given that I haven't learned to think through writing.

I, therefore, attempted to discover the methods of learning to write. Writing has been an area which has a hoary history of millennia. The field evolves and emerges anew till this day. Experts are too deeply polarized to propose a uniform theory of writing. Genre, audience, and context determine how a piece of writing will be conceived and constructed. These variables (i.e., genre, audience, and context) can't be approached with preconceived ideas, since they are amenable to spatial and temporal as well as institutional constraints and criteria. All writing theories, then, are contingent, controversial, and partial. Think, for example, of the two stalwarts of American writing: Ernest

Hemingway and Gore Vidal. Hemingway claims in his “Paris Review” interview that our best writing comes out when we are in love. Gore Vidal, however, claims in his “Paris Review” that he left love when he was sixteen. The process of writing seems so unique and inscrutable that no two writers seem to draw from the same repertoire. Naipaul (1986) seems revealing in this context, who claims that all literary forms are artificial and change constantly to match the new tone and mood of the culture. This perspective considered, writing is a cultural artefact, and because culture shifts, no writer can depend on a fixed set of theories. That leaves an aspiring writer in a bind.

Nonetheless, the consensus in the field is that learning to write presupposes two things: extensive reading and regular writing. Research in the area of writing confirms that all great writers have been voracious readers themselves. Extensive reading provides one with the ideas and information as well as the examples and explanations one may incorporate into her writing; it, as well, familiarizes one with the lexical, syntactic, and mechanical options and restrictions that writers generally avoid or adopt. Pinker (2014) claims that we become writers by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples from good prose. However, the connection between reading and writing is not as inevitable and automatic as it apparently seems. For example, how could Tennessee Williams write when he would not read and for whom ignorance was a blessing, as Gore Vidal confirms in the “Paris Review” interview? Toor (2011) cautions us further not to promote reading as an inevitable cognate to writing given that reading is like eating. If someone is on a diet of junk prose, that can destroy his writing minds and muscles. If reading has to complement writing, readers must stay away from bad prose. Unfortunately, bad prose is endemic and unavoidable. Reading is doubtless a non-negotiable requirement for writing only when readers choose their options of reading wisely.

As well as that, writing begets writing, which simply means that one becomes a writer by being a writer. Writing never emerges from any secret, sacred source. Writing demands uncommon patience, practice, and perseverance so that a writer remains involved in the process of writing despite being constrained and confused. Gabriel Marquez in his “Paris Review” interview likens writing to carpentry, because writing is as difficult and developmental as carpentry. The assumption that writing is an aristocratic endowment available only to a chosen few is ungrounded as Smith (1984) claims. Writing, instead, is an egalitarian attribute that is available to anyone diligent and determined. Claiming that I’m not a voracious reader, and that I don’t write regularly stands as strong excuses of my inability to write. Because I love writing, I attempt to write anyway.

And this is exactly what professional writers do. Both *The New York Times* and the *Newsweek* publish columns by professional writers, where they talk about their writing process. All together, they’ve debunked the myth of a gifted writer. They’ve demonstrated that writing is not produced under the influence of any drug or deity. It’s physical and menial labor, which favors none. There are no handy tricks and tips of the trade. A professional or a so-called expert writer struggles through the process of writing as much as a beginner does. But a professional writer limps to writing until the “shitty first draft” (Lamott, 1985) is accomplished. Despite that unyielding commitment to writing, there are days when they fail to put a single word down on paper. Writer’s block overcomes them. Krashen (2001), however, claims that good writing cannot be rushed. Feeling blank or blocked is

essential to the process of writing what Krashen (2001) claims as incubation. Writing has never been a continuous and spontaneous overflow of emotion and erudition, both for so called novice and expert writers.

Besides, professional writers are notorious editors of their writing. For example, Hemmingway claims in his “Paris Review” interview that he changed the last page of one of his novels thirty-seven times. Ideally in a sentence, a writer is telling his audience who is doing what to whom in a way which is easy to follow and difficult to misunderstand (Pinker, 2014). Unless a writer alters his semantic, syntactic, and mechanical options several times, it is never graceful and transparent. A beginner, however, believes that the first draft is always the final draft, and that a professional writer can write whenever and whatever she wants to write. I’m already purged of all these myths about writing because of my exposure to the scholarship in composition studies, but I yet don’t write with the grace of a professional writer. My writing inevitably shows shortcomings, and the process seems daunting and discouraging. As such, I sometimes wonder about what bogs me down as a writer.

I am persuaded to think that I’ve been a victim of atavistic influences because of my upbringing or academic background. Canagarajah (2002), a writing theorist from Sri Lanka who teaches at a university in the US, claims that in some parts of the world, including the Indian subcontinent, knowledge is orally constructed. Speaking is considered superior to writing, which implies that writing is subservient to speaking. I was perhaps culturally pushed or even primed to speak more than to write. Speaking irreducibly differs from writing. Writing is not an orthographic transcription of speech per se. Writing is an off-line activity, which undergoes various steps and stages, when the ideas and information are conceived and incubated, and finally skewered linguistically. Those steps and stages conflate into one another given that writing is recursive. One can come back to a piece of writing as many times as he wants. Conversely, speaking is an on-line activity. Essentially, it’s ad-lib all along. Something once said can’t be un-said or revised. Because of these essential differences between speaking and writing, shifting from a speaking-dominant culture to a writing-dominant culture is consequential. It demands an instantaneous mental, intellectual, and even emotional transformation, which most writers can’t or don’t undergo. Their writing appears vapid as such. So does my writing, unfortunately.

My academic background may have compounded my crisis with writing as well. When I started to pursue Bachelors in English literature at one of the public universities in Bangladesh in 1994, I felt overwhelmed and edgy. It was a different world altogether, and I hardly had any prior orientation to stay afloat there. I had to study some of the canonical texts, which were written in refined and rhapsodic language. Critics stalked to help me appreciate those texts. In hindsight, I yet believe that neither a canonical writer nor a critic offers any authentic model for a beginner to emulate and so learn the craft of writing. They represent ultimate linguistic sophistication, which is not amenable to replication. Nonetheless, they are too irresistible to sidestep for a beginner who wants to write the way they do. When a beginner with inadequate linguistic and conceptual wherewithal begins to emulate those sophisticates, her writing creates a lexical and syntactic quagmire, where the meaning is partially or completely lost. I may have shown this problem in my writing as well.

Illustration: one of my teachers in 2007 told me at one of the State universities in California that my writing is on the word side, not on the idea side. I knew what she meant. I was not word-wise; I was, instead, being wordy.

I still am. But because of my exposure to the scholarship in the area of writing, I'm somewhat informed about the basics of writing. Writing scholars contend that a good piece of writing embodies brevity, clarity, and cohesion. To combine all these attributes in a piece of writing, no writing scholar is more germane than William Zinsser. Zinsser (1976) claims that any piece of writing can be truncated around 50% without sacrificing substance. Verbosity distracts readers from a piece of writing, so sentences should be short with simple words. He suggests a solution. He contends that we perhaps don't need an adverb in a sentence given that an adverb adds to a verb; therefore, if a verb is already strong, it needs no addition. Likewise, an adjective modifies a noun, so if the noun is already strong, it needs no further modification. He further speculates that in a natural world, almost every word is monosyllabic or Anglo-Saxon (e.g., air, water); however, in a man-made world, almost all the words are multi-syllabic or Latinate (e.g., computer, building). This is a controversial stipulation, because exceptions abound. But his import is clear here: our sentences must be short and simple.

I believe and practice that. Why don't I write like a Zinsser, then? A convenient answer to this question is that I perhaps haven't read and written as much as Zinsser did. I stress a reading-writing synergy to learn the craft of writing, again. I yet aver that the quantity of my reading and writing will never enable me to write like a Zinsser. Writing is perceptions personified. Two people hardly perceive the world alike. They, then, can't express their perceptions in identical ways. When someone is perceptive and has the urge to write, she will discover the appropriate semantic, syntactic, and mechanical combination to transcribe her perceptions. I believe that and strive to discover and master that golden combination every single day. What else can I do to foil the frustration stemming from my inability to write?

I must write regularly, because writing generates writing. Writing has never been natural. It has always been habitual. We must develop the habit to write. Learning to write presupposes a constant engagement with writing. I fall short on that front. I opt to write occasionally and selectively. My advanced knowledge on the theories of writing is not a necessary precondition to producing writing automatically unless I actually write. Nor can I attribute my inability to write to the fact that I don't write in my interior language, which is Bangla. Writing across languages is essentially alike, as some composition scholars claim. Neither is the argument plausible that I shifted from so-called creative writing to so-called critical writing. Pinker (2014) argues that good writing cannot be strictly demarcated to lean toward a specific genre. Good writing equally embodies creative abandon and rational control. Genre is just a popular label. These excuses that hinder the process and output of my writing are more psychological than practical. I struggle to write because every writer does.

It might sound self-deprecating, but I occasionally experience that I am a paralyzed writer. I feel blank and blocked as I get down to writing something. My hybrid linguistic and cultural orientations form a continuum of empowerment and inability. I have accesses to more linguistic and cultural resources than a mono-cultural, and mono-lingual writer. When, however, each of my cultural

and linguistic origination vies for attention and space in my writing, I feel lost in deciding which version of me should be left out or retained. I juggle conflicting forces as I navigate the process of writing. I struggle but carry on. Nothing delights me more than a well-crafted sentence. One of the reasons for Orwell (1946) to write was aesthetic enthusiasm. Words, when properly arranged, embody lyric and logic, rhyme and rhythm, concrete knowledge and fraught abstraction as well as observation and intuitions. Writing is crafting art. And no artist – in this case, a writer – has ever claimed that she has created art without experiencing creative tension. My dilemmas in writing are perhaps misnomers for creative tension. The more I live those dilemmas, the better I write.

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*Literature and Cultural Studies*

# Power Shifts in the English Language in Postcolonial African Poetry

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## Abstract

Colonialism has been used as a negative term for its brutal, cruel, and merciless history of oppression. In the process of colonization, the English language has been used as a tool of subjugation. However, postcolonial writers have formed a resistance against European superpowers by writing their own stories in the colonizer's language. Although critics like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe have given contradictory views on using the English language to write African fiction, most of the postcolonial African writers have remarkably written about their own African experiences in English. By analyzing four postcolonial African poems by Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Wole Soyinka and Gabriel Okara, this paper aims to explicate how the colonizer's weapon – the English language – actually turns into a blessing for postcolonials.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Poetry, Africa, Nigeria, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe

Colonialism is a process of European settlement in a non-European land to impose political power on the dependent area and its people by subjugating them through the implementation of both “repressive” and “ideological” apparatuses. Ania Loomba writes in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, “Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods” (8). The history of colonialism is the history of oppression, suppression, individual and collective alienation, physical and psychological subjugation, political deprivation, economic exploitation, linguistic and cultural hegemonization, and so on. According to Azfar Hussain, colonizers targeted four areas while colonizing an area: land, labor, language, and body. The British Empire forcefully occupied the lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America by focusing on these four areas. The European superpowers dominated these lands mostly from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. In the process of colonization, the colonizers aimed to omit the remaining culture and language by imposing their own language and culture. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, writes, “In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held to soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation” (9).

English, as a language, played a crucial role in determining the power and its position between the colonizers and the colonized. Thiong'o writes about the “dual character” of a language. He mentions that a language is both “a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). The loss of a language causes the loss of its culture. In a precolonial country, the native language would serve both to communicate and carry the native culture. As soon as the British started colonizing, they first turned English into the language of formal education in institutions. Everyone in schools, colleges, and offices was bound to learn and use English. They could use their native language at home, but in their institutions, they were exposed to English only. As a result, they suffered from duality and alienation which turned them into “hybrids.” Language was used to control and oppress the natives mentally. Without mental control, the colonizers would not have gained political and economic control. So, English was made mandatory for the indigenous. Learning English, then, became “a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (Thiong'o 17).

Thiong'o further explains how the colonial classroom becomes a medium of "psychological conquest in Africa" (qtd. in Wade). In his childhood, Thiong'o attended one of the top-ranked Kenyan schools named The Alliance High School, established in the 1920s. The indigenous students spoke in Gikuyu language at home, but in school, the medium of instruction and communication was English. Those who spoke Gikuyu were beaten and punished. English, in this way, became a language of power, rationality, knowledge, and intelligence. Thiong'o shows how a language can be operated to manipulate and mold the ideologies of indigenous people.

Furthermore, knowledge was stored and restored in the form of books written in English, and also supplied to the indigenous people by the British. The books contained little information about the Africans and almost obliterated their history. The power of English could normalize all the absurdities and anomalies of colonialism and make people think and accept that English was the language of the superior class. The knowledge which was provided by the English in English was not supposed to be denied or even questioned. Thus, the locals began to internalize English.

In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba rightly states, "Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power" (42). She goes on to add that "the knowledge about the 'Orient' as it was produced and circulated in Europe was an ideological accompaniment of colonial power" (42). The British, being the powerful masters, shaped the consciousness of the Orient by spreading knowledge which included the concept of binary opposition – Master and Slave in this case. They divided the world into two parts, the West or the Occident, and the East or the Orient. The Occident represents the "Self" which is the educated, civilized, powerful, intelligent, and well-mannered master. On the other hand, the Orient represents the "Other" which is the uncivilized, uneducated, ill-mannered, and foolish savages. The West interpellated Occidental ideology in the Orient so that the oppressed also could accept their lowliness and savagery. The Orient was brainwashed to become sophisticated and educated by devouring the Occidental language and culture.

Francis Wade, in his essay "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Tyranny of Language," considers language as "a less easily discernible weapon of divide and rule; wielded quietly, it helped create hierarchies within oppressed groups." However, the oppressed had to learn and master English. They were forced to use English both to communicate and carry their culture. They were counselled to understand and believe that English is the only superior language. The glorification of English turned out to be an atrocious humiliation of the native languages. When the natives started writing in English on the basis of the European knowledge they were exposed to, they failed to secure a respectable place in world literature. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, in his essay "The African Writer and the English Language," says, "The real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother language for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling."

However, when a language or culture is given to non-native speakers by implementing power in order to "abandon" what they culturally have and what they are forced to adapt, it automatically forms a resistance. Where there is power, there is resistance. On the basis of this power-resistance concept, Achebe assures that, "the English language will be able to carry the weight of (my)

African culture” (“The African Writer and the English Language”). So, English language, in time, changed its power position. Once a tool of domination, it is now a weapon of resistance.

William Shakespeare foreshadowed this colonial-postcolonial tension more than four hundred years ago. He portrayed Caliban, the antagonist who turned out to be a postcolonial hero, a rebellious personality. He showcased his resistance against his master Prospero. After mastering the language Prospero taught him, Caliban revolted by saying,

You taught me language, and my profit on't  
Is I know how to curse. *(The Tempest, Act I, Scene II)*

After reviewing Caliban’s speech from a postcolonial perspective, we see that the paradigm of his position has shifted from a colonial slave to a postcolonial rebellious hero. Caliban learned to use his master’s language to express his experience. Similarly, by “learning to curse” in English, colonized people started showing their resistance (Bhattacharjee 51). They owned English and then started creating their own literature. In this way, English is now in the process of emerging as “a major language and medium of communication for fiction writing” worldwide (Aijaj 76).

In the African continent, writers had to go through the cruel, brutal, and indescribably oppressive process of colonization. When Africans started writing about their problems in their languages, very few readers could connect and understand their suffering. Writing in their native languages provided them a comfort zone, but it restricted them to a specific audience. As they started writing in English, they got an international readership. They owned English and made it their “Africanized” English. The African writers started writing about their peaceful precolonial Africa. They wrote about the barbarous journey of European colonization. They narrated how the colonizers broke their peace into pieces and distorted their national glory. They wrote about their expectations to revive the golden and glorified history of Africa.

However, before using English as a medium of writing fiction, the African writers had to go through a massive psychological turmoil. The basic issue was whether Africans should write in English or stick to their own native language. On this matter, Achebe and Thiong’o share contradictory views. According to Thiong’o, “language is a way of spiritual subjugation” (9). He argues that Africans should create their literature in their own language, because language acts as the “carrier of culture” (13). African culture cannot be carried by a non-African language like English. He further comments that colonized minds should be decolonized. Otherwise, there will be no “difference between colonial era and Postcolonial era” (Saha 205). For this reason, Thiong’o suggests abandoning the English language and abolishing English departments from educational institutions.

On the other hand, Achebe argues long before Thiong’o that “English language will be able to carry the weight of (my) African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (The African Writer and the English Language). Achebe critically comments on the variety of African tribes and their different indigenous languages. He argues that if they start using their native language, they will ultimately limit their readers to their individual community only. Therefore, he suggests that there should be

one language which may be used as a tool to unite different African tribes. He writes about the late Chief Fagunwa, a famous African writer, who used his native language to enhance the beauty of ethnic literature. After appreciating Fagunwa, Achebe further says that writing in English will provide the authors more work to do and “much excitement.” So, Africans should use Africanized English to express their own African experience and represent their African selves (“The African Writer and the English Language”). In this way, the paradigm of power can be shifted to turn the “Other” into the “Self.”

It stands to reason then that language and power are strongly interconnected. Frantz Fanon writes about the “invisible” and “psychological” relationship between language and power in his *Black Skin, White Mask*, “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Fanon, qtd in Saha 206). By using English, the colonized people get back their power, thus they get back their identity. They start to reclaim their “Africanness” by producing postcolonial African literature.

Postcolonial African literature is concerned with some important issues. The writers, poets, playwrights, and critics started reclaiming their culture, space, and tradition by getting involved in the powerful and well-spread literary movement like Negritude. The postcolonial authors used English language to express their African experience. The European colonizers interpellated their colonial ideologies which excluded the African version “outside of history.” Therefore, African authors determined to revise and revive their part of the history in their own Africanized English. In a word, telling the African story from their own perspective was one of the major preoccupations of postcolonial writings.

The West stereotyped African indigenous people according to their will. The postcolonial African writers broke the stereotypical shackle and emerged as an individual entity. In postcolonial African literature, the writers mainly focused on recasting the indigenous people and their culture. Chinua Achebe confirmed in his speech that the English language is capable enough to carry the weight of African experience. The African authors, thus, used English as a weapon of resistance and composed postcolonial African poems.

The role of African poetry, therefore, has been profoundly effective in providing significant insight into the African experience. The language of African poetry deals with a nation’s history as it moved from “freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion” (Iyengar, qtd. in Rao).

The postcolonial African poets mostly glorified the Africans and celebrated their Africanness from their stance. After a long struggle against colonization, the Africans had to go through culture shock, colonial trauma, economic unrest, political instability, and lack of educational exposure. Despite these drawbacks, the African poets were capable of fighting back and reclaiming their culture, space, and tradition in English — Africanized English. English literature has flourished to a great extent with the contribution of African poets like Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Wole Soyinka, and Gabriel Okara.

The Negritude literary movement has produced a few very significant African poets. Leopold Sedar Senghor is one of the most influential and founding poets of this movement. He is called the father of Negritude. This very movement is based on the manifestation of the African race, culture, and origin. It is about the celebration of Africanness. Senghor writes magnificent poems that focus on and reinforce the ideas of Negritude. His poem “Black Woman” is such a poem in which he personifies Africa as an African woman who is “black” and “naked;” thus she is “clothed with (her) color which is life,/ with (her) form which is beauty!” Senghor celebrates the natural color of Africa – black.

The African woman in Senghor’s poem is a motherly figure. She helps him grow under her “gentleness of hands” which symbolize the motherly protection and affection of his motherland. The speaker calls Africa the “Promised Land” to which he must return. This is a metaphorical return to the peaceful pre-colonial Africa which was brutally colonized by the Europeans. As Senghor composes the poem during the process of decolonization, he uplifts the position of African people who, till then, have been represented remorsefully to the world from the colonizer’s viewpoint.

Throughout the poem, Senghor shows his appreciation of the black woman and her natural beauty. He writes,

Naked woman, black woman,  
I sing your beauty that passes the form  
That I fix in the eternal.

Before jealous fate turn you to ashes to  
Feed the roots of life. (“Black Woman”)

This poem is written in the style of the colonizer’s literature. Therefore, writing about the African experience in the colonizer’s style and language is essentially a powerful form of resistance against the colonial superpower. Senghor first writes the poem in French as Senegal was once colonized by France. In that way, the colonizer’s language is used as a tool of resistance at first. Later, the English version of this poem also acts against British colonization. On the whole, Senghor writes poems to resist the European colonization.

Senegalese poet David Diop followed in Senghor’s footsteps. He depicts the long-suffering colonial experience of the Africans in his poem “Africa,” personifying Africa as a motherly woman. First, the poet glorifies the golden past of Africa. He talks of an unknown motherly lady of whom his “grandmother sings.” He has never known her, but her blood flows in his body. He is a part of her body and the history of oppression which constructs his consciousness. He refers to the long-struggling history of slavery. He writes about the colonial Africa which was humiliated and subjugated by the Europeans. He portrays the picture of a broken back as he writes, “Is this your back that is unbent/ This back that never breaks under the weight of humiliation” (“Africa”).

Right after showcasing a brief picture of colonial Africa, he draws the picture of postcolonial Africa which has sprung up so well after enduring all the bloodshed and oppression. He ends the poem optimistically:

That is your Africa springing up anew  
Springing up patiently, obstinately  
Whose fruit bit by bit acquires  
That bitter taste of liberty            (“Africa”)

David Diop’s poem “Africa” beautifully depicts the long history of Africa from its precolonial freedom to colonial slavery to, finally, postcolonial liberty.

Another very significant postcolonial Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka has written some poems which contain the colonial experience and postcolonial resistance. His poem “Telephone Conversation” depicts an exchange between a white lady and an African black man to shed light on the issues of racism and white supremacy. Soyinka uses irony and sarcasm to show the ridiculousness and vagueness of racism in Europe. In the poem, the poet portrays a white landlady of “good breeding” who belongs to an upper class white family. Soyinka uses visual imagery like “lipstick coated” and “long gold-rolled cigarette-holder piped” to represent the aristocrat’s sense of white supremacy. On the other side of the phone, the poet draws the image of a black African who, from the racial perspective, belongs to the savage group of people. However, the “silence” in the conversation after assuring the nationality — “I am African” — shows the racial conflict between the speakers.

The landlady is obsessed with the skin color of the African man. She repeatedly asks him, “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?” and again, “ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Her hysterical inquiry proves the ill-mannered attitude of the racists in the West. The conversation is supposed to take place on one particular issue — that is, renting a place or house or land. However, the excessive concern of the white lady regarding skin color brings out the irony so well. Soyinka ends the poem with a mysterious question that may leave the readers visualizing the next unwritten scene. Soyinka’s use of sarcasm and irony is remarkably admirable.

Gabriel Okara is one of the most significant African poets who wrote in English and shared African stories with international readers. Before that, the world viewed Africans through the European lens which presented Africans as “uneducated,” “uncultured” savages. Okara writes poems in which he depicts African identity, folklore, religion, and culture from an African perspective. This Nigerian negritudist poet received an award at the Nigerian Festival of Arts in 1953 for his first poem “The Call of the River Nun.” His popular poem “Once Upon a Time” combines the recollection of the past, interpretation of the present, and expectations for the future. In this poem, the speaker addresses a listener, calling him “son” and shows him how the African identity has changed over time. It is written in a postcolonial context where the British successfully teaches the British manners by omitting indigenous heartfelt emotions. The speaker uses simple, yet very effective symbols to show the difference between pre-colonial genuine emotion and postcolonial plastic feelings. The “heart” is the symbol of genuine emotion. Once upon a time, the Nigerian people laughed “with their hearts.” The eyes convey the heart’s emotions but now the people have learned to hide their true feelings, they “laugh with their teeth” only.

Once upon a time, the pre-colonial people used to “shake hands with their hearts,” but now “that’s gone.” While shaking right hands, which project surface intention, they keep their left hands inside

their pockets. The left hand projects real intention which is to search for money inside pockets. The left hand is controlled by the right side of the human brain that direct rational and material tasks. The speaker, in this way, shows how the people have changed to become materialistic and emotionless.

In the next stanza, the speaker criticizes the vague formalities like “Feel at home!” and “Come again.” When people say these phrases, they really do not mean them. They are welcoming others on a surface level, but deep inside, they do not welcome guests more than twice. They shut their doors. The speaker says that he has learned to wear so many “faces like dresses.” This sophisticated postcolonial world is very manipulative. People wear context-based faces like “homeface, officeface, streetface, hostface, cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles.” This smile is also not natural. It is like a perfect meaningless portrait smile. The speaker also has learned to say and show all the affectations like “Glad to meet you.” When people say it, they do not mean it. When people say “nice to meet you” after spending a boring time, they actually show their colonial British manner to sound more gentlemanly.

The last two stanzas reveal the speaker’s expectations of unlearning these pseudo-feelings and relearning the pre-colonial innocent and natural emotions. He says to his “son,”

I want to be what I used to be  
When I was like you, I want  
To unlearn all these muting things.  
Most of all, I want to relearn  
How to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror  
Shows only my teeth like a snake’s bare fangs! (“Once Upon a Time”)

The speaker uses the “snake” symbol to compare the “muting” of people who are like the unfaithful and harmful reptile. He says he want to be like his son – innocent and natural. He seeks proper guidance from his son who will show him back to the way he used to be. He says,

So show me, son  
How to laugh; show me how  
I used to laugh and smile  
Once upon a time when I was like you. (“Once Upon a Time”)

The poem ends on the note that the son is the father of man and it is he who will help to reclaim and revive the old golden African identity.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o comments, “English language opened the door to a wide range of fiction” for the African writers (72). The African poets, who used English to compose African poetry, have played a vital role in shifting the paradigm. Achebe too rightly says,

The African writer should aim to use English that brings out his message without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English, which is at once unusual and able to carry his peculiar experience (qtd. in Rao).

African poets have taken the initiative to narrate their African stories, which contradict the European version of the African experience by maintaining internationalism of English language. So, the devil is not as black as it is generally painted. Colonialism, having endless cursed sides, has a blessing in disguise too, and that is the English language.

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# Landscapes Mythicized: Placing Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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## Abstract

The lay of a people is often tethered to the lay of the land that they live in or leave behind; for the land holds all the associations of ancestry, heritage, and environment that constitute what Emile Durkheim would call “the collective conscious.” Landscapes may assume near mythical dimensions in forming and framing the creative impulse of writers who draw their images and symbols, themes and motifs, and aspirations and apprehensions from their terrestrial roots and routes. In the present paper, I seek to re-read a few poems of the famous Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali with a view to highlighting his poetics of place that remains true to the kindred points of haven (America, the adopted land) and home (Kashmir, the homeland). Attempts will be made to shed light on the re-creative dynamics of his poetry that helps him to mythicize these two landscapes with the aid of “memory” and “imagination.” My objective here is to foreground the process through which the poet’s re-creation of place combines with the reader’s focus on spatiality to situate Ali’s poems such as “Postcard from Kashmir,” “Snowmen,” “A Wrong Turn,” “Snow on the Desert,” “Farewell,” etc. In the poem, “Postcard from Kashmir” for example, the speaker holds the postcard that represents to him the land of his birth – “Kashmir shrinks to my mailbox,/ my home a neat four by six inches.” The persistent pains of “exile” lead him to proximate the half-inch Himalayas to this “home,” because he realizes “This is home. And this the closest I’ll ever be to home.” Similarly, in the poem “Snow on the Desert,” the poet brings to bear all his imaginative elasticity to re-create the Papago’s way of living in the Sonoran desert in the South Western part of the United States. His poetic narrative brings to the surface the native history of the Papagos people whose long lost lives are imaginatively re-created by a diasporic poet, keenly aware of the ancient glory of his own homeland as contrasted with its recent abjection.

**Keywords:** Agha Shahid Ali, Diaspora, Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, Place, Migration, Exile

“Place is the locale of the truth of Being”

– Martin Heidegger (*On the Way to Language*)

Since time immemorial, literature has shared a very close bond with the land, both in its telluric generality and in its spatial selectivity. The flora and the fauna, men and manners, and topography and history give a specific character to a place, and evoke particular associations in alert and articulate human subjects. As Bertrand Westphal points out, geocritical consciousness, motivated by specific environmental and cultural concerns, is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon though its roots can be traced in the post-Renaissance phases of “exploration,” “colonization,” and “migration” (qtd. in Tally *et al.*, ix-xv). In the present paper I intend to “place” selected poems of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali from a geocritical perspective focusing on his treatment of physical environment encompassing both the landscape of Kashmir, his place of origin, and of the United States, his place of immigration. I shall seek to show how, against the backdrop of the politically volatile situation of his native land, the once pristine beauty of the “paradise on earth” and the sheer brutality of its gory present are set side by side. Attempts will also be made to explain how Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic narrative revolves around the place even in the adopted soil of the American southwest. Be it Kashmir or Arizona, landscapes in his poetry have been

mythicized from an earth-centered perspective. His commitment is to Earth as reflected through his commitment to places and landscapes which, as will be shown, is at once translocal and transcultural.

Purporting to situate man's intellectual and artistic endeavors in the *compositio loci* of the physical environment and a specific locale respectively, ecocriticism and geocriticism, as Robert T. Tally, Jr. and Christine M. Battista have observed, share the same discursive domain (Tally *et al.*, 1-18). Ecocriticism as a critical approach has been adequately defined by Cheryl Glotfelty in the following words:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xix)

To put Glotfelty's words into the geocritical perspective we may refer to Bertrand Westphal's definition of geocriticism: "Geocriticism probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts [e.g. literature, painting, culture etc.] arrange through, and in, texts, the image, and cultural interactions related to them" (Westphal 6). Since ecocriticism connects literature with environment, and since geocriticism "probes the human spaces" as constituting the environment, these two fields of study inhabit the common discursive domain of "situatedness."

"Situatedness" is one of the main traits of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. Ali's poetic consciousness is at once formed and informed by the land he had lived in and left behind. The soul of his poetry consists of his diasporic imagination, nostalgic vision of the beauty of the native land accompanied with the sense of loss and sometimes the awareness of victimhood. Besides, the sense of wonder with which he takes in the reality of a changed landscape in his adopted country, finds expression in a number of his poems. According to Shaden M. Tageldin, "Twice convicted by Colonization and displacement the postcolonial migrant [like Agha Shahid Ali] finds in being longing, rather than in belonging, her or his only reprieve" (Tageldin 32). The reason why the dynamicity of "being longing" seems preferable to the stasis of "belonging" is that mobility gives to the poet both the incentive and the ingredient of poetry by offering a variety of locations.

Ali's diasporic memory is always entwined with landscape but the landscape is "reported" to be ravished in the name of politics and/ or changed beyond all recognition in the name of progress. Ali's diasporic consciousness endorses "cultural pluralism" and upholds the cause of nature, transcending the geographical and topographical specificities of both Kashmir and Arizona. Ali's emphasis on place as thematic as well as the schematic pivot of his poetic endeavor renders his work amenable to geocriticism. Kashmir has always been present in Ali's poems in the twin capacity of what Nirmal Selvamony terms as "diastopos" and "syntopos":

When space is spoken of in terms of objects, space is thought of as "place," as space occupied by objects. Such space or place could be denoted by means of the terms, "diastopos" (after Saussure's "diachrony"). But when the object does not occupy any place other than consciousness, consciousness as place can be spoken of as "syntopos" (after Saussure's "synchrony"). (Selvamony 191)

Ever since 1947, Kashmir has been the apple of discord between two nations India and Pakistan. It has witnessed several disturbances including insurgency, militarization, and civil unrest accompanied by environmental devastation and inhumanity. The poems I have chosen provide an ecoconscious as well as geoconscious dossier of the plight of Kashmir and her people. They expose and reconstruct the awful environmental and cultural degradation of Kashmir. Poems such as “Postcard from Kashmir,” “Snowmen,” “A Wrong Turn,” “Farewell,” “I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger of Flight 423 to Srinagar,” “A Pastoral,” “Return to Harmony 3,” “A History of Paisley,” “Leaving Sonora,” “Beyond the Ash Rains,” “Snow on the Desert,” “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” “An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little,” and “Hansel’s Games” reveal the “green” moral and political agenda of the poet. Agha Shahid Ali’s poems are engaged with the natural environment, and the poet is perceived to “investigate,” à la Greg Garrard, “climate change, environmental justice, sustainability, the nature of ‘humanity’ and more” (Garrard, *Dust Jacket*). Yet on another level, the above poems testify to the poet’s enduring awareness of place.

“Postcard from Kashmir,” the very first poem of the collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) reconstructs “home” through what Lawrence Buell calls “environmental imagination”; for Ali’s poetic strategy in treating his remembered homeland closely parallels what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin stipulate, namely, the exploration of “nature and natural elements (landscape, flora and fauna, etc.) as self-standing agents, rather than support structures for human actions, in the world” (13). To the absent poet, any news of and from Kashmir, as contained in a postcard, stands for Kashmir itself. The picture that is evoked before his mind’s eye is that of a colorful and vibrant Kashmir full of “neatness.” That this remembered picture does not reflect the actual situation of Kashmir lends to it an added poignancy on account of the sense of loss and longing contained therein that inspires Rajeev S. Patke to designate Ali as a “poet laureate of loss” (232):

...When I return,  
 The colours won’t be so brilliant’  
 The Jhelum’s waters so clean’  
 So ultramarine. My love  
 So overexposed.  
 And my memory will be a little  
 out of focus, in it  
 a giant negative, black  
 and white, still undeveloped. (“Postcard from Kashmir,” *The Veiled Suite* [henceforth, *V.S.*], 29)

That his “love” is or may be “overexposed” suggests that this overexposure has both physical and psychological dimensions. On another level, that he suffers his love to be “overexposed” may hint at, as a means of engaging himself in the imaginative recuperation of the loss of natural beauty and resources, what Kashmir faces in reality. The vibrant color of the flora and fauna of Kashmir, when remembered, remains “a little out of focus,” because the spatio-temporal distance renders the memory distorted in being “giant” (lengthened or heightened to an unnatural extent), “black and white” (devoid of colors), and “still undeveloped” (yet to be processed or defined). By deploying the vocabulary of photography, such as “overexposed,” “out of focus,” “black and

white,” and “undeveloped,” Ali secures for his spatial reconstruction an atemporal and aspatial suspension of pictorial stasis that goes a long way in indicating the aforementioned strands of his memory namely “loss” and “longing.” In this context, Bruce King opines, “Loss, whether of the protection of family, of friends, homelands or alternative futures, is normal, part of growing up and experiencing, rather than particularly the tragedy of exile or the result of cultural conflict” (2). However, Ali’s sense of loss cannot be rationalized merely as a “part of growing up and experiencing,” because, as Kamala Das, one of his peers, has observed “The tragedy of life/ is not death but growth...” (“Composition,” *D*, 29) In fact, the self-exiled poet’s process of proximation – “This is home. And this the closest/ I’ll ever be to home” may profitably be read in the light of his sense of loss; for it adds the quality of evanescence to his spatial imagination on account of the essential fictiveness and transience of this make-believe.

In “Snowmen,” another poem from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Agha Shahid Ali narrativizes the antique migration of his ancestor, “a man of Himalayan snow.” As the mythical forefather steps across the spatial border between Samarkand and Kashmir, the landscape changes. Nevertheless, the basic egalitarian approach to Nature, and men’s harmonious relationship with her is established and/ or explored throughout the poem. The poet-speaker shows at once great imagination and an equally great perception in grounding the march within the traversed spaces from Samarkhand to Kashmir:

My ancestor, ...  
 Came to Kashmir from Samarkhand,  
 Carrying a bag  
 Of whale bones:  
 Heirlooms from sea funerals,  
 His skeleton  
 Carved from glaciers, his breath  
 Arctic, ... (“Snowmen,” *V.S.*, 34)

The poet considers the aching nostalgia for the whole journey of human history from the prehistoric to the modern period as his “heirloom” which has “passed from son to grandson,/ generations of snowmen ....” Human and non-human particles of ecology are found engaged in a symbiotic relationship with each other, as space is at once telescoped and teleologized with the “heirlooms” of time. The poetic persona seeks to re-create the close bond between his ancestor and nature by representing him as an inter-specific survivor of sea funerals of whales.

Place attachment and place-sensitivity are vitally important ingredients of ecocritical, and by extension, of geocritical writings. As Val Plumwood points out, “place sensitivity requires both emotional and critical approaches to place, and this must include an understanding of place that is rooted in memory (including community memory)” (233). In the poem “A Wrong Turn” taken from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the limned landscape of Ali’s “memory’s homeland” (Kashmir) mirrors the violent desecration of nature and it betrays his tender concern for Kashmir. Here we perceive a strong “place attachment” as well as a keen “place-sensitivity.” Though in dream, the persona sees not an inflated vision at all if we remember the blood-smeared Kashmir during and after insurgency and militarization in the 1980s:

In a massacred town,  
 ... walking among the atrocities,  
 Guillotines blood-scorched,  
 Gods stabbed at their altars,  
 Dry wells piled up with bones,  
 A curfew on ghosts. ("A Wrong Turn," *V.S.*, 60)

Of course, the unnatural cruelty of the situation in Kashmir is at once symbolized by the proposition of Gods being "stabbed at their altars" and the ghosts being subjected to a curfew. The gruesome reality of the massacred town with its tell-tale hypallage is further aggravated by the imagined vision of "Guillotines blood-scorched" and the perceived presence of a bone-filled well. What is more, the place-sensitive poet fails to find escape from this scene of "atrocities" neither in reality that assails him with the harrowing details of a massacre, nor even in memory that evokes in him the sanguinary associations of the French Revolution.

A sustained lamentation over the loss of an earthly paradise recurs throughout Agha Shahid Ali's poetic oeuvre. "Farewell" from *The Country Without a Post Office*, for instance, raises a voice of protest at the mindless massacre of innocence: "They make a desolation and call it peace/ who is the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?" The poet inveighs against the loss of the paradise on earth when he experiences hell in his beloved Kashmir – "I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell." The narrative flashback evokes the poet's psychological restoration of Kashmir's golden past of cultural syncretism, where Kashmiri Hindu "pundits" and Muslims could once coexist in joy and safety. In the process, he is enabled to relive the paradisaic coexistence of diverse peoples and multiply a nostalgic yearning equivalent of his wish to "protect" or "safeguard" the loved memory of Kashmir. In fact, it is only the poet's memory "getting in the way of your history," that can reconstruct the former glory of communal harmony that the land has lost – "In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/ in each other's reflections" ("Farewell," *V.S.*, 176).

At this point of the poem, the poet's lament for the place graduates into an elegy on a severed human relationship. If the "I" of the poem is a Kashmiri Muslim, then the "you" may stand for a Kashmiri pundit. That they had been together for centuries, and that they have been now torn apart from each other, give to the intradigetic speaker much chagrine and megrims: "If only somehow you could have been mine,/ what would not have been possible in the world?" ("Farewell," *V.S.*, 177). On another level, what ails the poet is a perceived and persistent dilemma as to whether he should "hide" or "reveal" his pains from himself: "I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to/ myself..." ("Farewell," *V.S.*, 177).

The possibility of forgiveness, the speaker feels, may transform recrimination into a "farewell." It is in this context that Amitav Ghosh, the renowned novelist and a close friend of Agha Shahid Ali, writes: "If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary leitmotif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise..." (Ghosh 89).

This desecration of the "paradise" and plundering of its environment (both natural and cultural) constitutes the theme of yet another poem "I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight." The

reader sees the tragedy of Kashmir unfold in this brilliant poem: “the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers/ Kashmir is burning.” Kashmiri Hindu pundits are forced to leave their native place and the poet helplessly recalls this wrong of history:

By that dazzling light  
we see men removing statues from temples.  
We beg them, “Who will protect us if you leave”  
They don’t answer, they just disappear  
on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.

(“I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” *V.S.*, 180)

This exodus is indicative of a grave loss to Kashmir’s rich diversity that was once famed for its variegated cultural fabric. Agha Shahid Ali’s commitment to cultural pluralism comes to the surface when the poem’s speaker laments the loss of the Hindu divine protection for the entire (predominantly Muslim) population. Besides, the flight of the pundits towards the plains (from the hills) signals a regional bifurcation of Kashmir that hacks at the ecumene’s pluralist heritage and saps its life-blood.

The poem, “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger of Flight 423 to Srinagar,” evokes a similar sense of loss. The personal sorrow and nostalgia for Begum Akhtar is juxtaposed with the general anguish for Kashmir. The *Statesman* headlines show both “BEGHUM AKHTAR IS DEAD” and “IT’S WAR: It’s 1994: ARMY LAYS SIEGE TO SHRINE.” The poem is an elegy in effect, and commemorates the loss of what Ali prized very highly, namely the queen of ghazals and the paradise on earth. He mourns the loss of Lal Ded’s heirloom which is also the Kashmiri cultural heirloom. The devastating fire in “Chrar-e-Sharif,” the shrine of the revered Sufi saint Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, is factual but Agha Shahid Ali uses this in a metaphoric sense also. The poet feels a sharp pang at the communal violence between “Muslim and Brahmin” which has claimed many innocent lives and wasted a uniquely syncretic spirituality. The “threads” of hope wane as “autumn’s last crimsoned spillage rushing with wings down the mountainside” is paired with the “flames clinging to a torched village.” In fact, the hapless poet-speaker looks on as the confluential culture of Kashmir frays thin under the collective burden of transnational terrorism, state-sponsored repression, and local militancy.

The trope of the pastoral is deeply entrenched both in environmentalism and in geoconsciousness. Besides, “pastoral has always been characterized by nostalgia, so that wherever we look into its history, we will see an ‘escalator’ taking us back further into a better past” (Garrard 37). In the poem “A Pastoral,” Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic practice closely parallels the above precept. Nevertheless, what distinguishes the poem as a lay of the land is that it envisions a better future for the land just as it looks back to an idyllic past:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar;  
by the gates of the Villa of peace,  
our hands blossoming into fists  
till the soldiers return the keys  
and disappear. Again we’ll enter  
our last world, the first that vanished  
in our absence from the broken city. (“A Pastoral,” *V.S.*, 196)

The nostalgia is therefore always for the past but not without hope and prospect of getting back the “lost glory” in future: “...We’ll hear/ our gardener’s voice, the way we did/ as children, clear under trees he’d planted.” What renders uniqueness to Ali’s transreal spatial imagination is his power of evocation that encompasses both the landscape and the lifescape of a liminal Kashmir that is free to retain its pristine glory either in the remembered past or in a prefigured future.

“Return to Harmony 3” from the same collection *The Country Without a Post Office* blends environmentalism with social ecology in the service of Ali’s poetics of place. Here, the theme of injustice, both social and environmental, has been dwelt upon in detail: “...Troops will burn down the garden and let the haven remain./ This is home – the haven a cage surrounded by ash – the fate of Paradise.” A note of melancholy is clearly discernible in the above lines that produce an almost apocalyptic vision of Kashmir. Here, Agha Shahid Ali’s composition closely corresponds to Lawrence Buell’s observation: “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). In fact, Ali’s apocalyptic vision of Kashmir is a product of both a close bond with the land and an utter anxiety about its ignominious present. Absence of “two summers,” return to a land under military occupation, and entry into a much loved home – all these fashion the poet-speaker’s response to his immediate surroundings.

Home has now been transformed into a “cage” surrounded by “ash” (remains of the “Paradise” on earth). As such, the inhabitant of such an abode (the speaker’s mother) can only be “poor.” The speaker’s dear home (“Harmony 3”) looks alien to him by the sudden appearance of “paramilitaries” “bunker,” “shadowed eyes” of the military personnel. He feels “like a trespasser” anxiously wondering if the gardener has “fled” to escape the precarious present. Significantly, the pastoral beauty of the “Harmonies” is brought into sharp contrast with the oppressive backdrop of the military presence to highlight the awkward feeling of the speaker who returns to a home left behind only to find it “all changed, changed utterly.” The house of the grandmother, the annex building of the Harmonies, is now closed and there is “nothing else to reflect” except the irretrievable fond memories of her sons’ absolute devotion (“offering themselves”) to her like “bouquets of mirrors.” The “bouquets of mirrors” here symbolize the means of an all-round reflection (revelation) of the physical as well as spiritual state of “her sons.” The speaker apprehends the whereabouts of the gardener and the postman who were necessary parts of the Harmonies but have inexplicably gone missing. The speaker guesses that the former might have been killed, and realizes that the absence of the postman must have been caused by the absence of the residents. As a result, “the roses have choked in their beds” and in the drawer of the cedar stand, there is “a pile of damp letters.” Damp letters here refer to the non-communication between the home and the world in this perilous situation.

While positing “the idea of home” as a “kind of space,” Mary Douglas points out, “There has to be something regular about the appearance and reappearance of its [the home] furnishings” (289). As if in keeping with Douglas’ views, the speaker promptly discovers the house with all its familiar arrangements on entering “Harmony 3.” The Koran is “lying strangely wrapped in a *jamawar* shawl” and like before it “still protects the house.” In view of the perils of the situation, the scripture’s protective efficacy may however be called into question. Similarly, the reference to the framed calligraphy – “*If god is with you, Victory is near!*” – seems “ruthless behind cobwebs”; for

the haze of the cobweb seems to defer the victory of the faithful and deny any possibility of the divine proximity in the veritable hell of Kashmir. The lack of normalcy is logically accompanied by a breakdown in communication as symbolized by “the dead phone.” Like the speaker who finds himself exiled from the once safe haven, “its number [too is] exiled from its instrument.” The speaker is now “a refugee from belief” seeking safe haven of bygone “harmonies” which echo the lines from another of Ali’s poems, a ghazal namely “Tonight”- “I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—/A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight”(“Tonight,” *V.S.*, 374).

Each object of the home the speaker looks at turns into a mirror reflecting the earlier version of the home when home was safe haven “untouched by blood.” Even mountains seem to the speaker like a mirror reflecting his stare. The bookshelf holding the books of Ritsos, Rilke, Cavafy, Lorca, Iqbal, Amichai, and Paz along with the wedding pictures of the speaker’s parents and a black and white photograph of the speakers’s mother in her teens make the home “so unforgivingly poor and so unforgivingly beautiful” that the speaker cannot hold it anymore – “the house begins to shake in my arms.” But “...when the unarmed world is still again, with pity, it is the house that is holding [the speaker] in its arms and the cry coming faded from its empty rooms is [his] cry.” Nothing is left now except a gnawing sense of loss and a profound feeling of hurt, because the speaker cannot shut his eyes to man’s responsibility for the decrepitude of the house (“Harmony 3”), and by extension, of the place (Kashmir).

In the poem “A History of Paisley,” the poet mythicizes the valley of Kashmir by claiming the “alibi of chronology,” and calling it in the same breath, a “vain collaborator of time.” Ali associates the myth of Parvati and Shiva with the topographical pattern in which the Jhelum flows through the landscape of Kashmir. The epigraph relates the mythical story that is associated with the formation of the pattern of paisley in the image of the landscape:

Their footsteps formed the paisley when Parvati, angry after a quarrel, ran away from Shiva. He eventually caught up with her. To commemorate their reunion, he carved the Jhelum river, as it moves through the Vale of Kashmir, in the shape of paisley. (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218)

In much of his poetry, Ali has used the leitmotifs of “paisley,” “saffron,” and the “Jhelum” to foreground the mythological associations of his homeland. The poet ruefully envisions a future when this beloved place will be decoupled from such myth. Addressing the reader as “you” he writes,

You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys  
one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan --  
Trader from an ancient market of the future,  
alibi of chronology, that vain  
collaborator of time -- won’t know that these  
are her footprints from the day the world began  
when land rushed, from the ocean, toward Kashmir. (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218)

The association of the addressee “you” with some “trader from an ancient market of the future” operates on the basis of a common outsider’s status for both of them. Here, the trader’s “ignorance” has been apposed with the “awareness” of the ancient market (land) with a view to highlighting the ephemerality of the former and the permanence of the latter. As for the poet, by engaging with the mythical history of Kashmir and by expressing his sense of loss at the apprehension of a gradual disappearance of this originary antecedent, Ali establishes a kind of anthropological bond with the land of Kashmir. The poet can hear the echoing sound of the Goddess’ (Parvati) anklets in the mountain stream of the Jhelum. Nevertheless, he also apprehends that the future generations will be “deaf” to such music of nature. They will be deaf to “history” embedded in the landscape on account of their mercenary motif for keeping ledgers. Further, they will be “deaf” to the “bullets drowning out the bells of her ankles,” just as their bond with the land and her people will be severed over time:

For you, blind to all defeat  
 up there in pure sunlight, your gauze of cloud thrown  
 off your shoulders over the Vale, do not hear  
 bullets drowning out the bells of her ankles...  
 O, alibi of chronology, in what script  
 in your ledger will this narrative be lost? (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218-219)

On another level, however, the “you” becomes the heedless march of history that remains equally impervious to the gargling music of the mountain stream as well as to the steady patter of bullets. Wiping out all the strands of history and memory, the future trader will treat the place merely as a commercial hub. Ali mourns: “The city burns; the dusk has darkened to rust/ by the roses. They don’t see it.” However, the geoconscious poet’s lament of apprehension may also caution the future generation against a possible ecocide that will at least leave some hope and scope for its regeneration.

That Agha Shahid Ali’s fidelity to place is translocal and transcultural finds echoes in many of the poems of *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*. The diasporic poet is seen to give adequate attention to the landscape of his adopted country. In this connection Lawrence Needham observes, “His [Ali’s] subjects – lost tribes and vanished villages, vast deserts, geological epochs, and cataclysmic changes – are able to support a resonant vocabulary of loss and desolation, as well as the mythic subtexts informing many of his poems” (123). By way of explication we may focus on Ali’s preoccupation with time while describing place, because time is seen to enrich spatial associations that may connect the diasporic poet with his hostland.

The poem “Leaving Sonora” describes the fidelity of the “Hohokam” people to the Sonoran desert, their place of residence “for 1500 years.” In fact, drawing upon the insights of Richard Sheldon, the local poet whose words provide Ali with the poem’s epigraph, he grows introspective. For the diasporic poet, this ancient tribe’s bonding with their desert, their living place, is evocative of the poet’s own bonding with Kashmir, the place of his origin. It is in a similar context that Abin Chakraborty has commented, “This is precisely why in Ali’s imagination the space of the host country, USA, often opens into that of his native land, which need not [but may also] refer to Kashmir alone” (206). To come back to the poem under discussion, the poet insists on the

bonding with the non-human elements of the environment (here the desert landscape): “Certain landscapes insist on fidelity.” According to the desert ethos, one has to be faithful not only to the place of one’s residence, but also to those of one’s ancestors that have now vanished from the face of this earth. That the poet is not unfaithful to those who no longer exist becomes clear when he feels the aching voice of his ancestors from Samarkhand in his bones and considers the memory as his “heirloom” in the poem “Snowmen” that has been discussed earlier. Away from the blinding light of reality and inside the cosy confines of memory, the poet-speaker is brought face to face with a Hohokam woman whose “summer thunder” voice invokes both the oddity and the fertility of the desert rain:

In his shade, the poet sees one of their women,  
beautiful, her voice low as summer thunder.  
Each night she saw, among the culinary ashes,  
what the earth does only through a terrible pressure-  
the fire, in minutes, transforming the coal into diamonds. (“Leaving Sonora,” *V.S.*, 116)

Significantly, the terrestrial fire may metamorphose ordinary coal into extraordinary and precious diamond, just as Ali’s spatialism may transform the sight of the “blue lights” into the vision of “a vanished village.”

“Beyond the Ash Rains” taken from *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* is a poem of loss. The loss here refers as much to the loss of man’s connection with a place as to that with a loving companion. The first person speaker opens the account on a note of frustration as the land he had lived in and left behind refuses to acknowledge his connection with it:

When the desert refused my history,  
Refused to acknowledge that I had lived  
there, with you, among a vanished tribe,  
  
two, three thousand years ago, you parted  
  
the dawn rain, its thickest monsoon curtains,  
  
and beckoned me to the northern canyons. (“Beyond the Ash Rains,” *V.S.*, 110)

The denial of the speaker’s history has serious ontological ramifications for him, because this refusal by the land may blot out both the speaker’s present (any claim on it) and his past (his ancient association with it). The introduction of “You” and the allusion to “a vanished tribe” in the narrative matrix add a gregarious dimension to the speaker’s “spatialism” connecting the coeval companion (“You”) and the antecedent community (the vanished tribe of the Hohokam people). The frustrated speaker is given an alternative choice of destination by his recrudescing addressee who, like a deft guide, parts the dawn rain to reveal another possibility, and calls the speaker to leave for the northern canyons (the Antelope canyons).

If the companion’s hospitality soothes the speaker’s weariness and anxiety, then her alacrity to come with him reassures the speaker in ways more than one. In fact, hand-in-hand with her, he can

afford to traverse the “emptied world” of the desert in which time has emptied the land of all its accumulated personal significations:

You took my hand, and we walked through the streets  
 of an emptied world, vulnerable  
 to our suddenly bare history in which I was,  
 but you said won't again be, singled  
 out for loss in your arms, won't ever again  
 be exiled, never again, from your arms. (“Beyond the Ash Rains,” *V.S.*, 110-111)

On another level, his act of revisiting history in her company gives the promise of a permanent abode in a long-loved land with a long-loved companion. What grants the poem its multivalence is the feasibility of interpreting the “you” figure not only as a human companion, but also as a place of residence. It is the “you” that remains the more active agent of the two, offering alternatives, giving assurance and showing fondness for the speaker. Following this terrestrial interpretation, we may say that place exercises a decisive influence, rejecting or replenishing the speaker at will. In fact, though thoroughly dependant on place, man remains only partially aware of the real extent of its influence. As a result, place retreats to the backdrop and becomes what M. Merleau-Ponty dubs “the matrix of habitual action” (90). Needless to say, it is this matrix of habitual action that the speaker at once forgets and retains, and that the “you” figure recalls to and replenishes for him.

“Snow on the Desert” from *A Nostalgist's Map of America* hints at the radical relationship among elements of ecology dismantling the speciest hierarchy, denying human supremacy, and displacing anthropocentrism with a kind of post-speciest outlook:

in each ray a secret of the planet's  
 Origin, the rays hurting each cactus  
 into memory, a human memory –  
 for they are human, the Papagos say:  
 not only because they have arms and veins  
 and secrets. But they too are a tribe,  
 vulnerable to massacre. (“Snow on the Desert,” *V.S.*, 165)

Fidelity of the poet towards the indigenous people (the Papago Indians) and their life is reflected in his description when he reiterates the Papago belief that saguaros (a cactus species) are also a community and they too have their “memory.” The empathetic attitude towards the plants (saguaros) of the desert testifies to the poet's eco-sensitivity which is very much concerned about the indigenous culture of the land and her people (here the Sonoran desert and the Papago Indians). Accepting from Arthur Rimbaud the poet's responsibility towards human beings and/or animals (202-205) Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, can easily empathize with any other oppressed people like the Papagos or the Palestinians. Like the Australian Aboriginal philosopher

Bill Neidjie, Agha Shahid Ali also “weaves his [the Papagos] people beautifully in the ecological fabric of the world as connected beings, held by the land and its places of special sacrality” (Neidjie in Plumwood, 225).

The last lines of the poem can be read as a kind of rumination on the loss the earth has faced during its journey from the beginning:

... a time  
to recollect  
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,  
  
a time to think of everything the earth  
and I had lost ... (“Snow on the Desert,” *V.S.*, 167-168)

Needless to say, the earth’s losses are to be borne by men in general and a sensitive poet like Ali in particular, for he too is a member of the human community.

In another poem from the same volume, namely “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” the poet sheds light on a historical and historic event of Arizona that took place in 1917 and has had an enduring cultural importance ever since. Hubert Zapf propounds the concept of “cultural ecology”:

... it has staged and explored, in ever new scenarios, the complex feedback relationship of prevailing cultural systems with the needs and manifestations of human and nonhuman “nature,” and from this paradoxical act of creative regression has drawn its specific power of innovation and cultural self-renewal. (852)

This pattern of “cultural ecology” is perceptible in “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel” where the poet re-visits the Bisbee Deportation of July 1917. The voices from the past keep whispering to the collective consciousness and a kind of “*Son et Lumiere*” is enacted in the place of the illegal deportation and killing of nearly 1,300 mine workers:

he hears her whisper: “Something  
has happened. What is it?”  
No one answers,  
but each night a voice cries out: “Fire!”  
The copper mountains echo with rifle shots:  
Men on strike are being killed  
In the mines, the survivors forced  
into boxcars and left the desert  
without water. Their women are leaving the city. (“The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” *V.S.*, 137)

A kind of dialogic relationship is established between past and present, and history and culture. As a result, a process of cultural ecology is set in motion and a creative regression operates just as a kind of “cultural self-renewal.” What is more, this opens a new vista for a later day poet who is free to negotiate the past armed with the heirloom of the history of the land.

“An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little” taken from the volume *A Walk Through The Yellow Pages* (1987) imagines the poet’s encounter with a character from a famous fairy tale almost 700 years after its creation. In this, Ali’s spatialism finds newer dimensions as he moves beyond the constrictive frameworks of “temporality” and “reality.” An obvious geocentric concern is perceived in the following lines: “My father.../...slowly bought the whole forest,/ Had it cut down./ But the wolves escaped, ...” The poem actually allegorizes the urbanization of the rural and the sylvan landscapes. Since Little Riding Hood is no longer little, she does not fail to comprehend the mercenary motif of her father for the denuding of nature and endangering the life of wild animals. The other characters of the fairy tale also change in keeping with the changed times. The father of the little girl comes out as a commercial enterpriser who shows no compunction in ruthlessly cutting the forest and making money out of it. A direct conflict thus arises between human and non-human elements of ecology that fill out space into place by means of association. The symbiotic relationship is broken here. A traumatic, environmentally critical situation arises in the following lines: “Now I drive through the city,/ Hearing wolves at every turn./ How warm it was inside the wolf!”

The “wolves” are obviously symbolic here, indicating some harmful elements of the social environment of a city girl threatening her safety and security. Not only do the human-nonhuman bondings get severed, the interhuman bonding too crumbles down as the social environment becomes vitiated. What gives the poetic picture an element of pathos is the predicament of the girl’s grandmother. Unable to cope with the pangs of dislocation from their forest home to an old age home, the venerable lady got nightmares and lupophobia that ultimately took her to her grave: “The last time I saw her, she cried,/ “Save me, he’s coming to eat me up!”/ We gave her a quiet burial.”

The transformation of the locale from a sylvan landscape to the concrete jungle that gives to the poem the distinction of a revisionist reworking of a fairy tale, also reveals the geo-consciousness of Agha Shahid Ali who seems to follow Arthur Rimbaud’s ecoconscious dictate: “He [the poet] ... is responsible for humanity, even for the animals” (204).

“Hansel’s Game” is another subversive take on a German fairy tale that was first recorded by the famous Grimm brothers and published in 1812. It captures similar concerns over the change of environment, at once biological and social. There is a contrast between “in those years” and “now.” This is the narrative of revisiting the “form of the world” from “the grave to the womb” and from “the womb to the grave.” The twist comes at the tag end of the poem when the innocent little boy, now grown up, does the kind of work “what witches do” or did in the original tale:

We have a big ice-box  
in our basement  
where we keep the witch.

Now and then we take portions of her  
to serve on special occasions.  
And our old father washes  
her blood from the dishes. (“Hansel’s Game,” *V.S.*, 103)

Apparently, the evil of consumerism has outreached even the witches. What is worse, the doers are not at all guilt-conscious; they have left behind any sense of guilt or shame like discarded belongings. If on the macro level, the spatialism exhibited remains telluric, then on the micro level it becomes domestic.

Agha Shahid Ali's sustained negotiations with landscape(s) add a remarkable dimension to his poetry, thanks to his unflinching as well as unwearied attitude to place. In this context, Amy Newman opines, "Though his [Ali's] poetry is dense with the landscapes of pre- and postpartition India and of his travels through and transitions to America, his [Ali's] nostalgia is extraterritorial" (71). According to Newman, "It [Ali's place attachment] is not limited to the borders and waters between countries but extends to the boundaries of human longing, dissolving postcolonial categorizations and etching poetry of an immaterial rather than a geographic exile" (71). The poems discussed in this paper may show us how Ali's passion for landscape(s) acquires for them near mythical qualities of evanescence, poignancy and a genuine sense of loss and longing. Significantly Ali's geoconsciousness is at once translocal, transtemporal and transreal allowing him to describe with equal aplomb Kashmir and Arizona, utopos and distopos, and ever-ever land and never-never land. By going across place, the poet is able to gain and give a global perspective that is ever mindful of specificities and generalities of location(s) described. By going across time, the poet limns the changes that affect his locations and lends to them a dreamy grandeur. By stepping across the liminality of the real, the poet gets the freedom to conflate "the inspective," "the introspective" and "the inventive" in the service of poetry.

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# “Everywhere I look, you could frame it”: David Mitchell’s Mission to Describe

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## Abstract

David Mitchell’s novels are often discussed in terms of large themes, but this paper adumbrates a different approach: reading Mitchell as a stylist, tracing the tendencies of his writing at a more local level and probing their implications. Focusing on Mitchell’s debut *Ghostwritten* (1999), the essay explores Mitchell’s persistent penchant for aphorism and for succinct visual description. In the novel’s “Tokyo” chapter we observe the cyclical growth of cherry blossoms as part of the narrator Satoru’s attention to the world. In the “Petersburg” chapter, another narrator, Margarita Latunsky, walks through the city at night, listing vivid visual details, and remarks: “Everywhere I look, you could frame it and just by doing that you’d have a picture.” This attention to detail is redemptive. The same is true of another character, Neal Brose, earlier in the book, who, just before his death is granted a perceptual relief, an ability to see and appreciate more clearly the physical world around him. In all this, Mitchell compares tellingly to the great stylist of the previous generation of British novelists, Martin Amis. The reviewer Adam Mars-Jones observed that “Amis’s originality as a stylist” had been “to detach lyrical language from the lyrical impulse,” writing with exquisite style about degradation. Mitchell inverts this aesthetic, bringing our attention readily to bear on the external world in a spirit of curiosity and care. This connects to Mitchell’s ethical impulse as a writer: his care for words betokens a care for the world.

**Keywords:** Stylist, Lyricism, Aphorism

David Mitchell’s novels are understandably discussed in terms of large themes: global flows, structures of power, the repetitions and ruses of world history. Formally, the intricate architecture of his novels is equally amenable to analysis at a large scale. Yet we read novels line by line, and the quality of Mitchell’s writing also depends on its most molecular levels of prose. This essay thus adumbrates an analysis of Mitchell as a stylist. It also proposes that the micro work of his sentences is connected with the macro work of his themes and convictions. This argument could hold across his work, but the present short discussion primarily demonstrates how it can be traced from Mitchell’s debut *Ghostwritten* (1999).

Mitchell’s style presents a paradox. He is at once a diverse stylist and a consistent one. We admire him because he can write in lots of different ways, setting himself challenges, and meeting them successfully. The journal of Adam Ewing is different from the diary of Jason Taylor – and from the letters of Robert Frobisher or the radio dialogue of Bat Segundo. But we may also admire Mitchell because he seems to do the same things repeatedly, across such different voices. What things are they?

Mitchell’s prose contains a lot of thinking. His novels involve many big ideas, but they are rich and effective also because they are full of little ideas, the thoughts people have about anything and

everything that crosses their paths. Clearly, Mitchell's writing tends this way in part because of his extensive penchant for first-person narrators, people we naturally catch in the act of thinking – some, like Neal Brose or Marco in London, almost offering stream-of-consciousness commentaries on their minds and fields of vision as they go along. These figures naturally tend to be lent some of Mitchell's own wit and perception – a literary tendency for which *Ghostwritten's* noncorpum, inhabiting other minds and lending them direction, is one analogy. So Mitchell's people do not just have vague ideas, they have precisely phrased ideas, even if these have only just swum into view. “There are so many cities in every single city,” says Neal Brose (97). “Sometimes language can't even read the music of meaning,” declares the noncorpum (165). In Tokyo, Satoru tells us, “you have to make your place *inside* your head” (37). In isolation these phrases can tip towards the portentous, but amid the flow of a character's voice they demonstrate one of Mitchell's particular qualities: he is aphoristic. As a writer of epic novels, this may be one of his strongest and most overlooked suits, rather as James Joyce wrote a 700-page book that was actually distinguished not for its copious overflow but for its pointillist precision with words.

Many of Mitchell's big ideas come at us through aphorism, as well as through story arcs and events. But something less ostentatious may be still more fundamental than this to his style. This is description: of objects, scenes, places. Not all Mitchell's figures offer this in quite the same way. But the encounter with visual description is a central part of the experience of reading Mitchell. These scenesetting lines can be isolated, separated by several pages or even chapters. But they recur, pile up, and form part of his stylistic warp. In these pages I shall trace this textual strand through *Ghostwritten*, focusing primarily on just two narrators.

### Tokyo

Satoru, the record store clerk early in *Ghostwritten*, is one figure who allows Mitchell to show us the physical world. He is adrift in his own yearnings, but also an observer of what's around him:

I went outside for a moment, to feel the rain on my skin. It was like being breathed on. A delivery van braked sharply and beeped at an old lady pushing a trolley who glared back and wove her hands in the air like she was casting a spell. The van beeped again like an irritated muppet. A mink-coated leggy woman who considered herself extremely attractive and who obviously kept a rich husband strode by with a flopsy dog. A huge tongue lolled between its white teeth. (39-40)

In one of Mitchell's recurrences, that woman and her dog are echoed later in London (273). One thing that Mitchell's details can do is draw patterns across a novel, as though that will twine it together. But details can also be compelling in their contingency. The unrepeated, unique, fleeting moment of Satoru's reaction to the rain is as important as any secret bigger picture – important to the novel's slowly building texture, its responsiveness to weather and place. Satoru, who has a highly developed sense of Tokyo's particularity, is a great appreciator of these things. His observations of the cherry blossom form a rhythm, a sort of prose punctuation, through his chapter. First:

The cherry trees lining the backstreet were still winter trees, craggy, pocked, and dripping. (35)

A little shower of adjectives, but a plain account.

The cherry trees were budding. Maroon tips sprouted and swelled through the sealed bark. Pigeons ruffled and prilled. I wish I knew more about pigeons. Were they strutting about like that for mating purposes, or just because they were strutting birds? ... The air outside was warmer and damp. Being outside was like being in a tent. A jackhammer was pounding into concrete a few doors down. (43)

This blooms a little more: the flat simile for being outside, the alliteration of “sprouted and swelled,” the keenness of observation in that line – for Satoru is looking for something that has not quite happened yet; the trees have not yet presented the world a spectacle. The pigeons also introduce the meandering thought process that I have already suggested is typical of Mitchell’s narrators: it often brings a sort of bathos.

The cherry blossoms were suddenly there. Magic, frothing and bubbling and there just above our heads filling the air with colour too delicate for words like “pink” or “white.” How had such grim trees created something so otherworldly in a backstreet with no agreed-upon name? An annual miracle, beyond my understanding. (50)

As the noncorpum will say, language sometimes feels inadequate. This passage is different from the others, bursting out into rapture, admitting its love of nature’s visual bounty. But it is modest too, stressing the imprecision of words and the limits of Satoru’s capacity. It is a moment of gratitude and reverence.

The cherry blossoms had come and almost gone. New green leaves, still silky and floppy, were drying on the trees lining the back street. Living and light as mandolins and zithers. The commuters streamed by. Not a coat in sight. Some had come out without their jackets. No denying it, spring was old news. (56)

Mitchell can be curt. “Living and light as mandolins and zithers,” like “Not a coat in sight,” is a verbless sentence: a form that is quite characteristic of him, working for quick notation that can be vivid yet takes up little space, makes few claims to grandeur. Among major contemporaries, one prolific employer of such lines is Iain Sinclair: this is one possible route between these rather different writers.

In Satoru’s chapter of nearly 30 pages, this descriptive material only adds up to a few lines, under a page. It does not predominate over Satoru’s emotional journey or even his feeling for jazz. But it is an important counterpoint to those things. It grants his story a sense of place, but in a quite different way from his general statements about Tokyo. It makes place a matter of the small furnishings of the street, of color and contingency rather than any larger social tendency. William Carlos Williams counselled “no ideas but in things,” meaning that poetry should cleave to objects, think its way through them rather than in cloudy generalities. In these moments of Mitchell there are no places but in things, though elsewhere, to be sure, he also entertains complex ideas of places which are less anchored to them.

Satoru is a romantic. Near the end of the chapter, talking to Koji on the telephone, he tries to remember why he and Tomoyo have not consummated their relationship, and drifts into a list of memories – “I remember her body wrapped inside my dufflecoat as we walked along, sharing the same umbrella. ... I remember lying on the blanket in Ueno Park as the cherry blossom fell onto our faces. ... I remember her asleep on my shoulder on the night bus” (57). That is a generic way of thinking, like lovers do: but we can take from it a hint that details, observations, can be connected to love. No wonder Satoru remembers these things, for we have already seen him watching the world around him even without Tomoyo’s presence to inspire him.

### **Petersburg**

Mama-san in Tokyo sees the trees too, and asks: “aren’t the cherry blossoms outside a picture?” (52). That opens a discreet passage through the novel to another character, for whom pictures are a job but also, as we shall see, become a metaphor for seeing better. Margarita Latunsky is a profoundly different character from Satoru: a criminal rather than a shop assistant, she is also as deluded as he is clear-eyed. But they do have one thing in common: love. Both are romantics, Satoru with chaste yearning, Latunsky with kitsch, painfully misguided fantasies about her villainous lover. And Latunsky also elaborates on the idea of description, of seeing one’s surroundings, more fully than anyone else in *Ghostwritten*. The passage where she and Tatyana, the new colleague who is in fact an undercover agent, walk through St Petersburg at night arrives near the middle of the book, and might be considered aesthetically central to it too. Latunsky tells us:

The streets were filled with shadows and brightness and footsteps and candy-colours and tramlines and swallows. I’ve never noticed the windows above the Glinka Capella, how graceful they are. What are those things called? Jerome would know. Flying buttresses? The stars are not quite there tonight. A light is moving amongst them. A comet, or an angel, or the last decrepit Soviet space-station falling down to earth? (230)

This is a woman who is usually only rapturous about her fantasies, and who cannot wait to escape from St. Petersburg to Switzerland; but the passage announces sudden rapture in her environment, in its rushing first line with its incongruous items – footsteps are auditory, candy-colors are more a quality than an object, while swallows swoop into the end of the line from nowhere. Margarita Latunsky is a deeply flawed narrator not least for the arrogance with which she dismisses all those around her save her opportunistic lover; her delusions are painfully, maybe excessively visible to the reader. So it is noteworthy that she is noticing, looking outward and admiring, rather than dismissing. Note her curiosity also as she wonders about the name of an object (Jerome, who would know, is an English art forger): questions, as well as descriptions, are part of an attention to the world – something she shares with Satoru and his unknown pigeons. Here she comes again, as her attention widens:

Everywhere I look, you could frame it and just by doing that you’d have a picture. Not a Jerome picture. A real picture, more real than the ones we steal. Even they are just copies. Jerome’s are copies of copies. That boy’s head. The wishing well. All those girls in green eyeshadow and apricot blusher, being herded into the back of the police van ... The firecrackers going off in a distant quarter, or might they be gunshots? That would

be a good picture. The car with bricks for wheels. The shape of the factory roof, and the chimney, sooty bricks, a picture made of sooty bricks. The horse running down an alley, how did the horse get off its pedestal? A boy with dinosaur fin-hair sways past on roller-blades. A tramp with his bag of newspapers for a pillow on the bench. Tourists in their bright “mug me” shirts, the canals and the domes and the crosses and the sickles and, ah .. Even the mud by the river .... (231)

Not just the mud by the river: even of a police boat, this criminal tells us a moment later to conclude her peroration: “Its red and blue lights are beautiful” (231).

What is this passage doing in *Ghostwritten*? Why enter it in the midst of Latunsky’s tale of failed art theft? It does not necessarily tell us much about global causality, flows of capital or the novel’s other large interests. It is mimetic of the confused, amnesiac renewals of perception that drunkenness can induce, and Mitchell is good at taking the trouble to render such familiar states in prose, one line at a time. But it has another role, for which it indeed needs to stand slightly apart from more grandly world-historical themes. In a word, it is redemptive. Latunsky has been granted a couple of pages off the road to disaster: and through the accidental chemistry of alcohol, her love for Rudi and her fascination with Tatyana, she has gained the ability, or the readiness, to see her world and wonder. She perhaps shares this new capacity with Neal Brose earlier in the book, wondering about Satoru and Tomoyo as he sees them across a cafe, wondering whether the Cookie Monster’s teeth will fall out (105). Brose’s flashes of insight into his surroundings are brief, rationed between dialogue, aphorisms and stories of his past. But the sense is that, late in life, he is looking anew: “I was wrong about the sky. It’s not dreary white ... when you look you see ivory. You can see a glow, there, above the mountain where the sun polishes it pearly and wafer thin” (78). A little later, “Alchemy was changing the sky. The sun was burnishing the leaden dullness to silver. In turn the silver was shrouding blue” (87). Brose parallels Latunsky in being granted a kind of perceptual redemption shortly before he dies, in the form of a synaesthetic receptivity to the sound of an aeroplane “skinning the afternoon with its jagged blade of noise” (102) or “A common dirt-coloured bird that sang in emerald and opal” (85). Both characters, of course, have been taken over by Mitchell, who wants to use their eyes and voices to see and announce these things: again one glimpses how the novelist hit on the idea of the noncorpum directing its human host. In fact Latunsky does not only have this ability momentarily: 25 pages later, another paragraph catalogs the details she walks by in the street, and concludes: “It’s all made of little things that you don’t ordinarily notice” (256). *It* being the walk, St Petersburg, or life in general: or also a novel.

### The Ethics of Observation

One could continue this process of looking at looking, through the rest of the novel – notably Marco in London – and through Mitchell’s other books, not least the budding writer Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* seeing the “Brittle thistles and fluffy grass” (107), how “The melony sun dripped steamy brightness” (102), or how in a field of daisies, “Petalled stars and dandelion comets streak the green universe” (100): a moment’s figurative reprise for the image of the comet which seems to streak across Mitchell’s body of work. But this short investigation will conclude by asking more about what Mitchell’s attention to the world means.

In the generation before Mitchell, the novelist most often acclaimed as the greatest stylist was Martin Amis. Mitchell's ability to structure a novel shows just how poor Amis has long been at it, and how flawed macro-novelistic form was not the inevitable result of living at the turn of the millennium. If, as many observers have remarked, such large-scale structures are not Amis's strongest suit, his ability to form individual phrases and sentences has nonetheless been exceptional (Brooker 9-12). Yet his style tends in a different direction from Mitchell, in an illuminating way. In a review of Amis's 1995 novel *The Information*, Adam Mars-Jones observed: "Amis's originality as a stylist has been to separate verbal beauty from the cause it has traditionally served, to detach lyrical language from the lyrical impulse. Why should intense verbal music be the privilege of those who love life in however contrary a fashion, the Nabokovs, the Updikes?" (155). Amis, Mars-Jones acutely saw, had made a career of bringing lyricism to bear on ugliness, and making intense verbal music in the service of a cynical, malodorous, entropic view of human life. That, Amis has often announced, is the necessary vocation of the contemporary writer: our post-nuclear and post-moral world has grown ugly, so the writer should no longer hope to find unpoisoned springs of beauty.

One of Mitchell's boldest strokes, though perhaps never intended as such, is his inversion of this aesthetic: his disobedience of Amis's implicit or explicit injunctions. He brings his attention, and thus ours, readily to bear on beauty, or on things that might not be beautiful but have simply gone unnoticed, and whose quiddity or mere existence he wants to register. Mitchell's way of doing so, we have seen, is often terse and succinct: verbless sentences, two-line paragraphs punctuating a narrative that is on its way somewhere else. But his gaze rarely denigrates the world. His stories show structures of oppression, imaginations of disaster: the Sonmi and Zachry episodes of *Cloud Atlas* are perhaps the most extreme instances, and show that Mitchell's lack of cynicism does not simply result from an inability to conceive of people acting badly. Even the bullies in *Black Swan Green* are a smaller-scale version of that collective human cruelty. But unlike Amis, Mitchell never lets this potential take over his own vision, or become an excuse for his own writing to grow nihilistic. It is as though for him that would itself be unethical, a surrender to the forces his fiction opposes with bold explicitness.

His thin but insistent layer of descriptive lyricism is thus discreetly linked to his ethical intuition, or his sense of responsibility as a writer. Mitchell has said of words: "language is to the human experience what spectography is to light ... although a writer must sometimes pretend to use language lightly, he should never actually do so – the stuff is near sacred" ("Q&A"). (It is a delicate irony, of the sort that William Empson appreciated, that the word "light" casually carries two different meanings in the course of this reflection on the delicacy of words.) Words are to be handled with care; and the logic of the novels is that people, places, and things should be treated with analogous tenderness. By the end of *Ghostwritten*, as by the middle of *Cloud Atlas*, what is at stake is little less than the future of the world and the fate of the human species. What Mitchell wants seems youthfully optimistic: for us to care for the world, find a better way, start again. Those hopes may be condemned to failure, a risk that hopes are bound to run; but as fully dramatized in his fiction, they seem no less wise than Amis's strangely already-defeated outlook, in which the world has been ruined not by specific political agencies but by a general trend downwards. Mitchell's fiction tries to insist that other choices are possible, and they always start with something,

someone or somewhere in particular. This care for the world intuitively underpins the care with which he attends to things, places, climates; cherry blossoms, or clouds. He sketches them swiftly but surely: treats them as aspects of a place – the whole world – that we cannot afford to give up on or to lose. If the world is worth noticing, it might be worth saving.

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# Restriction, Resistance, and Humility: A Feminist Approach to Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley's Literary Works

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## Abstract

Anglo-American and French feminists focus on women's equality, women's experience as writers, and feminine writing. Proponents of black feminism, by contrast, position black women in fundamentally different ways from white women and offer the concept of intersectionality which calls for including women of all races in feminist concerns. Adopting this feminist approach, my paper uses a retrospective analytical methodology and aims at establishing a connection between two women poets of early America: Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. Anne Bradstreet writes about her experience of being a wife and mother, and overall makes statements about the patriarchal confinement imposed on women in her society in *The Tenth Muse* (1650). She had to succumb to the patriarchal Puritan society by writing poems secretly. Yet, she defies the "carping tongues" with her "mean pen." Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved poet, published *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) where she, like Bradstreet, wrote with a devotional homage to Christianity, but her poems also criticize those who "view [her] sable race with scornful eye." Though superior to most whites in her intellectual and literary accomplishments, Wheatley is clearly never their social equal and remains enslaved. Wheatley and Bradstreet, being brought to a new world from their land of origin, encounter a complex "phallogocentric" world. They oscillate between the two places and struggle to survive amidst the tripartite challenge of womanhood, motherhood, and patriarchal gender norms. The recent feminist discussions in academia mostly ignore how these two female poets fight intellectual battles and resist the patriarchal tradition, breaking the imposed silence and thus, gaining agency. Using feminist and gender theory, I examine their experiences as women and present a comparative analysis of the approaches that Bradstreet, as a white woman of the Puritan society, and Wheatley, as a black woman of the age of enlightenment, employ to assert their existence through writing.

**Keywords:** Phallogocentric Discourse, Race, Resistance, Politics of Sustained Empowerment

Male voices, starting from the ancient Greeks, have determined the role of women in society asserting that they "are physically, intellectually, and artistically superior" to the woman (Bressler 147). In response to this androcentric culture, recent scholars like Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster focus their concern on women's bodies and their creativity to show how "masculinist values" obfuscated, infiltrated, and influenced our attitude to women's writing and their creativity. Theorists such as Judith Butler, Vicki Kirby, Barbara Brook, and Jane Gallop also examine how the lives of women shape their creativity. In the 1970s, French psychoanalytic feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva became more concerned with women's writing. Instead of celebrating women as writers, they asked how women can write against the dominant language which is "phallogocentric" or masculine. Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray define women's writing as a form of *jouissance* (a term coined by Irigaray) which is feminine, maternal, and sexual. While all these feminist discussions encompass women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only, this essay examines two of the earliest female poets Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) and Phillis

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Wheatley (1753- 1784) whose writings created the literary path for women even before the concept “feminism” came into being.

Regarding the early women writers' resistance writing, Nina Baym, in her 2011 book, *Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927*, uncovers and describes the writing in different genres of almost 350 American women, most of them unknown today but many of them successful and influential in their own time. Baym says, “[w]ithout the feminist literary criticism of the late 1970s and early 1980s, hundreds of women writers of the past would still be unknown and the academy would have remained a much more hostile place for women literary scholars” (qtd. in Malecka 4). A critic of American feminism, Camille Paglia declares that creativity is itself male and whatever women create, it is more masculine than feminine. Another scholar Pattie Cowell finds it significant that women writers are now allowed to make some noise. In a similar thread, Karen M. Odden states that “it is only by failing in the maternal role that these women gain creative agency” (Schuster xxiii). In contrast to this notion, my paper shows how Bradstreet and Wheatley react to the conventional restriction on women through their creative genius in a non-violent way and win over the barriers of womanhood, motherhood, and phallogocentric discourse through their tropes of humility and modesty.

Anne Bradstreet is the first Puritan woman to be recognized as an accomplished New England poet. Bradstreet immigrated to the new world with her husband and parents in 1630, and between 1633 and 1652 she had eight children. Bradstreet went through mental turbulence as her “heart rose” in protest against the “new world and new manners” (Bradstreet's words found on a plaque at the Bradstreet Gate in Harvard Yard). Her recurrent illness and domestic responsibilities made it difficult for her to write poetry. Yet, her volume of poetry *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), was published posthumously and received considerable attention. In spite of Puritan restrictions set on women's creative experiments such as writing poems or fiction or creating artwork, Bradstreet remained concerned with the issues of sin and redemption, physical and emotional frailty, death and immortality, and struggles to resolve the conflict she had been experiencing between the pleasures of sensory and familial experience, and the promises of heaven. As a Puritan, she was bound to subdue her attachment to the world, but as a woman, she sometimes felt more strongly connected to her husband, children, and community than to God. Her poems are full of “normative oppositions” as she is a “colonial woman who would have experienced herself as the ‘other’ in relation to so many forms of authority” (Myles 353).

Scholars such as Katarzyna Malecka, Adrienne Rich, and Timothy Sweet examine Bradstreet's poetry using Lacan and Kristeva's perspectives. Malecka shows how Bradstreet goes beyond the Puritan norms with her use of rhetorical devices and strategies that expose her preference for the material world to the spiritual world. Timothy Sweet maintains that Bradstreet's earlier elegies interrogate gender hierarchy but her accession to a personal voice makes her feminist tone end in failure because of her “surrender or retreat into hostile terrain” (170). Referring to Susan Wiseman, Susan Bruce states that Bradstreet's “exclusion from the political arena produces a ‘figurative, oblique, complex politics’ rather than no politics at all” (21). Whereas many scholars following Adrienne Rich centered their discussion on Bradstreet's poems as either public or personal, I would like to highlight how her private experience of being a woman and a mother enabled her to prove herself as a versatile artist and stand superior to her male contemporaries.

Puritan society relegated household work to the female domain, but Bradstreet gets inspiration from that domain and certainly establishes her creativity without writing “of wars, of captains, and of kings” (“The Prologue”). Though not in the accurate sense of *jouissance*, she utilizes her feminine desire and motherly sense as materials for her poems. Bradstreet uses “feminine *content* and feminine strategies in *The Tenth Muse*” (Henton 303). One of her most anthologized pieces, “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” expresses the intense devotion that the couple shared: “If ever two were one, then surely we./ If ever man were lov’d by wife, then thee” (1-2). Another poem entitled “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” depicts the emotions that many colonial Puritan women experienced before childbirth, as the threat of death was always present. Similarly, her letter “To My Dear Children,” her “Meditations,” and, most significantly, her poem “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1656,” exemplify how she seeks to preserve her maternal legacy through her “eight birds”: “Thus gone, amongst you I may live,/And dead, yet speak, and counsel give” (93-94). Thus, Bradstreet uses her motherhood as an intellectual enterprise “by embracing the socially-sanctioned role of the selfless and pious Christian mother . . . in order to secure a desirable posthumous reputation” (Pietros 60). Besides being a good mother and good wife as expected by the Puritan community, she also dares to exercise her literary talent in an antagonistic environment by employing the tool of humbleness.

Bradstreet’s humbleness works as a severe ironical trope in the poem “The Prologue,” where she asks for the domestic herbs “Thyme or Parsley wreath,” instead of the traditional laurel. To show her resistance, she credits the poets and historians as superior in intellect for whom her pen is “mean” and her lines are “obscure.” Her poems needle the carping tongues and expose that her modesty is stronger than her aggressiveness. She does not write as a servile one, but rather proves herself a spirited woman with a strong sense of reality and experience which is apparent in “The Prologue”: “If what I do prove well, it won’t advance./ They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance” (31-32). Though Sweet thinks that Bradstreet’s “defective” image fails to establish her female voice, Bradstreet employs her modesty as her poetic strength and declares that she neither has “skill” to write like male poets nor are her “ragged lines” worthy of recognition. Thereby, appearing to subordinate herself to male writers and critics, she says in “The Prologue”: “Men can do best, and women know it well./ Preeminence in all and each is yours;/ Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours” (40-42). The same resistant tone is found in her elegy on Sir Philip Sidney which indicates that Bradstreet was angered by the gender bias against women writers: “Fain would I show how he fame’s paths did tread,/ But now into such lab’rinths I am lead,/ With endless turns, the way I find not out” (70-72). In the poem “In Honor of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory,” Bradstreet praises Queen Elizabeth’s outstanding leadership and historical prominence. In contrast to her submissive tone in “The Prologue,” her portrait of Elizabeth does not attempt to conceal her confidence in the abilities of women: “She hath wiped off th’ aspersion of her Sex,/ That women wisdom lack to play the rex” (34-35). She addresses all men who commit a crime by denying women’s capacity for reasoning: “Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long,/ But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong” (102-103) and lauds Elizabeth who outdoes the male leaders by excelling in the so-called masculine role. While Sweet’s assertion apparently seems true that Bradstreet subordinates herself to the phallogocentric structure, it is essential to explore the inner paradox and strength that Bradstreet’s subordinate tone has. By denying her capabilities, she, in fact, strongly affirms their presence.

Where Bradstreet was subdued by the Puritan male-dominated society in spite of being a white woman, it is easy to deduce what the fate of black women of the same era could be. In the 1980s, advocates of black feminism such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker argue that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways from white women. However, living with the dual burdens of racism and sexism, slave women in the plantation South assumed roles within the family and community that contrasted sharply with traditional female roles in the larger American society. Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) remains an indispensable starting point for the study of women and slavery. The book explores new ways of understanding the intersection of race and gender, comparing the myths that stereotyped female slaves with the realities of their lives. Above all, this groundbreaking study shows us how black women experienced freedom in the Reconstruction South — their heroic struggle to gain their rights, hold their families together, resist economic and sexual oppression, and maintain their sense of womanhood against all odds. In 2015, the publication of *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* contributed hugely to reviving the black women thinkers of America. This book challenges the resistance to the intellectual contribution of black women, retrieves their ideas, and foregrounds “how these ideas grew out of unique challenges to both the mind and the body” (Bay *et al.* 4). Thus, the earliest African American poet Phillis Wheatley again draws the attention of the critics.

Phillis Wheatley, a seven-year-old girl of small size, missing front teeth, from Senegal, became a commodity on the eighteenth-century global market. Being kidnapped from her African land and sold to a Boston merchant John Wheatley in 1761, she was renamed as Phillis by her owner after the slave ship, the *Phillis*, which brought her to America. By being renamed as Phillis Wheatley, she was stripped of her African identity and then occupied by the Wheatley family as their property. The Wheatley family, however, provided her with an education that was unusual for any woman of the time and unprecedented for any female slave. Her extraordinary accomplishments in reading and writing brought her political, social, and religious recognition. The religious knowledge she received from Susanna Wheatley, who was committed to evangelical Christianity, provided her with the themes and motives for writing. She traveled to England to manage a publisher for her book of poems and created a significant image there as a black poet. This enslaved girl became the founding mother of African American Literature by publishing her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773. In *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011), Vincent Carretta writes that Phillis Wheatley is “one of fewer than twenty whose words found their way directly into print during their lifetimes” (4). Arlette Frund affirms that Wheatley deserves to be called “intellectual” according to the definition of the term which describes the intellectual as “an individual who engages in an activity of the mind, produces written work, and participates in public debates” (35). According to Mukhtar Ali Isani, Wheatley had undoubtedly become a celebrity, and newspapers and magazines, both British and American, had contributed to the bulk of her fame. Forty-two newspapers and magazines, twenty-seven of which were American, took notice of the poet on more than one occasion. These notices focused on Wheatley as a black poet who proved herself as an intellectual in spite of being an enslaved woman.

In that era of enlightenment, many intellectuals and critics questioned Phillis Wheatley's creativity. For instance, Thomas Jefferson cast doubt on Wheatley's authorship, arguing in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1786) that "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (234). Jefferson believed that the suffering of slaves should have given them a comparative advantage as poets, but he found Wheatley to be lacking in "imagination." Led by Jefferson, the whites "ridiculed Wheatley's appropriation of the classical tradition, which they mocked as beyond her race's abilities" (Taylor 603). Though critics admonish her for being "too white" in expressing her gratitude to the white society, Phillis' voice against the slave owners is apparent in "To The Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth": "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat ... Such, such my case. And can I then but pray/ Others may never feel tyrannic sway?" (24-25, 30-31).

Being a slave and a woman, the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley had to work through complexities produced by the intersection of race and gender. The cruelty of her owners is highlighted by M. A. Richmond: "she inhabited a strange, ambiguous twilight zone between black society and white society, cut off from any normal human contact" (20-21). In a letter written to Reverend Samson Occum in 1774, Wheatley hints at her frustration at the colonists' hypocritical nature as they embraced the rhetoric of liberty and freedom while enslaving others. Addressing this hypocrisy as "a strange Absurdity," she writes, "in every Human breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom ... How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others ..." (Carretta, *Complete Writings*, 153). Many readers ignore the ironic tone she uses in her allegorical poem "On Virtue" where she writes: "Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach./ I cease to wonder, and no more attempt/ Thine height t'explore, or fathom thy profound" (3-5). Wheatley's modesty in acknowledging her own inferiority and appeal to "Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,/ O Thou, enthroned with Cherubs in the realms of day!" (20-21) hint at not only her own helplessness in a white patriarchal literary world but also the miserable condition of the whole black race. Her attempt to exercise power over social, religious, and political events suffers criticism as she takes a role that is traditionally reserved for male authority.

Though Wheatley had been converted to Christianity, she did not remain submissive as a "stranger in a strange land." Rather, she claimed an identity as an Ethiopian that granted her biblical authority to speak to her white readers. In "Deism," she writes: "Must Ethiopians be employ'd for you?/ Much I rejoice if any good I do" (1-2). Her audacity "assumes a voice that transcends the 'privileges' of those who are reputedly her superiors in age, status, abilities, race, and gender" (Carretta 59). By celebrating her blackness, she reminds her audience in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" that difference in color cannot be a barrier to the common ground of unity:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
Their colour is a diabolic die.  
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (5-8)

Wheatley preaches a kind of humanism that is based on the shared similarity of all created beings and envisions a time when all human beings regardless of skin color would come to the same platform through their refined soul. She subverts the conventional opposition between blackness and whiteness by using the imperative “Remember” and by arguing that “complexion was morally inconsequential” (Carretta 63). Staying among the whites, she breaks down the notion of race, creates a transatlantic network, and becomes the originator of a new black history. Eric Thomas Slauter addresses the white ambivalence and anxiety saying that “Colonial whites worried when blacks failed to reproduce white culture, and they worried when blacks did reproduce it” (96). Slaves were required “to be exactly like whites while remaining absolutely unlike them” (Thorn 79). Donald L. Robinson insists that “Few white men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could accept, or even imagine, the only realistic alternative” to slavery: “a racially integrated society” (Forbes 82). Waldstreicher’s evocative essay “The Wheatleyan Moment” reminds us of the egalitarian challenge posed by Wheatley. He notes that it is both a conceptual and methodological problem in recent black studies that fail to see the revolutionary challenge posed by enslaved writers when they came to appear in print with the aim of shifting from the marginal to the center.

Bradstreet and Wheatley both participated in the long tradition of humility to survive in the world which valued humility as a virtue for women. Robert Daly questions “why humility was so vital and viable a convention for so long and in so many otherwise quite various writers” of that era (3). Though Eileen Margerum affirms this humility as conventional, there is a kind of “performative force” in their writings. Susan Truce thinks that “For a woman, the act of publishing was itself a gendered act, an intrusion into a male sphere” (21). These two poets write not as revolutionary, but rather as very submissive women with moral sensibilities. If we call it the conventional trait of the woman of that time, a very truth remains hidden – the phallogocentric social structure. These two female poets are not allowed to enter into the print world directly. The patriarchal society has to be satisfied with the note of authenticity and the moral testimonial from trustworthy people. Bradstreet’s brother-in-law John Woodbridge’s epistle for her book *The Tenth Muse* reflects how Bradstreet has to be proved virtuous for being read by the public:

It is the work of a woman, honoured, and esteemed where she lives, for her demeanour, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete managing of her family occasions, and more than so, these poems are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments. (Hensley 3)

The title page of *The Tenth Muse* states that these poems are written “by a Gentlewoman of those Parts” so that Bradstreet does not seem “unwomanly.” To “protect a woman’s reputation from charges of immodestly pursuing publication” and to assure the public that she is neither influenced by evil nor does she neglect her motherly or womanly duties, Woodbridge designs the prefatory letter (Henton 305). He informs the readers that these poems are being published without the author’s knowledge who did not expect it to “see the sun.” Patricia Pender argues against the humility tropes attached to her poems, saying that this strategic deployment of modesty manipulates the convention and “constitutes a form of subtle self-fashioning” (Pietros 51). However, this epistle

also reflects the literary battle of the sexes when Woodbridge urges the readers not to be offended lest “men turn more peevish than women, to envy the excellency of the inferior sex” ((Hensley 3).

Wheatley also suffered the hostility of white colonists under the guise of hospitality in Boston society. Her host family publicized their status, piety, and charity by displaying Phillis among white Bostonians. She was shown off as an anomaly among Africans and as an entertainment for her exotic curiosity. She was first “examined” by boards of male experts to judge whether she was capable of writing and then her first book *Poems* was published in London with a documented preface signed by eighteen Boston worthies certifying the authenticity of her poems:

WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, .... She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them. (Gates 31)

Both Bradstreet and Wheatley adopted a self-deprecating voice, pretending to be “defective,” “mean,” or “fool.” These are the typical “compulsory performance” codes set by the masculine authority, according to Judith Butler, who asserts that masculine or feminine gender performances are culturally defined attributes, and not tied to physical bodies. Butler criticizes the traditional gender system that “establishes not only the sex of bodies but also the kinds of desire they can have” (Tyson 110). But this twentieth-century concept was beyond the imagination of early New England people where there were only Pilgrim Fathers, not Pilgrim Mothers, and where assertive and aggressive women were a threat to male domination or the patriarchal structure. In the case of Phillis Wheatley, slavery was another addition to her already jeopardized life, but she became eminent despite these gender constraints and other barriers imposed on her race. Like Anne Bradstreet, she became the tenth muse for black folks in the history of African literature. Bradstreet and Wheatley both demonstrate mastery of physiology, classics, history, politics, anatomy, geography, astronomy, Greek metaphysics, and the concepts of cosmology, unusual subjects for women at that time. Both poets’ acceptance of subordinate roles despite their evident talent proves their strong reaction to the debate about women’s access to reason. This is the same attitude that should place these poets in the category of Christine de Pisan, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Simone de Beauvoir who fought for women’s intellectual recognition.

Though the eighteenth-century books rarely included a frontispiece portrait of the author, Wheatley’s book was published with a frontispiece portrait that identifies her as “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley.” She became “the first colonial American woman of any race to have her portrait printed alongside her writings” (Carretta 100). In the portrait, Wheatley is dressed up as a domestic servant looking upward for spiritual inspiration and lacking the courage to look directly at the viewers (see fig. 1). She is made to exhibit her inferior status to compensate for her revolutionary act of writing as an African. Though Bradstreet’s book was not published with her portrait, most of the images of Bradstreet found later present the poet with the same humble and meek look (see fig. 2). These images lack poetic confidence, rather highlighting their feminine docility. This demonstrates how these two poets were barred from exhibiting their inherent talent and poetic worth. Yet, these images with their humble looks worked in their favor, making their entry into the print world possible.



Fig. 1: Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)



Fig. 2: Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

Bradstreet and Wheatley's poems echo the "feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and dread" as a reaction to their [her] separation from her family and arrival in America (Frund 41). Both of these poets find New England a wilderness but embrace it and endow it with their personal faculties and intellectual authority. Though Wheatley was a black slave poet, her network was more expanded than Bradstreet and even the themes of her poems range from personal to religious and social to political issues. Clad in slave's clothes, the young girl Phillis Wheatley takes pen in hand and visualizes something that remains invisible to her critics. In her poem "To Maecenas," Wheatley refers to her male precursor Terence and raises a question to the Muses for their "partial grace." She privileges Terence's name and also protests against the exclusion of women from the favor. Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls this tendency in the intellectual trajectory of African American writings the "cultural negotiation" (422). John C. Shields investigates the hymns of Wheatley in his book *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* and shows that "her use of the classical form expresses 'her portrayal of the feminine principle'" and her hymns are powerful expressions of woman in nature, woman in art, woman in society, and woman in politics (qtd. in Anderson 3-4). African American scholar Maureen Anderson affirms that Wheatley takes the voice of Dido in "An Hymn to Humanity" and "employs the epic hymn form, therefore, to celebrate and champion the feminine within a subversive, though powerful, expression of poetry" (4). Wheatley becomes the figure of feminine strength and wisdom, and raises the status of those who are disadvantaged, betrayed, and suppressed. As a slave, she cannot show her subversive attitude to her audience, so she takes the guise of Dido and a Christian message to deliver her charge against humanity.

Using their womanhood and motherhood as a source of strength, both Bradstreet and Wheatley participated in the debates of their time. Being a mother of eight and writing poems at the same time, Bradstreet maintained both Puritan family legacy and poetic legacy. She offers a different example of female physicality by "using reproductive discourse as a metaphor for power and constructing a female body that could legitimately produce not only children but ideas as well" (Lutes 310). Wheatley goes through a different experience regarding her marriage and motherhood. After the death of her master, Wheatley gained freedom from slavery and got married to a free black man of Boston. But her emancipation proved fatal for her as it made it impossible for her to have any financial help from her owner and she became more enslaved in freedom. The three

children she had all died young and later she died in poverty with her youngest child, unknown and unmarked. Her biographer Vincent Carretta notes, “Much about Phillis Wheatley’s life between 1776 and her death in 1784 remains a mystery” (172). Yet her enslavement, blackness, and womanhood fail to stop her literary glory from flourishing, creating a significant path for other women writers of color.

Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley, as poets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, could not have known about writing “feminine.” Moreover, the notion of “feminine writing” advocated by Hélène Cixous was unknown to these women intellectuals. While Cixous asks for a kind of writing which is all about women’s true sexuality, their eroticization, their adventures, their awakenings and their discoveries of a dynamic zone, we find a different version of writing in the works of Bradstreet and Wheatley. They write neither as rebels nor as conformists. They exploit masculine language to unfold the innate creative strength of the woman and deconstruct woman’s function within the discourse of man. Like the “madwoman in the attic,” they pose the challenge to patriarchy in action and in writing, as later envisioned by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Through their literary and biological children, they perpetuate their legacy. Motherhood or slavery, neither could restrain them from asserting their womanhood. Using humbleness, apologies, lamentation, and helplessness as the key to freedom, both poets make a careful negotiation with the norms without following the orthodox path and create a strong place among the literary intellectuals. They remain out of mainstream politics but engage themselves in a more complicated one: the politics of sustained empowerment, which their male contemporaries could not even imagine. Both of them overcome the boundaries and restrictions set upon them by the male-dominated society and situate themselves in the field of gendered hierarchy in New England, posing a constant threat to the conservative notions of social order and typical gender norms.

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# Intersectionality in Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* and Barbara Smith's *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*

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## Abstract

Adrienne Rich in her *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* focuses on the tension between imposed heterosexuality and choice of sexual orientation, whereas Barbara Smith in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* deals with the gap of identity politics between white women and women of color. Both writings can be examined through the lens of intersectionality. Both Rich and Smith argue that women, in general, are oppressed and have been subject to domination in the patriarchal society. However, they differ in their argument of how the social and institutional forces contribute to the politics of gender, race, and sexuality and how women's racial and sexual orientation have been exploited to make them vulnerable. Rich, in her writing, shows lesbian women as marginalized not only for being lesbian but also for being women. In Rich's writing, gender and sexuality intersect with one another, whereas in Smith's writing, race, gender, and sexuality intersect because she argues that both Black women and Black lesbian women are marginalized simultaneously. This paper will examine how intersectionality has been used by Rich and Smith to understand the differences in their arguments when they are both advocates for the voice of marginalized people in society.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Feminism, Race, Gender, Heterosexuality, Lesbianism

The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to refer mainly to women of color, but this paper will discuss how race, gender, and sexual orientation of women, in general, intersect with one another and how this influences the lives of marginalized groups in both Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith's writing. Rich, in her writing, mainly discusses the identity politics of heterosexual and lesbian women. When she talks about "woman," she refers to the woman in general irrespective of race, unlike Smith, who primarily deals with the intersectionality between women of color and white women.

In Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, intersectionality appears in intra-group tensions between heterosexual and lesbian women. Under the broad umbrella of feminism, heterosexual and lesbian women's identity politics intersect with one another, and lesbian women's existence and voices are marginalized under the heterosexual structure of intersectionality. Rich argues in her writing that the political and social power structure of the patriarchal society imposes heterosexuality, especially on women. What is notable here is that when Rich talks about imposed heterosexuality, she specifically mentions about heterosexuality imposed only on the women, not on the men. This led to the idea of the patriarchal power structure of the society where the female sex, in general, is marginalized and where lesbian women's existence is under threat of erasure. Thus, gender and sexual orientation intersect with one another and make the voice of the lesbian woman marginalized. Rich says that her essay is written "in part to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from so much of scholarly feminist literature, an erasure which I felt (and feel) to be not just anti-lesbian but anti-feminist in its consequences, and to distort the experience of heterosexual women as well" (1515-1516). Rich focuses on the use of sexuality as a weapon by the patriarchal

society to keep women subjugated. It is the institutional forces which compel women to choose their sexual partners according to the demand of the society. Forced heterosexuality has been legalized by religion and law. She argues that “the lesbian, unless in disguise, faces discrimination in hiring, and harassment and violence in the street. Even within feminist-inspired institutions such as battered-women’s shelters and Women’s Studies programs, open lesbians are fired, and others warned to stay in the closet” (Rich 1516). The hierarchical and social structure of the power system keeps the voice of lesbian women marginalized and subjugated. Crenshaw in her *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* also talks about the marginalization of the people who are different in the established power system: “The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination – that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (1245).

Rich argues that lesbian women are being tortured not only because of their sexual identity but also because of their gender. Here the two identities are not mutually exclusive. “But,” as Rich says, “I continue to think that heterosexual feminists will draw potential strength for change from taking a critical stance toward the ideology which demands heterosexuality and that lesbians cannot assume that we are untouched by that ideology and the institution founded upon it” (1517).

Crenshaw’s idea of both structural intersectionality and political intersectionality can be applied in explaining Rich’s argument in her writing. Structural intersectionality is seen when Rich mentions the physical violence against women by males. Rich lists about eight characteristics of male domination over women where sexuality and gender intersect one another. The hierarchical social structure which is male-dominated perpetuates the oppression of women. Rich refers to Kathleen Gough who categorizes male domination over women: “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically or prevent their movements; to use them as objects as male transections to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments” (qtd. in Rich 1518) shows that intersectionality shapes women’s roles and voices in the society. All these characteristics of violence show that women are oppressed not only for being lesbian or heterosexual but also for being merely female.

This structural intersectionality necessarily leads towards political intersectionality where compulsory heterosexuality is used as a tool to keep woman marginalized. Rich refers to Catharine A. Mackinnon when she shows “the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality and economic position of woman which eventually leads to political intersectionality. “Under capitalism, women are horizontally segregated by gender and occupy a structurally inferior position in the workplace” (Rich 1521). She also argues why male employers are reluctant to hire qualified female employees. It is a kind of psychological game where the aim of this system is to give the message that power evolves around the males and which leads woman to a kind of economic enslavement. She also refers to the social structure where woman needs to use heterosexuality as a shield to save their job whereas their sexual preference could be lesbian. “The fact is that the workplace, among other

social institutions, is a place where women have learned to accept male violation of their physic and physical boundaries as the price of survival;” (Rich 1522). Rich here refers to the intersectionality between gender, sexuality and economic labor market where women of all sexual identities are marginalized. MacKinnon also argues about the structure of the labor market where women are kept intentionally at the bottom of the hierarchy: “Sexual harassment perpetuates the interlocked structure by which women have been kept sexually in thrall to men at the bottom of the labor market. Two forces of American society converge: men’s control over women sexuality and capital control over employees’ work lives.” Thus, this intersectionality between gender, sexuality and economic labor market results in the intersection of power and politics.

Moreover, using sexual violence, such as enforcing heterosexuality could be interpreted through the lens of political and racial intersectionality as well. Crenshaw argues how heterosexuality has been used as a tool to keep women suppressed: “Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw). The female vulnerability has been created by the society by imposing heterosexuality so that male orientated power structure could be perpetuated. The institutional forces play a great role in making woman vulnerable or at least create the impression that women are by nature vulnerable. If one asks the reason behind creating such an impression, it would refer to the ultimate power structure which is patriarchal in nature and which would necessarily want to perpetuate male domination. Rich, in her writing, shows how race, gender, economic force and sexuality intersect one another and how through the heterosexual pressure all the woman are kept marginalized. “... it seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have woman’s sexual appetites forced on them or that woman want to smoother or devour them, but that woman could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional- therefore economic access to women only on women’s term, otherwise being left on the periphery of matrix” (Rich 1523). So, it could be argued that gaining economic and social power is the main reason for males to impose heterosexuality. Rich refers to Kathleen Berry in her writing arguing that “she [Berry] documents extensive and appalling evidence for the existence on a very large scale, of international female slavery, the institution once known as ‘white slavery’ but which in fact has involved, and at this very moment involves, woman of every race and class” (Rich 1523).

Rich chooses to use the *lesbian continuum* rather than lesbianism because it has been denied by saying that it is a kind of disease or something which is not intrinsic (Rich 1528). Rich does not mean the term “lesbianism” in its literal meaning. Lesbianism here has a different connotation in her writing: “I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range through each woman’s life and throughout history. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again” (Rich 1528). Therefore, in Rich’s *lesbian continuum*, lesbianism intersects all the race, gender and sexual differences. It includes the multiplicity of all the identities. Like Rich, Rosenblum also argues the same in her writing: “The queer continuum unites a broad range of disempowered communities, surpassing the ‘lesbian and gay’ community’s relatively limited political reach. By including occasionally subversive people and people who face intersectional discrimination, the queer continuum defines broad resistance to compulsory heterosexuality” (92).

Therefore, what Rich is arguing in her writing is that by enforcing heterosexuality and erasing lesbianism, not only the lesbian women are being marginalized, but the women in general are being marginalized both economically and politically. Here women are oppressed in a two-fold way. Women are oppressed for their sexual preferences – for being a lesbian, and for their gender – for being a woman.

However, if we think about Barbara Smith's argument in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, and if we want to analyze her argument through the lens of Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, we see a gap in her argument of gender violence, race, and sexuality. Compared to Smith's attitude towards intersectionality, it could be said that Rich's argument is much broader in relation to the intersection of gender and sexuality.

Barbara Smith primarily deals with the structural intersectionality in her writing. In her essay, she argues that Black women writers and Black lesbian women writers are almost completely ignored in the world of literature and in her writing, she shows how Black women writers face two overlapping oppressions which necessarily intersect one another. Black woman writers are oppressed, in the first place, for being women in a wholly male-dominated (both white and black) society, and secondly, for being black under the structure of white supremacy: "All segments of the literary world – whether establishment, progressive, Black, female or lesbian – do not know, or at least act as if they do not know that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" (Smith 2223).

Though Smith mentions Black lesbian women writers, she talks mainly about the Black woman in general. She ignores in her writing that Black lesbian women writers face multilayered overlapping of oppression – for being lesbian, for being black, and for being woman. In the case of Black lesbian women writers, race, gender and sexuality intersect one another and make Black lesbian women writers more marginalized compared to Black women writers.

Smith refers to the politics of racism and institutional structure as a driving force to make Black women more vulnerable. If we want to find the reason of Black women's vulnerability and the denial of their existence in any field of literary, social and political aspects, it is important to look back at the history of the Black movement. Smith figures out one of the core reasons why black women are denied their basic rights: "Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life" (Smith 2224). Smith here refers to the political intersectionality as well, where Black people are marginalized for being Black. However, Smith is cautious enough in her writing showing that intersectionality does not work in the same way for black men as it works for Black women. Smith shows how black women's writings and white women's writings are dealt with in different ways and how black women's writings have always been the subject of discrimination: "When Black women's book are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works, they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex, as well as, the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in

the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (Smith 2225). What Smith argues here is that race and gender, Blackness and feminism are not mutually exclusive. Smith’s argument refers back to Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality that both being a woman and being black intersect one another and in order to understand the experiences and challenges a Black woman faces, it is imperative to take into account how these two identities intersect and reinforce one another. “My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw).

Smith points out to the political marginalization of the Black woman writers also. She attacks the misogynist writer Ishmael Reed for his comments about Afro-American women writers. Reed’s comment shows the political intersectionality of race and gender and how that intersectionality makes Black women writers a marginalized group. “Neither Reed nor his white male interviewer has the slightest compunction about attacking Black women in print. They need not fear widespread public denunciation since Reed’s statement is in perfect agreement with the values of the society that hates Black People, Women, and Black Women” (Smith 2228). By mentioning the race and gender of the interviewer, Smith makes it clear for her reader to understand how race and gender are interlocked.

Smith mentions the erasure of the existence of Black lesbian women and their writing, but what I find problematic in the argument of Barbara Smith’s reaction towards racial and sexual discrimination is that she presents both Black women and Black lesbian women’s identity under the umbrella of Black women identity in general. Thus, to some extent she ignores the intra-group difference. Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith, both deal with the issues of race, gender and sexuality in their writing and show how they intersect one another and ultimately make one group vulnerable and marginalized. However, if their argument is analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, both Rich and Smith differ in their point of view. Rich shows how gender and sexual intersectionality makes woman in general vulnerable by enforcing heterosexuality, whereas, Smith shows how race and gender intersect one another and makes Black women in general vulnerable and marginalized.

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# *Hajar Churashir Ma*: A “Herstory” of Resistance and Emancipation

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## Abstract

The surface story of Mahasweta Devi’s novel *Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084)* is a cumulative of glimpses of the incidents of how Kolkata responded to the massacre of Broti Chatterjee and his comrades who took part in the revolutionary communist Naxalite movement in the early 1970s. But underneath the guise of the crucial socio-political issues, this text is essentially about a female individual – a mother – who resists her conventional, marginalized, ignored, and silenced survival, and emerges from the periphery to the center and from silence to voice in order to redefine her life. The way she executes an inward revolution (metaphorically paralleled with her son’s armed revolution) to materialize her sense of being within the dominating patriarchy (mostly performed by her terrorizing marriage) and the way she breaks through the stereotypes and exploitations to create her own place – both domestic and social – produce a remarkable personal “herstory.” This paper, thus, attempts to explore the “herstorical” journey of Sujata towards psychological emancipation through the passage of self-realization and political consciousness. The paper also observes that the portrayal of Sujata’s journey is not limited to a single individual “herstory” because it symbolically represents the struggles of many other Sujatas who fight against gender stereotypes and attempt ideological liberation.

**Keywords:** Herstory, Patriarchy, Domination, Resistance, Emancipation

The paper could have started like “A history of ...” but it has not, as the paper is not about “history” but “her-story” of Sujata who is the mother and the protagonist in the novel *Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084)* written by Mahasweta Devi in 1973. The paper uses the term “herstory” (as opposed to history, which is often criticized for becoming the product of a particular gender position that reduces the perspectives of identities other than men’s) because it attempts to reveal the text as a tale, or a discourse, entirely generated from a woman’s perspective, about her personal journey towards self-discovery and heightened sense of liberty from a completely threatened and dominated condition. Sujata represents many other women who are constantly struggling to preserve their individual identities inside the dominating patriarchic hegemony, and her story gets potentially emblematic to contribute to the discussions of women’s empowerment and emancipation. Prominent feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir asserts in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that the true meaning of liberty and freedom lies in self-recognition (60), and in the male dominated society, the biggest challenge for any woman is possibly to look for an independent identity and to pursue her own choices, as a woman is always accepted only in the expected, conventional, stereotypical, and archetypal ways. The narrator and the protagonist of this novel, Sujata, has to resist and fight against her subjugated and peripheral survival to come out as a rebel – to claim her voice, dignity, ideological liberty and psychological emancipation. As part of that process she first has to be aware of the fact that she has been deprived of the fundamental rights as a human both in private and public domain. It is a matter of great concern that though some of the recognized human rights, e.g., right to vote, right to education, etc., are generally enjoyed by women today, the right to equality or right against exploitation, are barely accessible since the social infrastructure is predominantly patriarchic. The dominance of the males or patriarchy infiltrates

every sect of human society and women are typically dispossessed of opportunities and spaces to nurture their individual capabilities. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich defines patriarchy as “the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour – determine what part women shall or shall not play, and which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (57). It is a blueprint of domination: politically generated with a purpose that aims at ensuring that all women remain under male control; it results in women’s being totally absent or objectionably present in discourses, including the quintessential texts of any sort – print, electronic, graphic – in which the women are either extremely naive and obedient or seductive and witchy). So, this paper observes Mahasweta Devi’s *Hajar Churashir Ma* as a creation of a counter discourse that not only brings the female perspective to the front but also provides femininity with power and positive energy. This text is made to magnify the toxic sexist notion of the world, and it can also make its audience psychologically capable of denying the acceptance of gendered foreground and background of exploiting women. Sujata’s “herstory” of surviving in the patriarchic cocoon and then her breaking through the gender stereotypes to establish individuality turns into “theirstory” of resistance and liberation that potentially reflects the journeys of many other women in achieving their own identities from severely volatile circumstances.

Mahasweta Devi is a West Indian Bengali fiction writer (born in 1926 in Decca, British India, but her family moved to West Bengal in 1930) and socio-political activist who is notably recognized as a loud voice, raised for the rights and empowerment of the abandoned and marginalized communities, often termed as “subaltern subjects.” Subaltern studies, suggest “‘subaltern’ as a name for the general attribute of ‘subordination,’ ... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” that signifies the group of people who are socially, politically, and economically outside the hegemonic power structure (qtd. in Ezzeldin 105). Devi’s writing against the exploitation of the tribal people and women makes her a postcolonial agent who allows the quiet to speak up; her philosophy of life is shaped by a dichotomy between “needful and needless” and she has “no interest in the later one” (“Talking Writing: Four Conversations with Mahasweta Devi”). Being a self-recognized communist, Devi never claims to be a feminist, but her interest in women’s issues comes from the notion that they live in the periphery of society and remain as the excluded “others” or the “subaltern subjects,” repressed not only by the elitist hegemony but also by the devise called patriarchy. According to her, “From my writing feminism oozes out, ... I have nothing to do about it”; she believes that the bodies become the source of oppression for women (“Global Feminisms” 22). Her sheer interest is in writing about women who are “doubly colonized” (both by bourgeoisie and patriarchy) and being a politically conscious author and a woman herself she considers it her responsibility to recreate Sujata, Dopdi Mehjen, Rani Lakxmibai, and many other unconventional women characters as the symbols of defiance. However, readers of *Hajar Churashir Ma* may consider it a politico-historical text since it offers a deep and introspective analysis of an emerging West Bengal by portraying how it contains and perpetuates the class distinction that keeps feeding the capitalists and makes the proletariat live below the poverty line. But a more intimate reading of the book can easily discover that under the surface of mainstream politics, it actually offers forensic details of how a phallogocentric and misogynist attitude of human society exploits women especially in both domestic and public

arenas, and how hard women have to fight with the whole system to ensure their voices, rights, and independence.

Talking about the background of the book in conversation with Naveen Kishore, Devi casually referred to how one night, a few Naxal boys came to her door and asked, “How come you are only writing about the Naxalite from rural context; but what about us who are being butchered on the streets of Kolkata every day? – 1084 came out of that” (“Talking Writing: Four Conversations with Mahasweta Devi”). But interestingly, the aspects of the Naxalbari movement: revolt of the marginalized; mass uprising to get minimum wages for the agricultural workers; massacre of the educated, communist, rebel youths by police; social responses of this political outbreak, are not the basic discussions of this novel. The heart of this text is decorated with the chronicle of Sujata’s metamorphosis: which she completes upon reconstructing a personal “herstory” that describes the process of resistance against her denied access to power. Thus, despite choosing one standpoint or ideology as politically correct (between capitalism and socialism), the text chooses to become a tale of a peculiar paradox of loss (of the son) and gain (individuality), and creates a counter discourse, deeply personal and emotional, produced mostly from the interior monologues of a woman. Sujata (the feminine version of *su-jat* which means of good caste, well-mannered, and refined) proved her naming appropriate: she was born into an upper middle class, educated conservative Bengali family; trained to be polite and well-mannered; taught to have a good English accent; and also allowed to graduate from Loreto College, Kolkata. She knew from the very beginning that all these privileges were targeted to get her married (her qualities were meant to lessen the amount of dowry) because conventionally marriage is the ultimate destiny for any woman, especially when the woman belongs to the South-Asian territory where female feticide (destruction of the female fetus) is highest in rate; the birth of a girl child is hardly celebrated; and the existence of a girl is always taken as a liability. Eventually, Sujata got married to Dibyanath who was a megalomaniac and used to believe in elitism, solvency, economic security and domination. Devi describes married Sujata: “*Tar ostittota hoye giyechhilo chhayaar moto. Anugato, anugami, nirab, ostittobin*” [She was living a shadow’s life. She was obedient, a follower, silent, non-existent] (Author’s translation, 14). And obviously after getting married, women are expected to behave in a certain way, where there is neither freedom of action nor freedom of speech. And when the family washes its hands off by sending the daughter away with a “good husband,” women like Sujata must push the limits of patience and tolerance. She can never question and challenge the “superior” as the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage is not “horizontal” (based upon equality) but rather “vertical” (authoritarian and tyrannical).

The evening of the second death anniversary of Broti Chatterji (Sujata’s youngest son who had joined the radical political group with a leftist militant ideology and got killed by the security forces of Kolkata) is crucial and climactic. Incidentally, it is the same evening when Sujata’s second daughter is going to be engaged. Disturbed by the duality of the moment, Sujata starts recollecting her memories over the past twenty two years. Fragments of memory take her back to the days when she was thirty-one and pregnant for the fourth time. She feels this is going to be her last day in this house, though she does not clearly know what she would do after leaving, but she is decided and repeatedly thinks, “*Ajker par Sujata thakben na. Ar thakben na*” [Sujata is not

going to be here anymore] (72). She is a very complex and conflicting character who undergoes a massive transformation: from a conventional obedient Bengali wife to a conscious individual who demonstrates resistance to the acceptance of domination and destroys the hierarchy by leaving her oppressive partner. The story of this transformation and evolution is very powerfully and dramatically narrated in a stream of consciousness and interior monologues of the protagonist almost like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, which also uses a similar narrative technique and details a single day in the life of an aristocratic wife named Clarissa Dalloway in post-WW1 England. Like Clarissa, Sujata is also preparing for the evening party and is also inwardly travelling backward and forward through time to interact with all the other characters and incidents. The way she visits her memories, the way she creates images of her past, can be visualized easily by the readers. For example, she remembers, "*Sholoi January shararat jontrona chhilo, gyane-ogyane, etherer gondho, chora alo, achchhonno jontronar gholate pordar opare daketarder norachora shararat, shararat, tarpor bhorbela, shoteroi January bhore Broti eshe pouchechhilo*" [The night of 16<sup>th</sup> January was tormenting, in part consciousness and part unconsciousness. The smell of ether, the harsh light, and the doctors' movements behind the curtain of the slumberous pain all night long. Then Broti arrived at dawn on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January] (11). That ambiguous, mystical, and overwhelming night was the beginning of something inexplicable to her; the infant had made her suffer and almost die, but he created the magical bond that she immediately shared with him. She continues reminiscing, and her recent discoveries about lives lead her to a kind of future where her imperfectly perfect life has become imperfect forever.

Sujata has performed as a conformist to the norms, to the conventions, and has always behaved accordingly in the days of her daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood, until her fourth and youngest child Broti ended as simply a number on a corpse – 1084. It is only out of a deep sense of loss and remorse that she looks back at her own life and the other lives around her; she sensitizes the futility, hypocrisy, and corrupted ideological structure of the society and realizes their impact on the individuals especially those who defy the norm and tradition. While revealing the secrets behind her son's death she starts to divulge her own living, and understands that she does not even exist significantly as a human being. She wonders how she could never protest her peripheral and marginalized condition. At this point, she remembers, she said "no" only twice in her whole life, as Devi reports, "*Prothom bidrohota Sujata Brotir dui bochhor boyoshe koren. Dibyanath kichhutei oke ponchambar 'ma' hote baddho korte paren ni* [Sujata's first protest was made when Broti was two years old. Dibyanath could not compel her to become a mother for the fifth time] (40). It can be generally said that motherhood (in terms of when and how) all over the world rarely occurs based on the choices of women themselves. The studies of second-wave feminism suggest that women are often burdened biologically, socially, and culturally to become mothers even when they do not find themselves fit for the process, physically or psychologically, because they are not allowed to defy the universal concept of "ideal woman" which defines, signifies, and limits women in terms of maternity. Motherhood is an institution rather than an experience; maternity is not just a biological reproductive process but is a crucial weapon, using which men have been trying to domesticate women for centuries (Rich 42). Canadian author Sheila Heti also finds the "over-validation of motherhood" very disturbing, as it discursively perpetuates the process of stigmatizing women in terms of maternity. For instance, it comes up as a sense that "women's bodies belong to everybody but themselves. There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children"

(qtd. in Feigel). In South Asia, this issue is even more complicated because it is not just maternity but repeated maternity that women have to go through. Mahasweta Devi was highly concerned about this crucial issue. While doing research for her short story “Breast-giver” (which appears in her book *Breast Stories*), she finds, shockingly, that “Women are having breast cancer as they overfeed too many children” (“In Conversation – Mahasweta Devi). Undoubtedly, each time Sujata experienced maternity, she encountered irreversible changes in her body and mind; and after each term she thought of not conceiving again. But she could not practically stop it until her fourth child Broti arrived. She discovered that she was physically, psychologically, and emotionally incapable of carrying another child and rejected her husband’s insistence for a fifth one. Certainly, for this disagreement, Sujata was subjected to bitter criticism from her in-laws and extreme behavior from her husband. She details, “*Dibyanath asey, Sujata jokbon porpor ma hoye cholechhilen, tokhono niyomito onno meyeder shabochocho korten. Erpor theke ta aro bariye den* [Dibyanath always had adulterous relationships with other women even when Sujata was repeatedly pregnant. Now, his indiscretions increased]” (40). Sujata knew about them, and so did the other family members including Dibyanath’s mother. But, except for Sujata and Broti, this open secret did not bother anyone and Sujata again chose to be silent as it was not the norm for an “ideal wife” to oppose any action of her husband’s.

Mary Wollstonecraft, the early feminist, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, suggests that women are sexual beings, but similarly men are also sexual beings; and the way female chastity and fidelity are necessary for a stable marriage applies to the males too (84). But the phallogocentric society takes it for granted that a man has the right to violate the ethics and principles of marriage, and maintaining loyalty and fidelity disproportionately falls on women. Nevertheless, Sujata has been a very loyal woman not only in terms of her sexuality but also in succumbing completely to her husband’s needs – she has practiced no right over her body or her mind. For instance, she was often compelled to engage in sexual acts with Dibyanath; she could not prevent repeated pregnancies (as her husband wanted more children); she did not question her husband’s affairs, and she never demanded access to any decision-making in family matters. It might seem surprising that an individual like her – who is sufficiently educated, has a job in a bank, and belongs to an aristocratic society – faces such exploitation and violence in the domestic arena. It is, perhaps, as Devi asserts, “Suffering peculiarly ... starts from home....Their society is also very, very cruel against women” (“Global Feminisms” 19-20); and she has to document the sufferings of women when representing her time. Thus, Sujata becomes Devi’s hero, a woman who suffers and struggles in a notorious marriage and with hostile gender disparity in society, potentially representing all women like her “about whom nobody writes,” though “they are everywhere around us” (“Global Feminisms” 22). Discrimination, domination, subjugation, and inequality of power are always present in any kind of discussion on gender, and the power that operates in the politics of gender is mostly Foucauldian. This power is subtle, fluid, everywhere, and embedded deep in the human psyche that functions in the conscious and subconscious levels. Since in power politics one group seeks to dominate by subjugating the other wherever there is a difference, the essential biological difference between men and women thus becomes the origin of the politics of gender. Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, identifies marriage as the agency that preserves the conventional pattern of men’s power over women, which leads them to domesticity, dependency, maternity, and the deprivation of individuality, equal dignity, and liberty.

Like many other women, Sujata accepted her reduced and minimalized existence: she tried to digest the everyday insults and humiliation, buried her sense of prestige, dignity, and honor deep in her unconscious, never complained about anything, and was just surviving against all the odds, which were many. Still, there were two different phenomena that let her breathe and became the source of all her hopes, inspirations, and logical reasons for living. In Devi's words, "*Kaj na-chhara Sujatar dwtiyo bidroho*" [Not quitting the job was Sujata's second rebellion] as it provided Sujata with economic power – at least for a specific time each day (40). It is significant to mention that this is not a context-specific issue but rather a global one where parenthood only affects the career trajectory of a woman, not of a man. Worldwide, millions of highly qualified women leave their careers because they need to perform as mothers as parenting disproportionately becomes the responsibility of women. It is ironic that a household and raising of children are still considered as gendered activities although the present human society does not have a clear division of labor and women are working in the professional arena. There is no homecoming for women as after work, women actually enter a bigger workplace called the household. Despite continuous fights with her husband, Sujata manages to stick to her banking career though she had to make many adjustments and work very hard. At home, it was her youngest child Broti to whom she was important and with whom she could be herself. She tried to raise him as a compassionate, "*anubbutiproban*" [sensitive], and "*kalponaproban*" [imaginative] (29) person, though these qualities have always been considered as emasculating and effeminate. Feminist philosopher, Virginia Held in *Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* considers this problematic and argues that, by attributing virtues like kindness, compassion, and caring for others as feminine and by discouraging men from having them, the society misses out important human values (102). Sujata was cautious about Broti because her older three children were just like Dibyanath – conventional, chauvinistic, and corrupt. They were greatly indulged by their corrupt father and grandmother. Devi describes, "*Brotir bela Sujata dakhol chharen ni* [In Broti's case, Sujata refused to relinquish control]" (29) to make sure that he would not echo them. She kept a hold on Broti till his youth to shape him into a very independent yet compassionate and sensible individual. Psychoanalysts have always theorized over the idea that parents try to live out their dreams through their children; it functions as a defense mechanism that alternatively satisfies individual egos. Likewise, Sujata was living through Broti: his reasoning, strong principles, analytical capability, challenging of the norms, being stubborn about his own ideologies, and his strong sense of individualism (which she could never achieve) used to give her a sense of fulfillment. And it was Broti who not only questioned and challenged the crooked social, economic, and political infrastructure of newly emerging nations like India (that outcast the minorities) but also found out the dirty politics within his own family and tried to destabilize it. Many a time, he questioned why his mother never protested the domination and exploitation of her life. Sujata understood that Broti knew about his father's extra-marital affairs (he witnessed Dibyanath's intimacy with his typist), and he was also aware of his mother's lifelong emotional sufferings. Once he asked Sujata to leave that place. But leaving is a difficult option. Mahasweta Devi believes that it is the social and cultural mindset of the people that never accept and recognize a woman who is not with a man – "Women are abused," but they "can get redress. But it's just not within their grasp. They cannot go. Where are they to go...?" ("Global Feminisms" 22). Sujata feels that she could have saved Broti from the catastrophic choice he made if she had left that house

in time. She also believed that her being extremely apolitical, subjugated, and taken for granted somehow instigated Broti into being aggressive and radical in political ideologies. She suffers from an intense sense of guilt. Despite the extreme remorse and sense of loss, though, she realizes that she had lost her identity and her living does not mean anything to anybody. Broti wanted her to come out from the see-saw of life-in-death and death-in-life, waiting for her resistance against the oppression. He also subtly showed her the ways through his own revolutionary path; so now she feels it is her turn to take the journey forward.

Metaphorically, Broti’s violent protest against the dominant hegemonic power of the state and his attempts to give voice to the voiceless underclass (rural peasants who fight to establish their rights on their own crops) parallels Sujata’s inward journey of resistance to claim her individual identity. Her way to battle is mostly at the psychological level, in the form of an “ideological resistance” ... “Resistance that manifests itself as a refusal to be absorbed” (Ashcroft 20). Over the past two years, after she lost Broti, Sujata gradually develops herself into a conscious individual. Broti was not loved at all because of his unconventional nature, but for Sujata, the most shocking issue was everybody’s indifference to the twenty-year-old’s brutal murder by the police. In the beginning, she starts fighting with her family to keep her dead son alive through his belongings – she tries to preserve his room, clothes, bedsheets, books, writings, and photographs for one long year. She struggles with extreme depression and starts wondering where she went wrong in mothering Broti. She realizes that it was the price she had to pay for raising a compassionate human being. She starts investigating the secrets of Broti’s life and death, and meets his fellow Naxal comrades and the families who lost their sons like her. She meets Broti’s girlfriend Nandini (a Naxal comrade who was captured and tortured by the police), who makes her realize how well she had raised Broti to be strong, independent and determined. Nandini’s personality as an extremely self-conscious, individualistic, and revolutionary woman was also a new discovery for Sujata. Now, at the age of fifty-three, Sujata looks back at her life and realizes she has been a caged, confined, dominated, violated, tortured, and silent woman. She thinks, “*Prothomato, ja ghote ta mene nen, oi tar shikkha, jibon theke paoa. Dwitioto, tar konodin mone proshno othe na, proshno korbar noitik odbikar je taro achchhe, ta Sujata janen na?*” [First of all, she accepted everything that happened. That was what she had always been taught. Secondly, she never asked questions; she did not even know that she too had the right to question] (29). But now, she feels an urge to be resurrected both for the sake of her revolutionary dead son and for herself. She makes herself able: she speaks strongly, she shouts, she quarrels with Dibyanath, she questions him about his affairs, she takes her own decision to leave her husband and the house he possesses. She destroys the “myth of womanhood” which suggests that being a woman means everyone can have an opinion about her life except the woman herself. Interestingly, Sujata’s sudden change in personality is also marked and viewed as hysteric, uncanny, and surreal by the people around her, but for her, this change brings her an inner strength that makes her express her emotions. She finds her voice and her confidence enables her to break the cage and embrace liberty.

The transformation of Sujata is thus radical; it makes her emerge from the periphery to create her space in the center, bringing her a powerful sense of individualism and hyper-consciousness that eventually negates and destroys the tyranny of her marriage. She welcomes and embraces her

second and opposite self (which, in Freudian language, is the alter ego), that questions, complains, challenges, defies, and resists the familial authority which is sexist, gender-biased, and exploitative. She ultimately recognizes herself as a free entity by coming out from the domain of psychological or emotional or ideological domination. The story ends very dramatically and ambiguously; it may indicate the protagonist's death or her physical collapse temporarily. Devi remarks on her writing: "I write in order to make people think, feel. I want to rob them off their sleep. I don't write to put them to sleep. I can't write things with happy endings" ("In Conversation – Mahasweta Devi"). But it is significant to mention that for the first time in her life Sujata could cry out violently: "*Ei kannay rokter gondho, protibad, shukhi shok* [This cry smelled of blood, of protest, and a happy grief] (95). The scenario of women resisting their imperious marital conditions is quite similar worldwide. Bangladeshi author Nasreen Jahan creates a very similar wife character in her story "Elenpor Biral" ("Allan Poe's Cat") in which the female protagonist compares herself with Edgar Allan Poe's black cat that was buried alive with the body of the murdered wife behind the newly plastered wall in the cellar, which symbolically saves her soul by rescuing the cat in her dream (interestingly that story also ends with a loud cry). However, Mahasweta Devi also dreams of liberating women from ideological slavery; she dreams of a society that will be free from stereotyping and reducing women to bodies, biological creatures full of instincts but not intellectual capacities. So she liberates Sujata and, through her, she connects to all other women who are striving for freedom and this text lives as one which is of the women, by the women, and for the women.

So, within the framework of historical realism, *Hajar Churashir Ma* is essentially a feminist text that is absolutely conscious of the living conditions of women in conservative gendered structures and opposes them. It transmits the message of potential psychological and ideological resistance of women inside the established patriarchy where power and discourse are both controlled by male hegemony. It also points out that the recent vibration of women empowerment is mostly like "Marxist opium," a mass hypnosis that shifts peoples' center of attention. For example, whenever women's rights become the discussion topic, people mostly look at the statistics like the percentage of girls getting formal education or the increasing ratio of women in the workplace. There is no doubt that these are essentially important, but women, to a great extent, have their formal rights in the public domain, but their experiences in the private domain – in families – are still traumatic because peoples' mindsets are still feudal. The centuries-old archetypes, stereotypes, and preconceived notions of women result in gender extremism, which considers and treats women as hereditarily defective and psychologically disabled. When every ideology is penetrated by these notions and when all the political and media representations of women get influenced by them, it is very difficult to comprehend the process and even more difficult to eradicate it. Fighting gender disparity or violence against women is thus very challenging as it is universal – in childhood, within abusive marriages, at workplaces, on the streets, etc. Physical violence is often very visible and a survey conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) could easily quantify that eighty-seven thousand women from all over the world were killed as a result of domestic violence only in 2017 ("Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women"). But the violence that functions at the psychological level is hidden and invisible, and therefore, more dangerous as it jeopardizes women's individual, familial, social, political, economic, and cultural identities without being detected. So, Devi's heartfelt narration of

Sujata’s “herstory” is not only thought-provoking, it is inspirational as it represents those who are abused, exploited, and violated, yet desperate to rebuild their lives. It becomes a tale impregnated not only with one but multiple “herstories” of numerous Sujatas who strive for their psychological and ideological liberation to protect individual dignity. At the same time, though, it is also true that Sujata cannot be generalized to represent the whole race of women because women are not clones of each other. They are singular identities and “theirstories” obviously differ in terms of the individual choices they make, except for the phenomenal similarity – they all are engaged in a never-ending struggle like Mahasweta Devi, who affirms, “I believe in resistance, I believe in protest and I believe that the struggle never ends, it goes on and on” (“In Conversation – Mahasweta Devi”).

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# What is Violence? On Hannah Arendt's Critique of Frantz Fanon

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## Abstract

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* offers a strong intellectual framework established on the author's medical and social experiences to overthrow colonial rule. Specifically, the text is Frantz Fanon's interpretation of the mechanisms of colonialism and of revolution from the perspective of the Algerian struggle to get rid of French colonial rule. Out of the five chapters of the book, the first one, "On Violence," where Fanon supports violence as a requisite weapon to bring down colonial rule towards national liberation and the reinstallation of humanity in the colonized world, is the one often "misunderstood and misrepresented" (Brydon). This paper, by presenting a critique of works such as Hannah Arendt's views on violence, argues that Fanon's concept of violence has to be engaged with and understood within the context in which Fanon has framed it, particularly the Algerian struggle.

**Keywords:** Violence, Colonialism, Revolution, Context

"Violent social revolution has been a prerequisite for increasing freedom and nationality in the world"  
– Barrington Moore (qtd. in Wiener 146)

"Violence is a basic component of a revolution."

– Kabir Ahmed (20)

Neelam Srivastava in her article "Towards a Critique of Colonial Violence: Fanon, Gandhi and the Restoration of Agency" mentions that Hannah Arendt criticizes Fanon on the grounds that his concept of violence is a "glorification of violence for its own sake" (310). Arendt herself in her book *On Violence* claims:

Violence will be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate ... [She] found that Sartre and Fanon fundamentally misunderstood Marx on the question of violence ... [and] though one may argue that all notions of man creating himself have in common a rebellion against the very factuality of the human condition ... still it cannot be denied that a gulf separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring from all deeds of violence. 'To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone ... there remain a dead man and a free man,' says Sartre in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. This is a sentence that Marx could never have written. (13)

While responding to Hans Jurgen Benedict's letter, where he asks for her views on violence, Arendt declares:

There's not a single revolution that has prevailed by means of sheer violence. Of course there were violent uproars of the oppressed but that never led nowhere if the existing apparatus of power wasn't undermined. It's always the lack of power, the incredible blind rage of the powerless that expresses itself in violence. Where she wins, chaos reigns the next day – nothing else; and this is for one single reason because those that have cooled their heads disperse the next day. (qtd. in Zwarg and Khatchaturian 305)

Arendt censures Fanon's concept of violence as revolutionary for change by rendering it as an erroneous idea: "Violence is ruled by means-end reasoning ... The most probable change it will bring about is the change to a more violent world" (qtd. in Frazer and Hutchings 100). Arendt further criticizes Fanon by arguing that violence is "instrumental by nature ... [and] can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction" (79). Birmingham notes that "Arendt's conceptualization of violence continuously affirms the main point that violence is devoid of meaning – violence refers only to an evil that is in itself meaningless (qtd. in Ayyash 344). Here, Arendt is unfair to Fanon because she is picking up violence by definition not by context. She does not recognize that Fanon was not writing as a philosopher but as an activist.

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of nonviolence is often used to counter the idea that only violence can bring freedom and national independence. Gandhi has claimed that "[i]t is the acid test of nonviolence that in a nonviolent conflict there is no rancor left behind, and in the end, the enemies are converted into friends ... Nonviolence is a power which can be wielded equally by all – children, young men and women or grown up people – provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all [humanity]" (qtd. in Smith and Burr 277). In contrast to Fanon's persevering attitude towards violence, "for Gandhi, non-violence is the weapon of the poor and the oppressed, and importantly it is a method of anti-colonial struggle that can be taken up by women as much as by men" (Srivastava 305). Then what about the assassination of Gandhi? Was not his assassination a mockery at the peaceful, non-violent protest in gaining freedom for the Indian people?

There are other points that question the legitimacy and credibility of Fanon's concept of violence. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks in her article "I am a Master: Terrorism, Masculinity, and Political Violence in Frantz Fanon" argues that "[t]hrough Fanon stresses the nationalist and universalistic aspiration of political action, he nevertheless distinguishes between spontaneous rage and organized action ... [because] anti-violence ... should primarily be understood as an oscillation between expressive acts of (political) dislocation, and their discursive recuperation" (85). Améry's article, "The Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence: Frantz Fanon the Revolutionary," provokes serious thought about the plausibility of Fanon's concept of violence. He writes thus:

No matter how convincingly Fanon portrayed the violence of the oppressed as counter-violence; no matter how impressively detailed and precise his narrative of the situation of the colonised, how it is engendered by and how it engenders violence ("The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but you're never close enough to see them,"); no matter how passionately and yet thoughtfully he presents his thesis of the interiorisation of repressive violence; he, the psychiatrist and phenomenologist, has nonetheless neglected to specify what actually happens when passive violence becomes active. He has claimed that revolutionary violence has a redemptive character, but he fails to give us an explanation of why that is. (15)

Furthermore, Frazer and Hutchings in their article "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon" point out that although Fanon argues that

[a]s a libidinal energy, violence is about being rather than doing. It is a force that is inherent in colonial structures of oppression, in everyday colonial life, in the psyche of the native turned citizen-soldier ... [and his] argument is that this violence of being is a condition for the productive use of violence as a political instrument, providing the momentum motivating the colonized to do what is necessary to overthrow the oppressor, and thereby cleanse both themselves and their world of violence ... his representations of perpetrators and victims of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* do not suggest this comfortable conclusion. (98)

Here the critics are dodging Fanon and his reasoning for violence. The reason is Fanon did not look for a “comfortable conclusion,” but rather asked for a sustainable freedom.

Although the above questions and justifications regarding the authenticity and plausibility of Fanon’s concept of violence are not points to be overlooked, surely they are positioned with some misunderstanding in relation to the concept of Fanon’s violence. One of the main reasons for this misunderstanding of Fanon’s concept of violence is that they do not take the Algerian context of the time when *The Wretched of the Earth* was published into cognizance in making generic statements against the violence of decolonization. The suppression of the Algerian people was done through raping, robbing, and inhuman killing by the French since the 1830s. As Fanon had experienced the brutalities done by the French on the Algerians as a psychiatrist in the region, he came to realize – or at least believe – that there was no other option for the Algerians but to take up arms against the French colonizers. He thought that violence would release the colonized from their inner tensions of suppression. At that time in Algeria the concept of a peaceful nation was totally an abstract idea. However, Fanon’s concept of revolutionary violence against the French offered the Algerians a solid cause of freedom to fight together. Roberts in his article “Fanon, Sartre, Violence, and Freedom” justifies violence thus: “Regarding the normative assessment of violence, victimization occurs when linking violence with the innocent. Retribution occurs when linking violence with the guilty. [And a]ny attempt by the colonized to change the status quo of the colonizer hints at a form of future violence seeking retribution” (144). While answering Robert B. Silvers’s question – “Under what conditions, if any, can violent action be said to be ‘legitimate’” – Noam Chomsky replies thus: “My general feeling is that this kind of question can’t be answered in a meaningful way when it’s abstracted from the context of particular historical concrete circumstances” (“The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?”). Emphasizing the importance of context in understanding the concept of violence Gibson states that “Violence cannot be allowed to speak for itself. It does not have its own meaning but it has a context and a history .... To be made thinkable, violence has to be historicized” (qtd. in Srivastava 306). Srivastava further notes that “[t]he violence needed to turn camp inmates, or the colonized, back into human beings,” is identified by Améry as “revolutionary violence,” which he calls “messianic,” thus resonating closely with Fanon’s idea of violence as a re-humanizing force:

Revolutionary violence is the affirmation of the self-realizing human being against the negation, the denial of the human being. Its negativity has a positive charge. Repressive violence blocks the way to the self-realization of the human being; revolutionary violence

breaks through that barrier, refers and leads to the more than temporal, the historical humane future. (Améry, qtd. in Srivastava 308)

Edmund Burke III in "Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*" also supports the idea of context and declares thus: "*The Wretched of the Earth* needs ... to be situated within the political and intellectual context of postwar France" (128). Achille Mbembe's thoughts in "Metamorphic Thought: The Works of Frantz Fanon" in this connection are particularly relevant:

How was one to put an end to this suffering and agony to allow another world and other figures of the human to emerge in the future? This is primarily what interested him.

If he was proposing any form of knowledge, this was knowledge in context – knowledge of the dehumanising colonial context and knowledge of the means to bring this to an end. To read Fanon today means, on the one hand, to restore his life, his work and his language to its place in the history which he saw unfolding at the time and which he wished to change through struggle and critique. (25)

Another reason for misunderstanding Fanon's concept of violence is due to the omission or the failure to consider the intrinsic value of violence that Fanon aims to advocate in "On Violence." Sartre in the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* indicates the intrinsic value of Fanon's violence: "[Fanon] shows perfectly clearly that this irrepressible violence ... is man constructing himself. I believe, we once knew, and have since forgotten, the truth that no indulgence can erase the marks of violence: violence alone can eliminate them" (lv). In this regard, Mbembe, by noting "Fanon's thought as *metaphoric thought*," argues that "[f]or Fanon, the irrepressible and relentless pursuit of freedom required us to mobilise all life reserves ... [which] drew the colonized into a fight to the death – a fight that they were called upon to assume as their duty and that could not be delegated to others" (emphasis as found in original, 20).

Responding to Arendt's views on violence, Cynthia R. Nielsen in her article "Resistance through Re-narration: Fanon on De-constructing Racialized Subjectivities" argues that Fanon's "advocacy for violence was never glorification of violence; rather, it was understood as analogous to the violence that must be performed in surgery in order to remove or at least halt the spreading of disease so that healing may begin" (375). She further argues: "Fanon, no doubt, felt the burden of that history [of Algeria], and its carnage convinced him that violence – at least with respect to Algeria's part in the unfolding drama – was the required passageway through which the colonized must travel" (375) to achieve liberty, a new world. Mark Muhannad Ayyash counters Arendt in his article "The Paradox of Political Violence" by arguing what "Arendt misses in her analysis: namely, a deeper explanation of an analytic that attempts to give at least a certain kind of violence a more prominent role in the explanation and institution of political movements and formations" (344). Equally, Roberts argues, "Fanon, like his revolutionary mentor Aimé Césaire, convincingly contends that these psychological effects lead the colonized to place intrinsic value on anti-colonial, tragic violence. Arendt ironically points out how readers of Fanon tend to reduce their comments to the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. It seems Arendt does not go much further in her commentary" (151).

In a compartmentalized world as Fanon puts it, “colonization or decolonization: it is simply a power struggle. The exploited realize that their liberation implies using every means available, and force is the best” (Fanon 23). The revolutionary violence makes “the ‘thing’ colonized ... a man through the very process of liberation” (2). Fanon states that liberation needs acts of violence instead of stories of rituals. He articulates thus: “During the struggle for liberation ... [w]ith his [the colonized] back to the wall, the knife at his throat, or to be more exact the electrode on his genitals, the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories ... [and] discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation” (20-21). Seshadri-Crooks argues that “[f]or Fanon, anti-colonial violence, which at its core is often spontaneous, unorganized, and affect laden, gets legitimated primarily through its elevation or incorporation into the narrative of national liberation” (85). She further notes that “what is important is that the revolutionary action that the colonized people undertake becomes legitimate through its precipitation from a spontaneous uprising into a national struggle for liberation” (85). However, it would be wrong to receive Fanon’s articulation of violence as an instrumental violence which is “either wanton irrational or calculated rational violence ... as a means to an end” (Roberts 145). Rather, Fanon’s “[a]nti-colonial violence, though, in response to the effects of Manichaeian colonial racism, marks a shift from enacting violence out of instrumental concerns towards intrinsic violence on the road to freedom” (Roberts 147). The ultimate goal of liberty is the core of Fanon’s violence which is also noted by Mbembe:

In addition to healing the wounds of colonial atrocities, the violence of the native achieved three goals. First it served as a call to a people caught in the grip of history and placed in an untenable situation to exercise their freedom, to take charge, to name themselves, to spring to life or, if they failed to do this, to be seen to be in bad faith. They were forced to make a choice, to risk their lives, to expose themselves, to ‘draw on all their reserves and hidden resources’—a condition for achieving liberty. (24)

Although Gandhi argues that “[v]iolent means ... could only give rise to violent ends, and violent revolutions ... [and] would eventually build new Bastilles” (qtd. in Finlay 26), history itself is proof that decolonization in India was achieved through violence. And in the Declaration on the Question of the Use of Violence in Defence of Rights of 1938 Gandhi accepts violence, although on condition:

Where the choice is set between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. I praise and extol the serene courage of dying without killing. Yet I desire that those who have not this courage should rather cultivate the art of killing and being killed, than basely to avoid the danger. This is because he who runs away commits mental violence; he has not the courage of facing death by killing. I would a thousand times prefer violence than the emasculation of a whole race. I prefer to use arms in defence of honour than remain the vile witness of dishonour. (qtd. in Young 34)

Although Fanon promotes violence as an agency of liberation, he unveils its shocking impacts in “Colonial War and Mental Disorders.” Fanon states that this chapter “deal[s] ... with the problem of mental disorders born out of the national war of liberation waged by the Algerian people”

(Fanon 181). Here he clinically details the dreadfulness of colonial violence through individual examples as the “war of liberation waged by the Algerian people ... has become a breeding ground for mental disorders” (182-83). He states how an FLN revolutionary struggles, after murdering an unarmed French woman thinking of a kind of revenge of her own mother's killing of the French army, with the nausea of violence and “depersonalization” (192), how “[t]wo thirteen and fourteen-year-olds, Algerian schoolboys, are accused of killing one of their European playmates” (199). These are individual crimes which Holdt identifies as “the trauma of violence [that] can generate cycles of revenge” (125).

All these circumstances he details “pose the question of responsibility in the context of the revolution” (185). However, Fanon's final essay, in spite of its critical analysis of terror, is not a document that ignores the effectiveness of violence as a process of liberation. The essay validates Fanon's awareness of the penalties of violence and he argues that the penalties are needed for a new start, to construct a nation: “The period of oppression is harrowing, but the liberation struggle's rehabilitation of man fosters a process of reintegration that is extremely productive and decisive. The victorious combat of a people is not just the crowning triumph of their rights. It procures them substance, coherence, and homogeneity” (219). Fanon further claims: “The combat waged by a people for their liberation leads them, depending on the circumstances, wither to reject or to explode the so-called truths sown in their consciousness by the colonial regime, military occupation, and economic exploitation. And only the armed struggle can effectively exorcise these lies about man that subordinate and literally mutilate the more conscious-minded among us” (220). Fanon's concept of violence “very well assume[s] an ethical position as a means of last resort, of self-defence ... His ‘new man’ is unable to issue forth from the womb of a colonial situation without violent pangs. The truly decolonised native knows no peaceful birth. For Fanon this is so because of the psychic violation wreaked by the colonial masters” (Tucker 405).

Looking into the chaos around the world, even in Algeria, Arendt is right in asking about the effectiveness of violence. The questions against the legitimacy and justification of violence towards a peaceful end cannot be ignored as even after independence from the French colonialists the crisis still exists in Algeria. There are those who will still argue that the violence in post-independence Algeria is caused by the French colonizers who have not actually left. That is, Fanon's discussion of the Manichean order still subsists and the colonizers have only changed pattern. For instance, they implant corrupt leaders who do their bidding and use one part of the people to war against the other. The divide and rule approach that has led to crises in many colonized countries is the product of a colonization that has not yet ended. However, if we consider the context of time and space, *The Wretched of the Earth* is the result of Fanon's anger towards French colonialists' barbarity on the native Algerians. From the context of what the French colonialists did in Algeria, Fanon's anger is warranted. The brutality of the colonialists, the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, the chaos among the natives, and the rebel leaders' incapability to foster the revolutionary zeal among Algerians outraged Fanon. To overthrow such situations from Algeria and from the colonized world Fanon looks for change, liberation for the Algerians, through violence, and this is his message in “On Violence.”

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# Overcoming the Gleam of Empire and the Excremental State in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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## Abstract

The process of decolonization had most of the time been tumultuous for all African states as they tried to rise from the debris of European empires. Mass uprisings, enigmatic leaders, grand narratives of a hopeful future have shaped their individual paths to autonomy. But all those paths have ended up misdirecting the people. The promises made by revolutionary leaders, fighting in the liberation wars, fell too short in providing a new start for the citizens of the postcolonial states. One reason for this failure has been a misconstrued idea of nation and nationalism. Ayi Kwei Armah in his 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* sheds light on the pitfalls of nationalism. In the novel, the Ghana of great promises, the nation that fought against the Empire for its independence – a fight against inequality, indignity, and injustice – faces the same hypocrisy and corruption, prevalent during the regime of the colonizers. The author narrates the predicament of an unnamed protagonist who deals with the atmosphere of mistrust and betrayal around him. His conflicted state of mind, mistrust of social morality, and deep-rooted anger in witnessing a decadent nation on its way to becoming a materialistic wasteland, are significant issues in the novel. The appeal of what the narrator calls “the gleam” on one hand and a conscious effort to steer clear of the path of vice on the other is shown in the narrator’s stream of consciousness. This paper aims to look at the postcolonial state Ghana immersed in the degraded morality of its people. The nation and the individual both face the same hopelessness but in Armah’s novel a glimpse of hope can be found. The narrator called for a better Ghanaian society that would reject blind imitations of materialistic Europe.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Moral Degradation, Gleam of Empire, Excrement

The novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) begins with a narrator, an unnamed man who works in the Ghanaian railway department, describing the rusty body of a public bus which can be considered a metaphor for the postcolonial state Ghana that Ayi Kwei Armah has taken as his subject. In postcolonial studies there is significant discussion about how freedom from the colonizers can often lead to totalitarianism, which worries many thinkers. In the above mentioned novel, the issue of what independence truly means is highlighted by the narrator. Anti-colonial resistance in most colonies was forged as the colonized people believed themselves to be part of a “coherent imagined communities, bonded by common qualities and attitudes,” thus constructing a path to a new and independent nation (McLeod 97). For many postcolonial scholars, the concepts of nation and nationalism endow colonized natives with necessary properties to challenge the “ideological, material, and cultural apparatus of European colonialism” (McLeod 98). One such scholar Benita Parry asserts that, “disenchantment with post-independence regimes” should not:

[B]lind critics to the import of liberation struggles conducted in the name of nationalism, an ideology and practice which prominent participants in the postcolonial discussion denigrate in the interest of valorizing hybrid, deterritorialized and diasporic forms of consciousness that are apparently uninflected and untroubled by ethnicity or class. (10)

Parry here indicates that nationalism is vital in achieving liberation from the colonizers while many scholars consider nation and nationalism to be restricting and parochial, and thus inadequate in providing the promised liberty to the people. According to Tamara Sivanandan, the ideals which were responsible for bringing about independence can, arguably, be erroneous in many cases. Sivanandan points out how, even after many years of liberation in numerous postcolonial societies, the nationalist forces were still struggling to make meaning of the freedom they fought so hard to achieve, giving way to corruption and injustice in all spheres of public and private lives. She rather finds, “increasing division and oppression on the basis of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender; the failure of the economy to provide even basic necessities, never mind prosperity, for the mass of the people” (42). There can also be found “a lack of democratic participation by the masses in the political sphere; and the continued – often increasing – structural dependence, economically, politically, and ideologically, on Western imperial powers” in the postcolonial states (42). From this argument it is apparent that the postcolonial nation remains nothing more than a hollow ground where the anti-colonial movements seem like a myth to be retold mainly in political events. The social condition of *The Beautiful Ones* highlights the uneven development inside the nation, where a portion of the people have amassed wealth, leaving the rest to make do with scraps.

In the novel, the unnamed narrator, often referred to as “the man,” deliberates on his disillusionments about national liberation and the subsequent moral decay in people. Previously he saw a promise which surpassed all the suffering, death, and sacrifice, “The promise was so beautiful. Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that at last something good was being born. It was there. We were not deceived about that” (85). It is disquieting that the reality is far from the idealistic pledge that initiated the anticolonial movement in the first place. The unnamed narrator has witnessed the betrayal of the nationalistic ideals by the former rebel leaders; for him there is no purpose in working for what he considers an “excremental” society. The narrator talks about his own cynicism by bringing out the hypocrisy of the leaders: “We were ready for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs” (81). The novel criticizes the men who “were to lead” the Ghanaians out of despair but now embody the same qualities of a white colonialist. After Ghana’s independence, anglophilia arguably grew in a striking manner while the black man started to see himself as the successor of a great empire that had the mastery to enslave millions of people. In Armah’s novel the hunger for power and material wealth blinded the men in power. Armah has repeatedly voiced his concerns and criticisms of the nationalist forces in a postcolonial country – a pattern that can be spotted in the narratorial voice of the novel. The narrator in *The Beautiful Ones* is “the man,” who is a witness to how the society is becoming a toxic one due to the lack of responsibility of the common citizen as well as the elite class in power. In this case, the elite can be termed as one of the major setbacks for building of a nation after liberation is secured. So, a previously colonized country not only faces economic impediments towards development in the decolonizing stages but is also held back by the corruption of bureaucracy in the postcolonial phase.

It is important to mention revolutionary writer Frantz Fanon, a major influence on Armah’s work, while discussing the pitfalls of national consciousness in a postcolonial state. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses how there are only two ways a postcolonial nation can operate – either the colonized is condemned to blindly ape the colonizer or he has to engage in an active struggle to be free from the master. He writes:

The national bourgeoisie, since it is stung up to defend its immediate interests, and sees no farther than the end of its nose, reveals itself incapable of simply bringing national unity into being or of building up the nation on a stable and productive basis. The national front which has forced colonialism to withdraw cracks up and wastes the victory it has gained. (128)

Fanon's analysis of the emergence of a bourgeois elite class points towards its apparent inclination to mimic the colonial masters and in turn strangle the revolutionary spirit of equality and harmony in society, which can be found in *The Beautiful Ones*. In Armah's novel, both the narrator and Joseph Koomson, a classmate of the narrator's, were driven by the Nkrumahist party and its fiery ideals of revolution. But after independence, men like Koomson became engrossed in material possessions and started climbing the social ladder in dubious ways. Their questionable morals are embodiments of what the narrator believes is wrong with the upper-classes in the postcolonial nations. The Nkrumahist party which once stood for equality, honesty, and freedom later stood for corruption and self-serving bureaucracy. The narrator voices disgust and dejection at the current condition of the nation: "There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European, and that was what we were seeing in those days" (81). The misery and vulnerability of the common man ring true in the proclamations of the narrator:

There is no difference then. No difference at all between the white men and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our Party men. And after their reign is over, there will be no difference ever. All new men will be like the old. (89)

This statement in the novel can be supported by the words of historian and Africanist Basil Davidson, as he probes into the minds of postcolonial bureaucrats and elites in power, "Such men desired Ghana's independence, but if it could be independence 'in the British way,' shaped on British enjoying British approval, and therefore, by the logic of this attitude, fulfilling Britain's interests" (27-28). This may direct the reader's attention towards the fact that the regime change from a colonial to a postcolonial one does not necessarily mean a complete transformation in the formerly colonized people's minds; they might remain enslaved instead of becoming free even after independence.

The question of true freedom of the masses from the colonial masters is a complicated one for the postcolonial state to answer and postcolonial scholar Neil Lazarus sheds light on this issue. He believes that the people fought with their blood to gain independence, and just at the moment when it seemed within their reach, the neocolonial powers seized it, reinstating the old, slavish ways of the colonized days. He writes, "Finally, adding insult to injury, this humiliation is compounded by the official rhetoric which celebratorily proclaims Africa's independence. In independence, according to *The Beautiful Ones*, the masses are still unfree" (146). This analysis is relevant in the discussion of Armah's novel since there is a status quo which dictates the standard to settle for nothing less than a materialistic European lifestyle. Ironically, the independence has created materialistic slaves in Ghana, furthering the West's agenda. This life is something that everyone dreams of but only a handful of corrupt and powerful people can revel in. People are depicted as moving away from everything "black" or "African," and aspiring to be "white" or "European."

Looking at history, it can be argued that even after the colonizers leave, there remains a longing to stick to the cultures or practices established by the outgoing rulers. One can simply blame the psychological effects of anglophilia for causing such longing to cling to the ways of the colonizer. But a closer look might reveal that arguably the preference for the White culture is the result of a long-drawn systematic destruction of the native cultures of all the colonized countries. After all, the colonized are left with no option to revert to their roots when most of their core cultural rituals have been erased from their collective memory. In this regard, an apt picture of postcolonial African nations is painted by Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as he analyzes the imperialist’s strategy of overpowering the subjects by the process of, “destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the languages of the coloniser” (16). This happens because political or economic dominance cannot be fully accomplished without psychological control. Thiong’o then goes on to discuss the colonial alienation that occurs in the minds of the colonized subjects as a result of the cultural hegemony and the subjects engage in, “an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment. ... On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (28). In Armah’s novel, people like Koomson symbolize these hollow men who denounce their roots and don the capes of their colonial masters.

Armah censures the nationalist leaders for their covetousness and hunger for power. He writes that the African leaders are “caught between two contradictory social forces to both of which they are compelled to speak in the same breath: for the contemptuous erstwhile masters, they ... exhibit their prowess in the international competition of conspicuous consumption; for their less fortunate brothers, they must provide at least an illusion of community, of shared suffering and shared hopes” (28). To quench their thirst for all material wealth and to achieve esteem in the European’s eyes, the African leader shows “an arrestingly vulgar, premature decadence,” but to keep up the façade of a true patriot they conjure up, “a thunderous stream of revolutionary-sounding words” (28).

Façade or not, the chase after the “gleam” of Europe is a never-ending unappeasable desire in the minds of many national leaders of postcolonial nations; in this case it is the unnamed narrator’s Ghana. Armah has used quite a few symbols in the novel and “the gleam” is a significant one. The luxurious life or the gleam, as the novel terms it, complicates the protagonist’s moral ideals and his wish to fulfil the needs of his family. The allure of exotic and luxurious things imported from the former masters or the Empire seduce most Ghanaians. The gleam is hence a major part of the system of corruption and exploitation prevalent in a materialistic Ghana. In the beginning of *The Beautiful Ones* the gleam is introduced by “the man” while he walks to his work near the hill on top of which the glamorous Atlantic-Caprice hotel is placed. He then examines his inner dilemma of whether to shun or move towards the gleam:

The gleam, in moments of honesty, had a power to produce a disturbing ambiguity within. It would be good to say that the gleam never did attract. It would be good, but it would be far from the truth. ... It was getting harder and harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it repelled, or just did both at once in one disgustingly confused feeling all the time these heavy days. (10)

The shine of materialistic pleasure poses a glaring contrast to the “feeling of entrapment, dislocation, and marginalisation within a decadent environment” (Ogede 26) throughout the novel. In his novel Armah portrays the condition of his protagonist trapped in an infected environment, looking for a way out.

Along with the symbol of the gleam, Armah also uses symbols of filth, excrement, and human feces in the text to illustrate the toxicity of the protagonist’s social setting. The novel has an unusual number of detailed images of waste, excrement, and bodily fluids, and the readers find vivid descriptions of these when the protagonist looks at the decay of the walls of buildings in government offices. “The man” portrays the mindless incivility of his fellow citizens while recoiling when his hand touches the handrail of the office stairs:

Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory downstairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The calloused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. (13)

Here, Armah gives a thorough depiction of flawed human nature and indecency in the public space to show the protagonist’s frustration in his social environment. The tendency to show disregard for public property is not very unusual for developing nations such as Ghana, especially because of the lack of accountability and observance of civic rules. Perhaps that is why it is appropriate to state that, “many will find nothing essentially wrong with such a picture of the modern elite in Africa” (Nkosi 67). Armah aims to explore humanity in all its forms – be it beauty or excreta.

Many critics have dismissed the symbolism in *The Beautiful Ones* to be evocative of only “decay and rot, what with the frequent mentioning of ooze, dirt, excreta which obviously represent the mess and disillusionment of the modern Ghanaian society” (Rao 44), and their opinion is that the recurrent use of those motifs delineates the anguish, torment and estrangement of a person. Armah’s intention in writing *The Beautiful Ones* has been widely criticized. It may seem that the novel paints a picture of despair in the grim Ghana which can be described as insufferably pessimistic. To many readers, the images of dirt, filth, and rust may seem a deliberate condescension on the part of a snobbish author. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, while praising Armah’s style of writing, criticizes the novel as a “sick book” in which “the hero, pale and passive and nameless a creation in the best manner of existential writing, wanders through the story in an anguished sleep, neck deep in despair and human excrement of which we see rather a lot in the book” (624). Achebe’s prejudice does not stand alone as literary critic Eldred Jones also denounces the work stating, “Armah has taken the predicament of Africa in general, Ghana in particular, and distilled its despair and its hopelessness in a very powerful, harsh, deliberately *unbeautiful* novel” (56). The reality is unapologetically harsh in the narration, but Armah’s version is the protagonist’s reality. Perhaps it may be said that, “In postcolonial writing, shit can redress a history of debasement by displaying the failure of development and the contradictions of colonial development and, moreover, by disrupting inherited associations of excrement with colonized or non-Western populations” (Esty 25-26).

The readers of *The Beautiful Ones* can be misled into thinking the text as an exclusively negative depiction of humanity. However, a closer evaluation may indicate Armah's intent of presenting the anguish and wretchedness of a narrator who "seems like an existential everyman" (Goldie 94). The novel calls for a contrasting outlook to analyze the inherent beauty even in the slowly degenerating social sphere. The novel explores the possibility of something pleasant trying to grow from both literal and metaphorical filth. The force of seduction of the railway man's home is no less powerful than the one outside. At one point in the novel, "the man" meets Koomson, an old acquaintance of the protagonist from school who is now a government minister, and invites him over. Koomson's wife Estella has such an impact on the narrator's wife Oyo that she seeks a high status in society, just as Estella enjoys. Oyo chides her husband for not taking bribes and amassing illegal wealth like the corrupt government officials, as she says, "maybe you like the crawling that we do, but I am tired of it. ... Everybody is swimming toward what he wants. Who wants to remain on the beach asking the wind, "How...How...How?" (44). This repetition in the narration hints towards the frustration of a wife whose husband is standing on the side-lines of what she believes is progress, while others are advancing in the rat race. The nice and clean existence that Oyo desires comes at the price of decaying of a person's soul. Oyo compares her husband to a Chichidodo, a bird that contradictorily eats maggots, but hates excrement from which the maggot grows. In her mind his naiveté is also cowardice. The narrator wants to provide his family with a better life yet simultaneously refuses to play the dirty game of politics and deception, which is apparently the only way to gain a higher standing in their society. "The man" seems to be sympathetic towards Oyo's complexes, unfulfilled desires, and her passion for a better, clean life not different from the vision her husband has. The narrator resents the feeling that he is alone in upholding the values of liberation and societal development because he has not joined the blind masses. The author's choice of frequently using contrasting images of decay and cleanliness stems from all the agonizing social experiences. The harsh satire of the novel is directed towards everyone who disregards the possible better future of the nation by chasing after material wealth. In the novel this condition of the postcolonial state is the "harsh reality" which stands in the way of "the emergence of the world of the 'beautiful ones'" (Lazarus 139). One of the most forceful parts of the novel is the hope of a new beginning at the hands of the titular "not yet born" as it gives an alternative vision of what the current condition is. Neil Lazarus writes:

In *The Beautiful Ones* what could be exists as a fundamental threat to what is. The social environment of "the man" is profoundly unrevolutionary, but the specter of revolution figures in its margins nevertheless. In fact, it is present there as nothing less than a promise. (139)

The unnamed narrator's refusal to take part in the practice of moral decadence in itself is a symbol of optimism in the story. Resisting the gleam, in other words the lure of wealth, the narrator also has to silently accept his family's accusations. The narrator sees through the clean and immaculate appearances of the Koomsons and the corrupt bureaucrats, and considers them to be diseased. At one point "the man" speaks his mind to Oyo, "Some of that kind of cleanliness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump" (44). The narrator realizes that the immediate scenario might not change soon, but he has faith in his actions and in the future which might bring light in the darkness. The contrast between the dumpsters, filth, excreta, and the whiteness of wealthy neighborhoods needs to be emphasized, which can be termed as a "purgative

exposure” (Aidoo 18). This exposure might be painful to witness but is “absolutely necessary” (Aidoo 18).

A significant success for Armah’s narrator is seen when his abstinence is praised by Oyo. She sees the consequence of Koomson’s corrupt nature that ends in humiliation and finally realizes the worth of living an honest life. The wife is relieved and grateful as she tells her husband, “I am glad you never became like him” (165). The hope for a better nation is renewed in “the man” after hearing his wife’s confession. He feels a form of freedom in making someone understand that the Chichidodo is not necessarily a problem, but an answer. A heightened sense of morality in the narratorial voice may be seen as a positive note towards the end of the novel. Looking at the intrinsic optimism, arguments can be raised against Chinua Achebe’s disregard of the novel. In one of his interviews, Achebe himself talks about the responsibility of the author in portraying the problems infesting the world and his attempt at bringing about a solution:

If things were perfect, there would be no need for writers to write their novels. But it is because they see a vision of the world which is better than what exists, it is because they see the possibilities of man rising higher than he has risen at the moment that they write. So, whatever they write, if they are true practitioners of their art, would be in essence a protest against what exists, what is. (4-5)

From this point of view, Ayi Kwei Armah’s intention to write about Ghana and its immersion in delinquency is in no way snobbishness of a novelist, but an attempted wake-up call for his fellow humans. Armah examines the filth of moral and social degradation only to search for purity and decency. An image of a policeman taking bribe from a bus driver is a commonplace incident that is mentioned at the beginning of the novel and repeated towards the end. This is a symbol of corruption spreading from the minister’s house to the bus driver’s. But two incidents are striking towards the end of the novel – one is that on the rear of the bus there is an inscription which reads, “THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN,” painted with a flower that is “solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful,” and the other one appears when “the man” hears a bird singing and diving into a latrine. The repeated symbols of solitude, mystery, beauty, latrines, excreta, and the flower indicate a possibility that beauty can be born and persist in squalor. There is no apparent reason to believe that a morally bankrupt Ghanaian society will suddenly undergo dramatic change; on the contrary, like a hydra’s head, in the place of one Koomson, two others may rise. The never-ending cycle will go on at the expense of the honest individuals. Yet, amidst all the unpleasantness of the corrupt city, the narrator still searches for a better world. The positive tone of the novel is celebrated by Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo: “Perhaps the beautiful ones, when they are born and let’s pray it will be soon, will take care of everything and everybody once and for all time. The least we can do is wait” (18). The novel offers a promise that all that man can do now is hope for the filth to bear flowers and wait because they may not bloom today, not even tomorrow, but someday they will.

The moral decadence, complicated familial relationships, social norms, and an attempt by the protagonist to resist the lure of the glamorous materialistic former empire is what makes the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* a stringent satire of the postcolonial state of modern

Ghana. The novelist's flowing and forceful criticism of the hypocritical nationalist leaders, with their blatant violations of the ideals that once drove a nation to fight for freedom from colonial power, drives a message home. This message says that achieving freedom from a white master is not enough because there will always be a threat coming from another group of people with minds like the colonizers, who desperately want to establish themselves in positions of power. History is a witness to how neo-colonialists have oppressed the people like the old colonial masters did – putting their own selfish personal agenda before that of the nation in making decisions, and creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust to keep the masses under their expensive and oppressive boots. The colonial past can never be denied or forgotten, but there is a necessity to learn from its scars, to take the side of the suffering ordinary public, not to bow down before the colonizers by mirroring them. Amidst the grim realities of life – the filth-ridden streets of the country, and the decadent bureaucracy – lies a hidden promise in the narrative. The glimmer of hope in the story is a search for truth, honesty, and innocence in the people by Armah's protagonist. No matter how disillusioned "the man" is about the degradation of his fellow human beings, no matter how conflicted his psyche is in addressing the gleam, the narrator's faith in humanity still persists; he sees beauty, even in waste. The optimism in the novel's ending may appear rushed, but it would not seem so if the unfolding of events throughout the novel is considered. The storyteller seeks to remind his readers that the immoral leaders with their petty agenda and sham discourse of nationalism will try to hinder progress, liberty, and equality in the nation, but the people have to fight back for their own sake.

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# Translating Medea's Infanticide: A Reading of Euripides' *Medea*

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## Abstract

The figure of Medea is indeed one of the most enigmatic and problematic characters of Greek mythology. In Euripides' *Medea*, the problem becomes acute because it is not merely a vengeful character that the reader comes across, but a woman who in order to avenge her husband's betrayal, chooses to kill her own children. And in traditional patriarchal society that is certainly not acceptable. In the recent past, Medea's actions have presented her as a cruel hearted murderess, a passionate woman bent on revenge, a mortal woman emerging as a goddess through her actions, and even as one of the first feminists to have uttered vengeance against man's unfair treatment of women. While this paper looks at all those interpretations, it also attempts to analyze and interpret the riddle of Medea from other perspectives. Drawing on the historical background of the Asian sorceress, this paper aims to present Medea as a lost voice of matriarchy that retaliates against the father's rule that denies a mother to have any hold over her children. In the process, the woman may lose her most precious possessions, she may also be deemed as a monster, but she also just might regain her honor and esteem.

**Keywords:** Deus ex machina, Matriarchy, Infanticide, Rites of Atonement, Heroism

One of the biggest problems I face in teaching Greek tragedies is that students would not accept Medea as a great heroine because she ends up killing her own children. They cannot understand why any dramatist would allow such a vile creature to ride out in a dragon-drawn chariot in full glory. Yes, they can see that her husband is a selfish, dimwitted fool, and they are moved by her plight. But they ask if that can be enough reason for a mother to *kill* her children? Isn't a mother supposed to protect her children at the cost of her own life, honor and whatever precious possessions she has? Why does not this mother do the same? Even among the most gruesome tales from Greek mythology the story of Euripides' Medea killing her own children has always been a problematic one for critics. As Robert Palmer points out, the character of Jason in Euripides' *Medea* is at best "a bourgeois hero with a bourgeois sense of morality" (53). But how is one supposed to interpret the character of Medea? The manner of deaths she delivers to the Corinthian Princess and her father is terrifying, but understandable, and to some extent even justifiable. They had treated Medea as vermin with no respect or place in society. They had lured her husband away, broken her home, and threatened to send her and her children into exile. Even the slaves of Corinth had more security than a woman with children and no guardian. So, is Euripides trying to show that a woman's urge to avenge the wrongs inflicted upon her by her husband is so strong that she would kill her own children? Critics have put forward different theories which show her as a cruel hearted murderess, a passionate woman bent on revenge, a mortal woman emerging as a goddess through her actions, and even as one of the first feminists to have uttered vengeance against man's unfair treatment of women.

Referring back to Greek mythology, even though mortals very often commit heinous crimes such as homicide, incest, and cannibalism, they are also punished through divine intervention. But Medea rides out of Corinth in the chariot of Helios like a goddess while helpless Jason whimpers in futile

rage and sorrow. However sympathetic Euripides might have been at the plight of foreigners living in Athens, or women's situation in Greek society, surely he had more reasons to allow Medea to leave the stage as a glorified *deus ex machina*. I would say that her actions may cry out vengeance, but they also commemorate the song of a lost time, the last cry of matriarchy that failed to protect itself against the rising patriarchal system.

Before engaging with the play, I would like to look at Medea's background to understand how she is different from her contemporary women in Greece. The Nurse, the Chorus, Jason, and Medea herself refer from time to time to her past life as the Princess of Colchis, which according to Jason, was like "living among barbarians" (l. 524). Colchis was actually an ancient pre-Greek state of Pelasgian culture. Homer refers to the Pelasgians in the *Iliad* while describing the allies of Troy. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Milesian Greeks were attracted by the natural and economic sources of Colchis and its surrounding area (Modern Georgia in Europe), and laid siege to local cities. It explains why Medea's father Aietes, the King of Colchis, did not like Greek invaders who visited his country for the Golden Fleece. The fleece might very well be a symbol of his wealth. Therefore, he had the fleece guarded by a terrible serpent. At the same time, he set the young adventurers to perform impossible tasks, enticing them with the promise of the fleece. The cult of death he practiced was terrible indeed, but in many other places of ancient times, similar rites were present. *Iphigenia at Tauris* explores a parallel ritual where young strangers were sacrificed at the temple of Artemis. So in Colchis, Medea, a granddaughter of the sun god Helios, was a powerful sorceress and she was also either a daughter, or priestess of Hecate, the pre-Olympian goddess of fertility. Emma Griffith in her study of Medea records at least one diagram of lineage that shows Medea to be the daughter of Hecate (10). But Medea in Euripides' play swears an oath on Hecate and claims her as mistress and the goddess of her household.

Medea also claims to have fallen in love with Jason when he arrived at Colchis with the Argonauts. She promised to help him on the condition that he would make her his bride. And according to Apollonius, Jason took an oath that he would love Medea for the rest of his life. His marriage to Medea, therefore, was not a mere social contract like most Greek marriages where the bride could be sent to her father's home with her dowry if the husband wished to end the relationship. In Euripides' play, we see that the once great hero Jason now looks at Medea's love as a ploy of the gods to help him. Furthermore, he accuses her of belonging to a barbaric race and lesser origin than his, and shows a condescending attitude by claiming to have honored her by making her his consort. In his attempt to treat Medea as merely a hindrance in achieving his ambition, Jason acts not only as a typical contemporary Athenian of Euripides, suspicious and contemptuous of foreigners, but as an ingrate as well.

Medea had left her country and family for Jason, and she also had sacrificed her brother for the safe passage of the Argonauts. She killed Jason's usurping uncle Pelias by tricking his daughters. However, whatever she did was for the interest of Jason to whom she submitted body and soul. The doors to her fatherland and parents' house were sealed for her. Therefore, when she addresses Jason for his betrayal with remarriage, the utter wretchedness of her situation is revealed:

“Where am I to go? To my father’s?  
Him I betrayed and his land when I came with you.  
To Pelias’ wretched daughters? What a fine welcome  
They would prepare me who murdered their father!  
For this is my position, – hated by my friends  
At home, I have, in kindness to you, made enemies  
Of others whom there was no need to have injured ....  
A distinguished husband  
I have, – for breaking promises ....” (ll. 490- 99)

Medea’s plight is more abject than most Greek wives because though she has “married” a Greek man, being a foreigner and outsider, she has no legal claim on him. He has the right to leave her any time he wants. But for Medea, Jason’s second marriage is an ultimate act of treachery, because, as C.A.E. Luschnig observes “she has broken from her family more operationally than other brides” (24), the very reason for which she refuses to take up the position of a secondary wife or concubine.

After the initial shock over her husband’s remarriage, Medea steps out of her house to talk to the Chorus of Corinthian women who notice a stark change in her attitude from what the Nurse had earlier reported. The nurse had informed the Chorus that her mistress was lamenting her lost marriage by prostrating on the floor. But when Medea approaches the Chorus, she appears quite level headed, passionate even. In Ancient Greece, notes Margaret Williamson, especially in Athenian society, a woman’s place was the *oikos* or the hearth of her household. By crossing that threshold and by speaking logically like a Greek man, Medea starts taking charge of the situation very early in the play (17). Even though the Chorus asks her to accept her fate as sufferings inflicted by the gods, this is where we begin to suspect that she may choose not to do so.

Considering her past conduct, Medea’s confidence and the ability to look squarely at things is not surprising. Even in her relationship with Jason she was the one who initiated and did everything. She combines the figures of the dangerous and ugly witch with the mesmerizing and lovely princess. She also helps Jason with the killing of the guardian of the Golden Fleece. Her only goal in life then was helping out the man she loved with her whole heart. But in doing so, unlike most heroines, she has transgressed social norms and boundaries. Even though she embraces the identities of wife and mother in Corinth, her past actions were not forgotten by the people surrounding her. Creon, the King of Corinth, knows about Medea’s past, and precisely for that reason wants to banish her.

Threatened with exile and humiliated beyond endurance, Medea once again resumes her assertive self, but this time the focus of her interest changes drastically. From a doting and caring woman she turns into a chimera bent on revenge against her once beloved husband. However, if we look at her action as only revenge, it would be too simple an assessment of her situation and character. When Medea lived in Colchis, she had an important place in her father’s house, which depended on her magical skills. In her union with Jason she had lost all that. Therefore, when she is betrayed by that very man, she laments over her past decision of leaving her father’s land and murdering

her brother. Medea, a semi-divine woman, being a granddaughter of Helios, was also the Princess of Colchis, a priestess of Hecate, and a niece to the sorceress Circe. But she betrayed her former self, her father's house and her people by crossing over to the Greeks. Therefore, if she wants to atone, it has to be difficult, dangerous, and self-mutilating. As Lillian Corti implies, the rituals of Hecate required child sacrifice for atonement (44), and that very implication is foreboding. Medea, having been Hecate's priestess in the past, and still honoring her as her household goddess, makes it all the more ominous. Her killing of the Corinthian Princess, King Creon, and the children of her and Jason's union are all bound together in one piece of symbolic sacrifice that she feels might redeem her.

Medea's murder of the young Princess is of course an act of revenge, and yet, she is an emblem of Medea's younger self. When urging Jason to talk to his wife about the refuge of the children, Medea reveals how she herself once was fascinated by his charm:

“Then you must tell your wife to beg from her father  
That the children may be reprieved from banishment . . .  
If she is like the rest of us women, you will.” (ll. 918-21)

The messenger, who describes how the Corinthian Princess died, also relates how fervently she awaited Jason when he went to meet her. It almost mirrors a younger Jason asking a younger Medea for help, and she granting his wishes in a similar manner. When Medea kills the Princess, symbolically, she destroys her own younger self that loved Jason. Her gruesome death can be interpreted as the result of loving Jason, or the price of being married to Jason. Marriage to Jason and his subsequent treatment scarred Medea. As Marianne Hopman observes, “The young, innocent Medea inflamed by love for Jason had been annihilated and transformed into a bride of Hades” (165). But whereas, being a mere girl, the Princess actually dies, Medea lives on. She will live on even after being burned and disfigured.

Therefore, for Medea, the death of the Princess means completion of only half of her atonement. To complete the task she has to embark on something almost impossible – killing her own children. Critics have often questioned if Medea could not have saved them. But if we follow the chain of events carefully, it shows that in spite of being a powerful woman, Medea, too, has her limitations. When she makes her bargain with Aegeus, she speaks only for herself, and not for her children. She, being a foreigner, really cannot claim Jason as her legal husband, not in Corinth, and certainly not in Athens, home of Aegeus. Even though a sanctuary for exiles, the root of Athens is buried in the sacrifice of children, which is suggested in the Choral Ode sung in the praise of Athens:

From of old the children of Erechtheus are  
Splendid, the sons of blessed gods. They dwell  
In Athens' holy and unconquered land . . . (ll. 808-10)

Corti sees this reference as ominous because, “the founding father thus revered is one who sacrificed his daughter, Otonia, in order to secure an Athenian victory” (37). While the Chorus may fail to see why Athens, a city of wisdom and prosperity, would give shelter to a child murderer, their own song implies that some children will always be sacrificed for the welfare of some other. If it can happen in Athens, it may happen anywhere.

Moreover, after Jason's desertion, Medea becomes virtually an unmarried woman with children. Without the protection of their father these children would be hounded to death in no time. The only way she could perhaps have saved them, as suggested by Lillian Corti, is "by accepting a demeaning and tenuous status for herself," through enslaving herself to Jason and his bride (35). This is an option a woman like Medea cannot take, and even if she did, it was not an absolute certainty that the children would live. Both Creon and his daughter have good reasons to hate and fear Medea's sons, because they are a threat to the children to be borne by Jason's second wife.

Moreover, when Medea uses her children to bear her poisonous gifts to the Princess, their life is forfeited, as the Chorus correctly observes. The Corinthians will look upon them as objects of their vengeance, for which very reason Jason comes to save them right after the deaths of Creon and his daughter. Yet, it should not be assumed that Medea is happy about using her children as tools in her revenge. One of the most passionate and sad speeches uttered by Medea is the one she delivers to her sons while bidding farewell to them. Initially, one might think she is reconsidering her decision of killing them by leaving them behind. But then it becomes clear that she is actually singing a dirge before their death. She laments the futile pain she bore during their birth as all of it has come to nothing. Her words after bidding the children to go inside the house are full of premonition and ambiguity:

And he whom law forbids  
To stand in attendance at my sacrifices,  
Let him see to it. (ll. 1027-29)

Pietro Pucci in *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea* offers two reasons behind Medea calling this murder a sacrifice, "First, they replace Jason because they are the most precious things he has, while they are also very dear to Medea; and second, their murder is intended to resolve her crisis and to be, therefore, her final act" (134).

However much it may hurt her, Medea must suffer as much as she made her father suffer. With this I would like to add that as the daughter/priestess of Hecate (in later ages often identified with Artemis), Medea also needs to perform this sacrificial ritual to purge herself. When she had left Colchis, in the sacrifice of her own brother she had destroyed her father's line of descendants. Now she must destroy all possibility of Jason leading a happy and comfortable life in old age, well-cared for by his children. At the end of the play, Jason accuses her of betraying her father's house, but long before that, Medea confessed her guilt while accusing Jason of treachery: "I myself betrayed my father and my home" (l. 471). She had killed her brother and caused her father tremendous pain, and she never forgot that. Jason's betrayal probably makes her grasp the futility of all her past actions.

Moreover, by marrying Jason, Medea had forfeited her former position of a virgin and priestess. She had also made herself subservient to a man who was not her equal, as Luschnig perceives:

The marriage of Jason and Medea almost reaching Homeric ideal of like-minded husband and wife (*Odyssey* 6.181-5) was an illusion all along: there was no equality (as Medea sees in hindsight), no shared world view. Jason, taking advantage of a man's greater mobility, went out and negotiated for a new wife. Medea's agreement and help are not asked for now. (25)

Now if Medea wants out of her marriage to regain her former status, she must annul the marriage too, but in a way very different from her husband's. Jason, who claims to belong to a "civilized" race, can abandon his foreign wife any time he wants to. But for Medea, it is a painful and difficult process. Being identified with a dark goddess of fertility, Medea will have to sacrifice; and her sacrifice will have to be the most treasured object in her "marriage," with which she had betrayed her former self. Jason cannot be a sacrifice because she has no love left for him. The sacrifice has to be precious, as was the case with Agamemnon, and as Pucci further observes, "Medea's purposeful resolve implies her self-mutilation but promises a full victory over Jason and a full restoration of her self" (142). Through her infanticide she also destroys "the tangible proof of her relationship with Jason ... [acting out] in the most literal and irrevocable manner the vanity of his [Jason's] oaths" (Hopman 161).

Yet, in spite of all the reasoning, Medea *is* guilty of filicide. Why then is she allowed to get away in the chariot of Helios? She is probably the only mortal child killer in Greek myths to have been allowed to get away without vengeance. The Orestian tragedy started with infanticide, and the curse visited the family for generations. The Chorus invokes the story of Ino, the one who dived into the sea after killing her son. Does that mean that Medea too will commit suicide? However, what the Chorus does not say is that after her death, Ino was transformed into a goddess. Most of the mothers of Greek mythology, who die of grief after killing their own flesh and blood, go through metamorphosis. Procne and Ino are two of such figures. Nevertheless, neither of them knew beforehand what the pain would be like. But Medea had the full knowledge of what she was doing. "Just for this one short day be forgetful of your children, afterwards weep," says Medea (l. 1221-22). Like Procne, she too, is severed from her children for all eternity. But unlike Procne, or Ino, her murder of her children was carefully planned, and she also knew of her coming transformation.

So, Medea in her dragon-pulled chariot becomes a *deus ex machina* – the divine presence that appears in all plays of Euripides to remind human beings of their limitations, and to reveal the truth of things. "In the world of the gods, oaths are inescapable and irrevocable," says Luschnig (65), and by marrying the Corinthian Princess, Jason breaks the oath he took in his marriage with Medea. By breaking his *oikos*, and leaving his wife and children destitute in order to fulfill his cold ambition, Jason proves himself a lowly man. Like many mythical heroes he wants to set himself at home after all his adventures, but at the price of discarding his devoted partner. *That* is an act of ultimate treachery. The woman Medea suffered as his wife, but in killing the children, she becomes an instrument of the gods. Invoking the name of Zeus, who punishes all oath-breakers, Medea does not only ride away safely, but prophesies an unheroic death for Jason. She is no more the woman Jason can upbraid and criticize. Like Dionysus in Euripides' other play *Bacchae*, Medea too, is slighted and insulted in the beginning of the play, but she rises at the end in her full glory. To some extent, she is also like Artemis at the end of *Hyppolitus*, who appears to clarify the wrongs inflicted on young Hyppolitus. Medea's crime might be insupportable, but Euripides allows her a platform to speak from and to justify what she has done.

Moreover, Medea's act of filicide transforms her into something inhuman, almost an immortal. In killing her children she destroys Jason, and in the process she also destroys the wife and the

mother within. "After committing this murder she becomes so changed, so hardened, that one doubts if she will ever weep again," (42) comments Jennifer March in "Euripides the Misogynist?" From now on, her dealings with people will be emotionless and businesslike, which she shows in her pact with Aegeus. In her commitment to Jason she had submitted herself heart and soul. But with Aegeus it is "a contract based on exchange and reciprocity between equals," observes Margaret Williamson (19). Conforming to the patriarchal mode of society she accepts Aegeus as her protector, but she will probably never be emotionally dependent on him or any other man as she was on Jason.

Even though Euripides shows Medea to be guilty of infanticide, he also makes her one of the greatest heroines of all time. In other stories concerning Medea, her children are either killed by the goddess Hera, or by the relatives of Creon, which suggest that these children could not have survived the disastrous events surrounding them. Or, even if they had survived, they would not be allowed to achieve greatness – being merely the sons of Jason by a foreign mistress. By making Medea kill them, Euripides actually gives Medea the power to write her own story. Earlier, Jason had denied her share not only in his story of the Golden Fleece, but also negated her role as a wife and mother:

You need no children.  
And it pays me to do good to those I have now  
By having others. (ll. 553-55)

He reproves her by saying that these sons will be useful to him because as sons, they belong to the father's world. He also takes away the identity he had given her only too easily, and at the same time, expects her to behave as a good wife by accepting his second marriage as well as give up her children. For Jason, he is always the center of his world. Medea has done so much for him in the past that he takes it for granted that she would do so again.

King Creon, the supposed protector of his land and people, had tried to make Medea a homeless fugitive. Only Aegeus, as Luschnig points out, "offers her a place from which to rebuild herself and recognizes a self in her from which to start" (3). And when Medea takes up that offer and acts from the shelter of that position, Jason is no less surprised than Medea was by his betrayal. All these years he has thought her as a loving wife doing wonderful things for him. Now when she kills their children, he sees the terrifying aspect of Medea:

A traitress to your father and your native land.  
The gods hurled the avenging curse of yours on me.  
For your own brother you slew at your own hearthside,  
And then came aboard that beautiful ship, the Argo.  
And that was your beginning. (ll. 1307-11)

Here we can clearly see that though Jason had been trying to deny Medea her part in his story by saying that the gods granted him glory, and that she had no part in it, in reality she is the one who had saved him as well as the Argonauts through her fratricide. She was no less terrible in the past, but she was then tremendously handy as a tool for Jason. Therefore, as long as she was useful for

the cold-hearted, ambitious man, he saw no fault in her. But the moment she begins to oppose his wishes, he starts finding her ill-tempered, useless, and as one only satisfied if her “life at night is good” (l. 558).

A woman pushed beyond endurance, Medea, therefore, kills her children and makes them immortal through the ritual she follows. It is noteworthy that she is different from all other child killers, most of whom die of grief, or are killed by avengers. Knowing full well what she was doing, immediately after the murder Medea rushes off to the temple of Hera, the goddess of marriage and child bearing. She performs the ritual connected to sacrifice to atone her deed and also to establish “a holy feast and sacrifice” for future generations of Corinthians to commemorate the death of her sons (l. 1357). It almost seems that by appealing to the goddess of marriage she finds a sanctuary for the bodies of her children, where they would not be dug up by some angry mob looking for vengeance.

Thus instituting the rites of atonement by Medea is a very important aspect of her story. Not only is she allowed to get away with murders, but like an immortal goddess lay the responsibility on the people of Corinth. Medea’s character reflects the “code of the ancient heroic system,” identifiable with the archaic heroism of Achilles and Odysseus (Knox 216). Mirroring Achilles’s grief after the death of Patroclus, Medea, too, lies prostrating on the ground after she learns about Jason’s second marriage. Soon, however, just like Achilles, she cries vengeance and wreaks havoc on her opponent. Like Odysseus, she is crafty too (her name, Medea, meaning the cunning one), in the deception and manipulation of Jason and Creon. When her revenge is complete, she rides out of the city in triumph, like an epic hero, apparently without caring what casualty she has caused, or how much it has cost her. She has been able to assert herself, and nobody will dare to laugh at her, or forget her as an insignificant and abandoned wife.

For his original audience Euripides has a very important message too. For the fifth century Greeks, more especially, Athenians, Medea being a woman and a foreigner, does not have the standing of a full human being. She is supposed to stay off-stage, her sufferings supposed to stay inside the house. The Chorus of Corinthian women laments it as the fate of women, but fails to find any solution: “Medea, a god has thrown suffering/ Upon you in waves of despair” (ll. 358-59). That a woman can actually cry vengeance for the wrongs inflicted upon her, was unheard of in those days. Euripides’s Medea, however, speaks and acts in ways that were totally unexpected by the contemporary audience. When she makes the claim that she would stand three times in the battle line than bear one child, she draws attention upon a sore spot – the physical and mental agony a woman goes through during child bearing. “Not many women would say what Medea says,” observes Easterling, and it surely was something unheard of by the patriarchal Athenian audience (182). Yet they did make a huge fuss over warfare and heroes dying in battlefield. The question is, where is the song for women who die at childbirth, or those who raise children only to be dismissed by husbands like Jason?

Thus, Euripides uses the figure of Medea to wreak vengeance of woman upon man for a long suffering cause. It probably is also a foreboding of chaos and revolution that a rebellious woman might cause for mistreatment and rejection. Moreover, attention is drawn to the fact that even in

a democratic city like Athens, the children of a foreigner like Medea would never be considered as citizens. The right to become a citizen of Athens was jealously guarded. Although the city depicted in *Medea* is Corinth, the scenario is the same, and Medea herself is aware of her disadvantages and shrewdly perceives the main reason behind Jason's marriage: "No, you thought it was not respectable/ As you got on in years to have a foreign wife" (ll. 579-80). So, Medea cannot be accepted as one of the Greeks even with her superior knowledge. They can sneer at her, but at the same time, they are afraid of her, as we observe in case of the Corinthian King Creon who banishes her from the city for the welfare of his daughter.

Therefore, in spite of all her trials and attempts to become a Greek, Medea remains an outsider. With her knowledge and wisdom she is also a forerunner of the "wise women" of the Medieval Ages, many of whom were burnt at the stake as witches. She reminds one of those mothers in slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who would choose death for her children rather than slavery and an inferior life. She is also reminiscent of the ferocious mother of matriarchal society where children were identified with the mother. Medea realizes that she will have no part in her sons' lives, they will be strangers to her if they lived, being tools of Jason's further ambition. The other, stronger possibility is they will be killed by the machination of a step-mother, or her relatives. Medea can allow neither, and decides to kill her children mercifully, with love. Therefore, Medea's infanticide is not a question of right or wrong, but an exploration of what might happen when the society acts without consideration, targeting one or two individuals by passing an arbitrary judgment.

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# Notions of Alienation and Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's

## *The Joys of Motherhood*

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### Abstract

Motherhood as an institution peculiar to women has always been reflected in diverse forms in Nigerian fiction. Whereas many authors venerate motherhood as the peak of feminine and familial achievements, some, like Buchi Emecheta, vilify it for the attendant ills experienced by women who are enmeshed in it. This paper examines Buchi Emecheta's deconstruction of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* with a focus on the possibility of motherhood leading ultimately to alienation. Using the theory of womanism, an African variant of feminism which exalts the peculiarities of African women and their circumstances, the paper analyzes how the author frames the experience of the protagonist as a mother to interrogate how socio-cultural dynamics impact gender constructs and the larger contexts of gendered spaces. In studying the author's textual construction of motherhood, the study discovers that the author employs specific characters as metaphorical indexicalities to denounce patriarchal and traditional feminists' penchant for extolling and venerating motherhood at the expense of women's search for self-realization with individual objectives that do not involve putting their womanhood in the service of society as subservient mothers with depersonalized psyches. The study concludes that the title is the author's ironical way of positing that being a mother is not all-fulfilling, because, as textualized in the novel, motherhood can become an avenue for women's societal oppression, exploitation, and alienation.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Womanhood, Feminism, Motherhood, Female Cooperativeness

As one of the foremost feminist writers in Africa, Buchi Emecheta had always treaded a peculiar path. While other writers appeared intimidated by the popular directions taken by the generality and would prefer to pander to established sexualized prerogatives, Emecheta was not one to shy away from challenging the seemingly inveterate hegemony that continue to militate against gender equality in the continent. For example, when fellow "feminists" thought feminism would provide the much needed panacea for the prejudiced gender situation in Africa, Emecheta came out calling herself "a feminist with a small f," to underscore the limitations of feminism as not particularly suited to ameliorate the challenges faced by females who confront different contextual variables. Indeed, while other feminists gravitated towards prescriptive feminism, which, ironically, like patriarchy, always attracts invitations to draw boundaries around femininity, Emecheta was always confronting and challenging atrocious androcentric cultural conventions and prejudicially hostile paradigms, because, apparently, the female must be free from the oppressive impositions of patriarchy as well as from the prescriptions of the "all-knowing" proponents of a brand of feminism in Africa that could be tottering towards misandrous feminism. While other feminists (like Filomena Steady, Bessie Head, and Katherine Frank, for example) always sought recourse in Western feminism, unmindful of the fact that whatever solutions proffered would be generally exotic and hence would

not take cognizance of distinct autochthonous values in Africa, Emecheta believed that solutions to the problems encountered by women in Africa could only be proffered in the continent by individuals who are conscious of the peculiarities of the cultural and material dispositions in Africa. By seeming to thrive on dissidence, Emecheta highlights and re-examines the various experiential trajectories that form the available avenues for women to explore their femininity.

When she started writing in England in the early 70s, the western world was still in the throes of feminist battles for gender equality. The feminist movement was in its second wave, with feminists concerned with issues beyond female suffrage, their focus having shifted to putting an end to the prevalent gender socio-cultural and political discrimination. For Emecheta, who had gone to England in 1962, her experience as a foreigner trying to live with racial discrimination was further compounded by an ingrained patriarchal system that white women in the society were trying to combat. As a woman and a foreigner, the discrimination she faced would be almost total, the effects more damning. Indeed, Emecheta's first two novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974), explore the experience of an alien black woman in England. Soon, she shifted her focus back home, where the women were still tackling an entrenched form of patriarchy complicated by the postcolonial struggles for significance, for identity. If her first two novels dramatize the traumatized swaths of black female protagonists alienated in a foreign land, mainly because of the color of their skin, in her subsequent novels she examines the lives of her characters in "their own" societies.

Although Emecheta grew up in Lagos, her family maintained significant socio-cultural ties to their ancestral village, Ibuza in the eastern part of Nigeria. She was apparently cognizant of the contradistinctions that defined living in cosmopolitan Lagos and the provincial interiority that characterized living in Ibuza. In terms of religion, socio-cultural relations and politics, colonial Lagos presented a situation where, though seemingly bustling with opportunities, the decades of colonial experience had greatly altered the gender constructs as existed in pre-colonial times:

Colonialism deeply undermined women's autonomy throughout the country as much as Islam undermined women's mobility in northern Nigeria. Colonial gender ideologies were at odds with what existed in pre-colonial societies. In Eastern Nigeria for example, Igbo and Ibibio societies clearly reveal societies where women's mobility and individual capital accumulation were not totally constrained by patriarchy. In western Nigeria, women were important in the economic, political and social affairs. Women performed important ritual and religious functions which empowered them and made their contribution to maintaining social harmony and cosmological balance important. Because colonial administration was established and maintained by a male dominated bureaucracy, it is no surprise that women were effectively excluded from the new administration. (Nnaemeka and Korieh ix-x)

The power equations of the genders were not only affected, the dialectic of gender completely swung in favor of the male. For Emecheta whose teenage life straddled Lagos and Ibuza (and later London), she was able to contrast the gender trajectories in the two places, and could not have failed to notice the hegemonic mythologization that had replaced the gender attitude in the country. Obviously, the pre-colonial patriarchal model did not possess the rigid and oppressive strictures that formed the nub of western patriarchy and anathematized its vectors.

For sure, the colonial period also brought with it new configurations that would be of benefit to women later in their (postcolonial) struggle for equality. For example, the introduction of western style of education would seem to ameliorate the gender situation, allowing that women too would be given access to formal education. Also, though colonial politics and Christianity explicitly reinforce a palpable separatism between the genders, the former excluding women from its bureaucratic structure, and the latter effecting a submissive circumscription on women, for women who are not fortunate enough to be educated, the cosmopolitan milieu through its vagaries provided various opportunities and sundry reliefs:

The colonial and postcolonial city has undeniably granted women more autonomy, allowing them to take on new social identities. Escaping rural constraints, women have found in [cities like] ... Lagos new sources of income, in the area of services and commerce (including prostitution), enabling them to achieve home ownership ... (and) become a vital part of the internal economic sector, outside of state control. (Gondola, qtd. in Kande 27)

Under the new dispensation, to achieve any form of significance, women would have to be resourceful and be self-reliant, and develop a survival impulse that simultaneously incorporates individualism and also communalism with other women. Failure to do this, according to Emecheta, engenders alienation and ostracism.

The intention of this paper, then, is to examine Buchi Emecheta's epistemic textualization of the vectors of motherhood and her (con)textualization of alienation that necessarily attends deliberate estrangement by a character that refuses to join others to combat gender imperialism.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist Epistemology and the Aesthetics of Motherhood**

When womanism was formulated in 1983 by a feminist (Alice Walker) concerned with the unique experience of women of color, most female writers in Africa welcomed it, because of their established grouse with feminism. Feminism, established by middle class white women in Europe and America after the Second World War, is supposed to cater to the needs of all women, without prejudice to color, race, class, or place. However, because African women are doubly oppressed, racially and sexually, the subaltern experience at two levels demands a different socio-political construct that recognizes the paradigmatic indices that catenate such background and the peculiar contextual phenomena that yielded them. For the advocates of womanism, its vectors are adequately and appropriately formulated to handle the essentials of the black woman's distinct experience.

While the focus of western feminism appears to be reactionary, idealistic, Emecheta opines that African women (womanists and African feminists) hold no similar views and cling more to the practical side of things. This is possibly the reason she describes herself as a "feminist with a small 'f'." By advocating a gender solipsistic togetherness that requires a pragmatic and consistent communication and cooperation amongst African women, she underwrites an anti-theoretical approach to tackling gender issues on the continent, an approach that is conceivably more empirical in its ramifications and more satisfying in its requisites.

The fundamentals of traditional African womanhood have always been anchored on the fulcrum of motherhood which vitiates modern ideas of femininity. Motherhood, because of its peculiarity, is venerated in the African tradition. The maxim that theorizes that “mother is gold” admits as much, as the mother is perceived to be a provider, protector, spiritual guide, comforter, and ultimately a life-giver very much prepared to experience self-denial, sadness, suffering, and even death to protect her child(ren). If the notion of fatherhood does not seem to enjoy a similar level of veneration, it is because of the belief that the impact made by a mother is perceived to be more vital in the physiological make-up of a child. Consequently, it is the most revered position a woman could occupy in African culture. Therefore, it is not uncommon to come across such expressions like:

the centrality of the mother to the African epistemology since Africa herself is the mother continent. (Adebayo 2)

Reproduction is the key to the continuity of kinship and community, and women as childbearers, carry its burden and glory. (Falola 262)

in Africa they preserve a special place of honour for motherhood. (Ngcobo 533)

The ethos of womanism and African feminism recognize the patriarchal penchant for eulogizing motherhood, at the expense of womanhood. In most African societies, a woman's womanhood is defined by her ability to give birth, in short, her motherhood. A woman who is unable to give birth is demonized as skewed and is socio-culturally estranged. But that is half the episteme built around the idea of failed womanhood. A woman who does not have a male child is almost equated with a barren woman. Not surprisingly, such parameters have become so ingrained in most cultures that the victimization of barren women or women with only female children seems to be generally accepted, by both male and female members of the society.

To Emecheta, the veneration ascribed to motherhood in the works of male writers and some female novelists – like Flora Nwapa – is too significant to ignore. It is one of the ways by which patriarchy “appears” to ascribe “real” importance to a particular vector of femininity (woman as mother) while simultaneously denigrating other vectors (like woman as wife, or woman as a citizen). To Emecheta, patriarchal idolization of motherhood is vital for its control of women's productivity, because as long as motherhood is perceived by women as the most important aspect of feminine experience, patriarchal stranglehold on women's productivity would continue.

In *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa's attempt to expose “the pain, misery and humiliation which childless or barren women suffer in traditional African society” (528) appropriately problematizes the anathematic affinities that characterize the experience of any woman who is unable to have a child. At the end of the novel, the eponymous protagonist, Efuru, after several unsuccessful attempts to have children, becomes a priestess. In a postcolonial society where women have to combat a more ingrained form of patriarchy supported by colonial gender solipsism imported from Europe, such an end seems to vindicate the valorization of motherhood as the major requisite for womanhood, while denigrating for the woman a quest for personal fulfillment outside of patriarchal expectations.

**(Post)Colonial Gender Displacement and the Poetics of Gendering in *The Joys of Motherhood***

According to Stratton, “in *The Joys of Motherhood*, (the) contextualization of the female characters’ experience constitutes Emecheta’s strongest statement in response to male idealizations of motherhood” (113). While laying emphasis on two constructs in *The Joys of Motherhood* – marriage and motherhood – Emecheta deconstructs their trajectories in a manner that debases them. In a way, she presents these two constructs as experiential snags for women in their attempts to be socio-cultural avatars, and she dissects the pith of marriage and motherhood as avenues for exploitation, particularly when in her attempt to satisfy the requisites of marital felicity and maternal signification, a woman ostracizes herself from her family and other women who otherwise could have provided succour in time of need. Coupled with the fact that most of the central male figures in Emecheta’s novels are metaphoric models for patriarchal oppression, marital irresponsibility, and paternal unreliability, her female characters are consistently obligated to make up for the shortcomings of their male counterparts. The central character’s epiphany aptly illustrates the novel’s major thematic thrust:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children ... It was not fair ... the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children. (137)

Emecheta’s envisioning of Nnu Ego’s tragedy encapsulates a realization of the true nature of marriage and the precariousness of motherhood. One of the key questions in the novel is “Have you ever heard of a complete woman without a husband?” (158). To escape socio-cultural ignominy, Nnu Ego calmly accepts her second husband – Nnaife – after having discovered, with her first husband, Amatokwu, that it is not marriage that actually defines a woman, but the ability to procreate. But with motherhood comes more responsibilities; children will have to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and educated. Though Nnu Ego is initially surprised at the onus placed on her as a mother when her husband fails to fulfill his paternal duty to his children, she subsequently dedicates her existence to feeding the requisites of motherhood, which requires a lot of sacrifices. However, rather than her industry and sacrifices as a responsible mother serving as a catalyst for her children to give her a favorable recompense for the hard work and self-abnegation, she is abandoned and allowed to die by the roadside, uncelebrated and unsung. It is, apparently, a tragic miscalculation for a woman who so much believes that motherhood would erase all her sorrows and also provide for her the much needed succor for the endless yearnings for respect and unconditional love.

In her quest for all this, Nnu Ego completely forgets about allying with other women. According to the author, Nnu Ego is a woman who “was so busy being a good mother and wife that she didn’t cultivate her women friends. She died by the wayside, hungry and alone” (Emecheta “feminism with a small f” 555). This is a trope, a motif that runs through most of Emecheta’s novels; characters alienate themselves from family and friends because they erroneously believe that doing such would ameliorate their problems.

The major level of alienation experienced by Nnu Ego is mental. She could not comprehend the complexion of cosmopolitan socio-cultural gender praxis. For someone who grew up in a rural

enclave where men and women knew “their places,” she finds it inexplicable that men in the cities have become effeminate, unabashedly getting the kind of employment that their counterparts in the rural communities would find demeaning to their manhood. When Nnu Ego discovers that Nnaife works as a servant in the house of a white man, her embarrassment is almost palpable:

Her husband Nnaife would get up at six in the morning by the clock the master and his wife had given him. He would then pull on his khaki shorts, eat the night's leftover food, and dash to Dr. Meer's part of the compound to start doing their washing. He used two giant tin bathtubs, grey and big enough to take up to three people at the same time. He would sit on a kitchen stool by the first bath and wash all manner of articles, towels, women's nightdresses and what-have-you ... Intermittently, he had to fetch water from the garden pump, carrying a tin bucket in each hand. After the day's washing had been hung up to dry, he would go into the pantry and fill the pressing-iron with coal ... They gave him the grand title “Nnaife, the washerman.” So good was he at his job that, for a small consideration the master's friends often borrowed him. (47)

Eventually she is resigned to her “fate,” accepting that the gender vectors have changed, the postcolonial culture bringing with it demeaning employment and other variables alien to the traditional lifestyle. While ordinarily men like Nnaife would have been objects of anathematization in the rural interiors because of their dislike for physical exertion, in the cities they are respected, because they work with the white man. Ironically, and not surprisingly, such men are not loath to view themselves as very important and, considering the circumstances, request that their women give them utmost respect just like their counterparts in the rural communities would do.

However, if for the men the notion of masculinity seems a little bit aggravated but nevertheless accentuated by some of the exigencies of colonial intrusion, the gender situation as it existed in pre-colonial times is forever altered. The transformation of the vectors of gender also affects the female gender too, as the narrator explains, “To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after ... with Christianity and other changes” (10). For most of the men in the rural communities, farming, hunting and other agro-allied involvements provide enough employment, not only for them but also the women. Albeit they are largely charged with taking care of the children, the women too are involved in trading and farming (especially vegetables and food crops). While there could be instances of “stay-at-home mothers,” these would be few in number. With the coming of the western form of “total patriarchy” which allowed the men to make the transition from employment that requires physical work (farming, hunting, etc) to occupations that need mental ability (as clerks, interpreters, and secretaries in the colonial government) came the inevitability of women having to stay at home minding the children and having nothing else to do. That is, except getting involved in petty trading, the kind that Nnu Ego partakes in.

### **Alienation, Motherhood, and the Dynamics of Afro-Phallocentrism**

For Emecheta, the strength of patriarchy resides in the ability of men to cooperate in utilizing all available appurtenances to sustain the gender status quo. This is directly and indirectly supported by the existence of exclusive male groups, societies and other ensembles which champion the virtues of masculinity and patriarchy. The inclemency of cosmopolitan patriarchy can only be

ameliorated if women seek comfort in their fellow women. For example, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego and Adaku find it difficult to present a definite front to challenge their husband's excesses. Even when they go on strike and together refuse to cook for him, they could not sustain their rebellion because Nnu Ego is afraid their actions could have disastrous consequences. However, according to Emecheta, women in polygynous situations ought to cooperate so as to achieve some significance in their lives:

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her ... Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time ("feminism with a small f" 555).

In Adaku (Nnu Ego's co-wife), one could readily perceive the rebellious inclination. When her husband (Nnaife's brother) dies, she is subsequently willed to Nnaife as culture demands. Obviously, her late husband was a responsible spouse and father, like most of the men in the village. When she marries Nnaife as his second wife and comes to Lagos to live with him, she could not comprehend his indifference to his responsibility as a father. If Nnaife's lackluster attitude to his paternal duties seems worrisome to Adaku, because she was raised in an ambiance where shirking responsibilities (in any form) is anathematized, she is more perplexed by Nnu Ego's readiness to quickly forgive their husband's misdemeanors which only further encourages him towards more fecklessness. To her, Nnu Ego becomes complicit in Nnaife's lack of paternal answerability, not only because she (Nnu Ego) works herself to the bone for her children to make up for her husband's paternal inadequacies, but also because she is not interested in combining forces to compel him to fulfill his obligations. According to Adaku, "yet the more I think about it the more I realize that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another" (169). This is a direct condemnation of Nnu Ego's attitude, as she is a woman who refuses to combine forces with other women to combat the manifestations of patriarchal oppression.

However, if Adaku could not comprehend Nnu Ego's complicity in the societal oppression of women, it is not because she (Adaku) is at sea when it comes to utilizing the opportunities presented by the new dynamics of colonialism, the limitless offerings made available by the loose ambiance of urban privileges. Indeed, she is more quickly attuned to the perquisites of cosmopolitan living. When she discovers that having female children is perceived as a curse, and that Nnaife cannot adequately provide for her and her children, and her co-wife would not cooperate with her to make their husband fulfill his obligations, she decides to free herself from the shackles of societal expectations. Unlike Nnu Ego whose major focus is to serve others, Adaku decides to revolt, radicalized by an unquenchable desire for personal freedom as an individual and a maternal instinct that realizes the unhealthiness of allowing her daughters to grow up in such an environment:

Why should I put up with all this any longer? ... What else is there for me to do? I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future ... Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! (168)

Her decision to be a prostitute might not sit well with others, but she has reached the end of her tether and could no longer live her life suffering and smiling in the process. And one does not have to wonder if she gets the support of the narrator, because, when Nnu Ego visits her later after she had abandoned her marriage, the narrator contrasts Adaku's transformed happy mien, enviable abode, and sartorial presence against Nnu Ego's shabby and oppressed existence and concludes with these damning words, "she (Nnu Ego) crawled further into the urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood" (169).

Eventually Nnu Ego becomes a subservient automaton who, though caught in the middle of values that straddle two worlds, could not strive to get the best of both worlds. While her readiness to make her husband happy at whatever cost would not endear her to women with feminist inclinations, her decision to estrange herself from other women further compounds a situation already made worse by Nnaife's paternal nonchalance. Although colonial culture might have eroded some aspects of socio-cultural gender constructs like the male groups and female coveys which existed in most traditional societies in Africa, similar groupings exist in the urban centers which, though lacking in the praxis that bonded the groups in their original contexts, in the cities they still provide varieties of benefits for members, the least of which is financial assistance and succour from marital woes. But Nnu Ego does not see the need to initiate friendship with other women.

Nnu Ego's refusal to cultivate the sisterhood of other women, rather focusing on the nurturing of her "motherhood," does not present a positive calibration, even when juxtaposed with Adaku's decision to become a demimondaine, a "trade" that thrives on the cooperative synergies of members of the group. In Adaku's own words, she is "going to live with those women in Montgomery Road. Yes, I'm going to join them" (168). "Live with those women," "join them" – these words present a comparatively better scenario than what obtains in Nnaife's household, where the children are underfed and cramped together, where the women do all the work but are never appreciated. Adaku seems less interested in seeking societal approbation for her actions, and more concerned about combining fulfilling individual desire for space and freedom. Rather than allow herself to be treated like Nnu Ego, Adaku decides to set up shop on her own, close to other women who would be less judgmental and where the desire for societal approval would not be a constant refrain.

Nnu Ego's alienation comes to the fore when she appears in court to serve as a witness during her husband's trial for attempted murder. Long atrophied by an instinctive streak that perpetually seeks approbation through marital and gender acquiescence, her obsequious posture in the witness box explicably assists the prosecution in its case against Nnaife, and he is sent to jail for five years. Following the court's insistence on truth, Nnu Ego unwittingly reveals that she, and not her husband, "was doing all the providing ... even though she then had five children to look after" (217). It quickly becomes obvious, with this revelation, that Nnaife's murderous rage against Kehinde's people is not motivated by any urge to protect his daughter's honor, but a selfish patriarchal impulse. According to Nnaife, if his daughter agrees to marry an Ibo man, he will receive a big bride price and "over twelve big kegs of bubbling palm wine" (216). His daughter's insistence on marrying Kehinde is not welcomed, because the Yoruba "just give the father (of the bride) a bowl of drink and buy the bride a few lappas" (215). However, even the vagary of

the colonial multicultural system does not permit a man bent on carrying out an act of family redemption to arm himself with a cutlass and invade another man's compound, and particularly not a man with Nnaife's characterological attitude.

Her husband's attitude further compounds Nnu Ego's growing misery. Having spent most of her youth serving her husband and children, now old, she lives alone in the village, uncared for. Even when her husband is later released from jail after serving only three months, rather than stay with her, he decides to live with his young wife, Okpo. Expectedly, Nnu Ego begins to examine her whole life:

Nnu Ego ... allowed herself to wonder where it was she had gone wrong. She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman. She had had children, nine in all, and luckily seven were alive, much more than many women of that period could boast off ... (She was surprised to discover that) a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? (219)

This tardy epiphany puts Nnu Ego on the road towards psychotic depression. For a woman who is only interested in "building up her joys as a mother" (224), solely focusing on this to the detriment of other aspects of her life, she suddenly comes to the realization that being a mother is not enough. And it is indeed too late for her to commence "oiling the wheels" of friendship she never developed when she was young. Her lamentations become a sort of epitaph:

Nnu Ego told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship; but she had never had the time ... she had shied away from friendship, telling herself she did not need any friends, she had enough in her family. But had she been right? ... many of the Ibiza people in general, blamed her for bringing up her children badly. There was Oshia in America, not caring at all, and though Adim was keen on having a footstool in Nigeria Nnu Ego suspected that he too would prefer to leave his family and go abroad.... (219)

Abandoned by her husband and children, the two sets of people she slaved for all her life, Nnu Ego's estrangement becomes total, affected by the "empty nest syndrome." It becomes apparent that the title is the author's ironical sneering at the reverence given to motherhood at the expense of sisterhood. While it is possible to cultivate both – motherhood and sisterhood – sometimes cultivating motherhood could be a given. For a woman who is barren, cultivating other women's friendship would provide long lasting relationships that thrive on togetherness, cooperative camaraderie, and often times, pecuniary welfarism.

The textual life of Nnu Ego appropriately thematizes most of the feminist concerns of the author, Buchi Emecheta. She not only demystifies the traditionalist construct that being a mother ought to fulfill a woman's personal yearnings, she also deconstructs the mothering process and presents it as a source of oppression, alienation, and exploitation. If the duty of a woman as a mother supersedes other duties, this presupposes that both the husband and the children recognize their complementary responsibilities. When these complementary aspects are not forthcoming, the position of a mother becomes precarious. If in marriage there are "inhibitions and restrictions

(which) stultify women's self-realization" (Adebayo 45), the experience of Nnu Ego proves that, indeed, what obscures a woman's self-identity is her readiness to subordinate herself to satisfy others (be it her husband or children) at whatever cost. Except a woman is prepared to challenge the socio-cultural prescriptions for womanhood/motherhood which are oppressive in temper, the exploitation will continue. While for some women it is either divorce or widowhood that begets the much needed epiphany, tragically for Nnu Ego the realization comes late, as it is a transformation in the postcolonial socio-cultural prescriptions for the family which has reduced the interdependence that bonded all family members by emphasizing their responsibilities to one another. And this change, which continues to perplex her till the end, is a constant feature in feminist fiction in Africa. In the novels of Sefi Atta, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and others, the penchant of female writers to show the "true consciousness ... through crisis situations" (Aduke 47) is prevalent.

Contrastively, Adaku, Nnaife's younger wife does not wait for circumstances to become worse before she abandons her marriage. While in a traditional setting she would have been an object of derision and shame, it is Nnu Ego who ultimately "pays" for her marital and maternal dedication and trust in traditional values of motherhood. When Adaku says Nnu Ego "believes in the tradition" (218), it is not an expression meant to praise her, but a kind of sarcasm meaning "I told you, didn't I?" Whereas Adaku has learnt to combine cultivating female companionship with a quest for individual fulfillment, Nnu Ego does not share similar emancipatory commitment. Whereas Adaku quickly finds it expedient to channel her marital frustrations into a "feminist" drive for combating the patriarchal hegemony, Nnu Ego perpetually strives to live with her marital frustrations and personal grievances. Hence, tragically, she drowns in the overwhelming contradictions rising from her devotion to cultural gender values made anachronistic by colonization. Ultimately, she comes to discern "that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty" (137).

### **Conclusion**

Emecheta's textual strategy is to use the experiences of the central characters to explore the nodal specificity of the gender dialectic and advocate her own personal axiology. The three major characters, Nnu Ego, Adaku, and Nnaife, are metaphoric avatars for specific constructs. Nnu Ego, industrious, unassumingly subservient, symbolizes the traditional woman caught in the vagaries of a hybrid world. Loath to cultivate the friendship of other women and steeped in living by the traditional precepts of gender behavior, she realizes tragically too late, that being a mother is not enough, that marriage and motherhood engender personal restrictions particularly when the woman is married to a man who is not conscious of his paternal obligations. Her death at the end of the novel underscores the inevitable calamity that attends loss of identity and inability to achieve self-realization. Adaku represents a generation of females who refuse to be pegged down by marriage and motherhood. Such females are not bound by any belief in traditional gender prescriptions for women, in the fallacy of marriage and motherhood providing unparalleled happiness and security. Such women are conscious of the available opportunities in a (post)colonial culture and are ready to utilize all avenues to achieve self-realization. Nnaife, their husband, like most male characters strewn across the terrain of feminist fiction in Africa, is constructed as an opportunist who is prepared to live a life of privileged masculinity without taking on the attendant responsibilities.

What we have then in *The Joys of Motherhood* is an author's (con)textual demystification and decomplexification of gender constructs in a manner that definitely problematizes the gender situation and simultaneously indicates a new directionality for the African woman. Would her life have turned out differently if Nnu Ego had cultivated friendship with other women? Would she have had better marital experience if Nnaife had lived up to his responsibilities? Would she have achieved some comfort if she had combined her search for self-realization with a quest for communal regard? These are the questions that together form the core of the author's ironic theoretical (con)textualization of the motherhood praxis in Africa.

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# To Speak or Not to Speak: The Silence and the Fear of Social Alienation in Arnold Wesker's *Annie Wobbler*

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## Abstract

In the hierarchized space of society, individuals are always expected to fit in and perform certain roles in order to be accepted and accommodated into it. Any questioning of the dominant ideology and deviation from the socially prescribed rules immediately brings the deviant individual under a social scanner, and every measure is taken to eliminate or silence such disruptive presence. Patriarchy, being a supremacist discourse, attempts to promote and perpetuate its hold on society as much through promoting narratives of male superiority and worthiness as through constructing a false discourse of female inferiority, ineligibility and lack. Needless to say, the most significant impact of this manipulated knowledge can be seen in the historical expulsion of women from the territories of speech and free expression. This paper re-reads the British playwright Arnold Wesker's 1981 play *Annie Wobbler* with a view to highlighting how the female protagonist of the play breaks free from the shackles of a "normative" existence and reclaims her identity by voicing forth the silenced tales of her forbidden and potentially disruptive experiences. I have also tried to underline the various hazards of such a deviant act and how the female protagonist ultimately succeeds in subverting the patriarchal narratives of normalcy and respectability.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Silence, Society, Speech, Tale, Telling

"In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle."

— Ursula K. LeGuin

Women's access to speech and self-expression has always been a matter of intense controversy in all patriarchal establishments. In fact, it is the strong patriarchal bias regarding women's putative "lack" of skills and merits as opposed to the immeasurably superior qualities and achievements of the males which has at once excluded women from the exclusively "male" domain of free expression and confined them inside the four walls of the house so as to eliminate any/all possibilities of resistance or subversion. Coming out of this silenced existence and telling her stories, therefore, is never an easy task for a woman; for the very act of such a telling is always fraught with the difficulties of finding a voice, articulating the long forbidden and, perhaps, forgotten narratives, and finally reaching out to an audience who can listen to, understand and empathize with her, and also, can carry the tale forward.

The image of the female as a passive, silenced, and useful commodity created and preserved for male comfort and concupiscence deeply troubled Arnold Wesker. A self-confessed observer of the "disharmony of something missing" in women's lives, Wesker always tried to bring on stage strong, resilient women who dare to tell their tales and try to reach out to an audience that can both understand the tale and empathize with the teller (xv). In this paper, I shall try to re-read Wesker's play *Annie Wobbler* (1981) with a view to highlighting the process and problems of a

woman's reclamation of her voice. I shall also try to show how the three alter egos of the female protagonist – the college girl Anna, the housemaid Annie Wobbler, and the middle-aged writer Annabella Wharton – struggle to overcome the silenced existence which their family and society had thrust upon them, and ultimately succeed in voicing the thousand muted cries that were so long lying buried in their respective pasts.

*Annie Wobbler* was first broadcast under the title *Annie, Anna, Annabella* in German on February 3, 1983, by Sddeutscher Rundfunk. The English premier of the play took place a few months later on July 5, 1983 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio with the playwright himself as the director. This one-woman play seeks to tell the tale of the eponymous heroine's life through her own telling. Annie Wobbler, thus, appears in the play not only as the teller and the tale but also as the telling through which she is analeptically born into the plot.

The play *Annie Wobbler* is divided into three distinct parts: each presenting the female protagonist presumably as a new character that Glenda Leeming has called, “three wobbly egos defiantly asserting themselves” (44). The play begins in the spring of 1939. We are introduced to the aged “part time cleaning woman” Annie Wobbler, in all black and green with an old hat concealing her bald head. The second part of the play presents Anna (no mention of her surname) as a witty and sophisticated college girl in “black underwear, black stockings and suspender belts” with a mass of “flaming red hair” on her head, preparing for her first date (*AW* 15-16). The third and final section of the play depicts the middle-aged Annabella Wharton, a celebrated novelist, elegantly dressed, rehearsing with herself before an interview (*AW* 24).

Regarding the portrayal of these characters, Reade W. Dornan has pointed out that “Wesker recognizes something of himself in every phase of *Annie Wobbler*” – the “patient and generous” Annie, the “energetic and passionate” Anna and the writer Annabella who “hates going through the motions of answering obvious and repetitive questions” (127). So, we may safely say that it is something of the playwright as teller that rubs off onto these women as tellers; for, as Dornan has herself informed the author in an email, “a number of his [Wesker's] women characters were probably not based on women he knew (although some certainly were) but were thinly veiled versions of himself” (Personal Email).

In the first part of the play, Annie is seen busy scrubbing the kitchen and talking almost incessantly to her “Madam” and to God (*AW* 3). While this may easily be interpreted as a successful attempt to reach out to the society as represented by the Madam (the aristocratic authority) standing right “offstage” and God (the religious authority) residing in a “crevice of the ceiling,” the playwright's observation of “who are not there” immediately undercuts any such presumption (*AW* 3). Annie begins her telling with a reference to what she has often been told:

Annie: They tell me I smell. I don't smell nothing madam. But then no one don't know nothing about themselves, do they? Lessun they look in a mirror. [*Idea*] I'll look in one, shall I? Got one here. [*Rummages among her numerous skirts*]

Somewhere.

[*Withdraws a chipped handbag mirror*].

Long time since I looked in a mirror. Don't tell you much, 'cept you're growing old. That's all I see. I see this face but I don't know anything about it, 'cept it's growing old. (*AW* 4)

That society accuses the “part time cleaning woman” Annie of foul smell is more than significant; for not only does it hint at the persistent view of the menial worker as foul and dirty (something to be avoided or abhorred) but also betray an attempt to conceal the importance of that cleaning woman who, in spite of her dirtiness and foul smell, cleans and sanitizes that categorizing and censoring society.

Annie's bold rejoinder “I don't smell nothing madam” contains her strong rejection of the societal judgement (“smelly”) heaped on her consciousness as well as a prologue to her telling against such (in)justices. Her comment, “no one don't know nothing about themselves, do they? Lessun [unless] they look in a mirror” opens up another interpretative possibility. That only a mirror can reveal the truth about a person's smells (the distinctive enveloping or characterizing quality of an individual) is ironic; for not only does a mirror reflect the reality but it may refract or contort it as well. Annie's subsequent act of taking up a mirror to look at her “self” here becomes doubly instructive. On the one hand, it indicates her desire to look at “herself” for inspection and embellishment. On the other hand, it may also signify an attempt at looking at her “self” for analysis and evaluation. In fact, looking at one's own self through the medium of a mirror not only helps the individual visualize what he/she is but also enables him/her to detach his/her own self from the self as projected on the surface of the mirror so as to effect a proper assessment of the self as “image” and the self as “reality.”

That Annie finds “nothing” in her reflection on the mirror except “it's growing old” is as much due to the fact that there is a visible mark of time on the mirrored face that happens to belong to her as it is because there is “nothing” to look at – time has robbed her of everything: her faith, beauty, vitality, youth, happiness, and her potential. Annie now can only exist as an old hag, a part-time maid for cleaning and scrubbing others' houses of dirt and spoil but can never have or wish to have a house of her own.

Soon Annie shifts her attention from her horrifying self-reality to wish a very “good morning” to her mirrored image:

Annie: “Mornin', Annie Wobbler,” I say, “mornin'.” Me talking to myself that is. . . . Funny feelings looking at yourself and not knowing what you see. So, I don't do it much. Old! What did I do to deserve that? Don't understand nothing, me. (Pause) I don't smell. (Sniffs) I mean that's not a smell, madam, that's me. (*AW* 4)

Annie's “talking” to herself is as much directed at her “self” as it is meant for the two society-supplements – Madam and God. That Annie can hardly recognize her mirror image points to her inability to correlate between her self-reality and self- image for, placed under the dazzling lights of societal gaze, as symbolized by the offstage Madam and the omniscient God, the mirror instead of reflecting the oppressed female only refracts her image as per norm and expectations with the result that it can only provoke laughter and ridicule among the spectators.

That Annie “does not do it” (looking in the mirror) very often at once highlights her refusal to submit her body to the societal gaze as an object of its inspection or ridicule as it hints at her rejection of the very institution of society as a judging/punishing authority. Her claim, “I don’t smell,” as a natural corollary to this rejection, embodies Annie’s sharp repudiation of the initial judgment “They tell me I smell.” Her following statement, “I mean that’s not a smell, madam, that’s me,” then, is Annie’s proud proclamation of her self-identity instead of a perceived sense and then, therefore, a misconstrued sensory response.

The next time Annie speaks, she tells the audience – both the “intra” and the “extra”-textual ones – about the magnanimity of her offstage Madam:

Annie: (*To God*) Madam said I could help myself. (*To Madam*) You’re very kind, madam. (*To God*) “I trust you, Annie,” she said. ... She tell me “We’ll give you sixpence or some bread and tea. Whichever’s around.” Fair enough. (*AW* 5-6)

Quite significantly, such wholesome praise is occasioned not so much by the Madam’s benevolence as by Annie’s professional compulsion of pleasing her employer if not with labor then at least with language. The mere reference to the word “kind” evokes in Annie’s mind a clear picture of her own past. In a virtual retelling of her life story, she now describes a day when a policeman asked her about her family:

Annie: I think my father was a Frenchy. Mother, father, sisters, brothers. I had ’em all. Dead and gone. ’Cept this sister. Now she had money. Don’t know where from – used to think some of it should have come my way – she never helped me is all I know. ... All I know is she ’ad a baby so I couldn’t stay with her and that was that! (*AW* 8)

This is a highly significant moment in Annie Wobbler’s life when the teller in her is finally able to tell her tales. Her passionate retelling of her own story breaks the shackles of silence and suppression, and evokes memories which are potentially disturbing as much for herself as for any sensitive audience.

Annie’s tale concerns a saga of loss – her expulsion from her own house, her years of suffering and servitude, and most importantly, the rejection of her by the entire society. Unfortunately, this remembrance of things past cannot reach the ears of an empathetic audience; for both the members of Annie’s audience – the Madam and God – are either absent or impassive. That the tale fails to reach out to the audience is due not only to the fact that it does not impress the Madam and God but also because it fails to interest them; for coming as they do from the upper strata of society – one the employer and the other the almighty – they can hardly have any interest in the tale of an old servant’s life. While this absence of the audience or their refusal to respond to Annie’s tale invalidates the telling, it also frustrates the teller.

It is this ineffectuality of the age old “part time cleaning woman” Annie to impress her audience with the sad account of her life that ultimately leads to her replacement as a teller in the second part of the play with the young and attractive Anna who is still in her twenties and in search

of both an audience and a lover-admirer. Unlike the old Annie who could only offer labor and praise to please the society in order to make it listen to her voice, Anna with her raw beauty and voluptuous body can easily cajole society into listening to her tales.

The second part of the play captures Anna standing before a full size mirror putting make up on her face and chalking out plans to win over her date:

Anna: What is there about you?

...

What is there about you?

It can't be your degree in French because he's got one in classics. It must be your breasts.

[*She pulls down straps, saucily, and ambles with sedate dignity back and forth*]

"She walks in beauty, like the night ..." [*Halts, deflates*] And it would need to be night.

What is there about you? (*AW* 16)

Though a young and educated woman, Anna's repetitive query "What is there about you?" reminds one of Annie's looking into the mirror to find out what is so "smelly" about her. Much like Annie, Anna's target audience too is not so much her self as mirrored as it is society at large. But, where Annie's glance at the mirror is potentially self-deprecating, Anna's gaze is predominantly quizzical. Standing before the glassy surface of the mirror, the image that Anna scrutinizes is more the reflection of Anna as the patriarchal society wants her to be – feminine, seductive, and accessible (even if not easily), than Anna as she essentially is – commodified, vulnerable and ephemeral. As Mel Gussow so rightly points out:

The second, modern Anna is not yet an emancipated woman, forced to submerge her Cambridge education in order to play the subordinate role demanded by men. Torn by an apparently contradictory existence, she says, philosophically, that she has "brains and black underwear," but, sadly, it is the latter that becomes her mark of identity. (par. 4)

Anna's conviction that it must be her "breasts" which have to attract her boyfriend and her subsequent act of pulling down the straps of her brassier to let the mirror reflect her bosom not only hints at her deliberate act of offering her body as an object of male concupiscence but also points to her attempts at using the same body to fulfill her lacks and needs. In this context, we may profitably refer to Kamala Das's poem "The Looking Glass" for a similar proposition:

... Gift him all,  
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your  
Endless female hungers. (25)

Significantly, Anna desires to use her female body as a tool to manipulate patriarchy, and her apparently unconditional surrender to the hegemonic male becomes her means for constructing a

female counter-hegemony. It at once underlines the female's potentially subversive ploy of paying the paternalistic culture back in its own coin and marks that watershed in a silenced woman's history when she finally gains control over her body and being, and thereby becomes able to deal with the patriarchal society on her own terms. Besides, it also points to Anna's desperate attempts at making the society listen to her stories – an endeavor in which the previous teller Annie had failed (*AW* 16).

Anna is soon to realize that no matter how beautiful or attractive she may look, her boyfriend with his characteristic superiority complex and studied aversion for female intelligence will never let her tell her mind, and instead, her body will become the locus of his attention and activity. Anna is thus compelled to rethink her decision of going to the date or change her plans to safeguard both her telling and telling rights. The intelligent woman in Anna easily sees through the grave drawbacks in her date who is at once a pedantic and a bore, and yet she decides to go with him because:

Anna: ... he's your [Anna's] first date since becoming a BA first-class honours and your cultural references shine like diamonds and you've broken the stranglehold of those century-old genes of crass ineptitude and supplication and you've unknown muscles to flex and a lot of intimidating to make up for and he's just the size and texture your teeth need sharpening upon. (*AW* 23)

Needless to say, Anna's stated ability of having broken "the stranglehold of those century-old genes of crass ineptitude and supplication" places her on a level with women pioneers like Henrik Ibsen's Nora and Rebecca West who can "flex" (wield) "muscles" (powers) that are "unknown" to society as well as "make up" for "a lot of intimidating."

If in her first avatar as Annie, the Wesker Woman has tried to please the society by serving it with physical labor and praise, then, as Anna, she has offered her body to cajole it. However, the patriarchal society refuses to pay any attention to the tales of these women in either case. Whereas the Annie of the first section ultimately finds herself alone in the kitchen with neither the Madam nor God looking at her or listening to her stories, and therefore has to become silent, Anna of the second part herself understands the patriarchy's unwillingness to listen and thereby supplements her telling through other means or at any rate camouflages the same. Thus, failing in both of her endeavors to find an audience in the society, the Wesker Woman now decides to resume her search for a last time and takes up the persona of the middle-aged novelist Annabella Wharton.

Annabella Wharton is a forty year old celebrated novelist whose fourth novel has become "a phenomenal success" (*AW* 24). The play captures her preparing for an interview, listening to some pre-recorded questions, and trying to formulate appropriate answers for them:

Voice-Over: Miss Wharton, this is your fourth novel and unlike others it's a phenomenal success. Installments in the *Sunday Times*, translated into fourteen languages, the film rights sold for a quarter of a million dollars, the subject of controversy in the heavyweight literary journals. Annabella Wharton, what does it feel like being Annabella Wharton today? (*AW* 25)

Having been thwarted in all her attempts at reaching out to an empathetic audience, the Wesker Woman here, quite interestingly, takes up the persona of a writer – the archetypal storyteller. Such a guise is obviously a liberating one; for not only does it liberate Annabella from a stifling silence, but also provides her with an agency to tell her stories – writing. Moreover, the fact that she has been hugely read fulfils the promise of an audience through the presence of the readers. However, the mere fact that even after writing such a successful novel, Annabella is so anxious for the interview and is actually trying to frame the “right” answers to project herself in the right light shows that something is still left unsaid, that Annabella still has a story to tell. The entire third section of the play *Annie Wobbler* comprises different versions of Annabella’s replies to a single set question beginning with “what does it feel like being Annabella Wharton today?” And her efforts to find the right answers also hints at the inadequacy of language as a medium of communication. Her provisional answers during the entire process of the revision construct self-conflicting realities:

Voice-Over: Am I right in thinking you’ve been married once?

Annabella: Good Lor, no! Couldn’t conceive of a man who’d want to share my scatty life.  
(*AW* 30)

Annabella: Three times, actually. ... (*AW* 38)

Annabella: Once! To a man who was drawn by the heat but left ... (*AW* 44)

And again:

Voice-Over: Do you have any children?

Annabella: I don’t think so. (*AW* 31)

Annabella: At least four. (*AW* 38)

Annabella: A son. (*AW* 44)

These widely differing statements not only signal Annabella’s utter inarticulateness as a teller, but also indicate that point in her own life when the divide between her private and public selves – Annabella Wharton the novelist and Annabella Wharton the individual – collapse, when the novelist in her merges completely with the person, and her private life becomes an object of revisions and alternative versions.

The stories that Annabella Wharton tells about herself come in the form of some kind stream of consciousness writing that breaks all the boundaries of linguistic probability. Her near obsessive references to Dr. Johnson and other literary artists may foreground an endeavor to sound intellectual and erudite, while her inability to remember their sayings reflects her lack of sound literary knowledge.

The penultimate recorded question initially yields inconsistent answers. However, near the end of the play, it is able to incite the Wesker Woman to express in and through the medium of telling the real cause of her worries:

Voice-Over: You have no fears?

Annabella: Oh good Lor. Yes. Everything frightens me. The morning, the doorbell, the telephone, interviewers, fish-on-the-bone, the post, Doctor Johnson ... (*AW* 31)

Annabella: Not now. None! (*AW* 38)

Annabella: Of being afflicted with a sense of futility. Of violence and certitudes. Of failing my son. Of being disliked ... mediocre. (*Pause*) Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up, don't you think? (*AW* 44)

That Annabella is scared of “the morning, the doorbell, the telephone, interviewers” points to her fears of the unknown. Her fear of “being afflicted with a sense of futility” is actually another projection of her fear of alienation – of “failing” her son, of being disliked, and left alone.

Finally, Annabella's statement, “Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up,” points out for one last time her intuitive understanding of a Hamlet-like suicidal tendency. The question that ends both the preparations for the interview and the play, “Do you feel you have an endless flow of materials?” in all of the revisions yield a similar non-answer (*AW* 31-32, 44); for everything that Annabella had to say have already come to an end with her self-annihilating statement, “Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up, don't you think? (*AW* 44).

According to Morris Ginsberg, society takes its origin from the collaborative effort of individuals who are “united by those relations or modes of behaviour which, unite them or mark them off from others who do not enter into these relations or who differ from them in behavior” (40). It is, therefore, a hierarchical organization wherein individuals not only share common cultural backgrounds or beliefs but also visualize themselves both completely and compulsorily as a single unified and distinctive entity. Needless to say, such an identification with a singular value system is both disturbing and dangerous. As Robert Morrison MacIver and Charles Hunt Page have rightly said, “society is a system of usages and procedures of authority and mutual aid of many groupings and divisions of control of human behaviour and liberties” (28-29). This is why society is often perceived to be a highly constrictive framework of predetermined rules and norms to which an individual must conform in order to be accommodated into its zone of safety and security. As seen in *Annie Wobbler*, individuals may raise the banner of protest or the voice of demands, but their actions and utterances often go unnoticed, unheard, and even unacknowledged in our patriarchal society. However, as Ernest Hemingway has taught us, “But man is not made for defeat. ... A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (89). The failure of the family or of the society to meet the demands of an adequate audience of course shatters and bloodies the Wesker Woman. But the show, as they say, must go on. So, tales are to be told not only to bury the past of shame, silence, and pain but also to alert others of the pitfalls and tree stumps lying ahead. And it is this urge and compulsion to break the silence that ultimately saves Wesker's *Annie Wobbler* from crumbling into a series of erasures. Every time Annie breaks down under the tremendous pressure of the society she belongs to and her story falls apart into myriad fragments, every time she is re-born with a new tale as another Anna or Annabella, she shows, just like a female Code Hero, “what a [wo]man can do and what a [wo]man endures” (55).

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*Language and Applied Linguistics*

# Students' Practiced Language Policies: A Linguistic Ethnographic Study

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## Abstract

Language policy research has traditionally focused on macro-level policies while language practices have been studied vis-à-vis macro policies to ascertain the success or failure of the policies. Policy as practice has only recently been conceptualized. This new strand of research argues that the real language policy of a community or institution resides in its practice. Language-in-education policies have traditionally advocated keeping learners' first language separate from the target language fearing cross-contamination and hoping that this makes learning more effective. This "two solitudes" approach largely ignores what really happens in the classroom. Ethnographic research, however, shows that learners switch codes fluidly. The term "translanguaging" has been coined to describe such usual and normal practice of bilingualism without diglossic functional separation. Drawing upon the theories of practiced language policy and translanguaging, and adopting linguistic ethnography as method, I explored the "implicit and deducible" rules of language preference, that is, the practiced language policies of students in two language classes at the University of Dhaka. The findings show that students orient to a practiced language policy in which translanguaging is the norm and boundaries between languages become permeable.

**Keywords:** Practiced language policy, Translanguaging, Bilingualism, Linguistic ethnography

Research on language policy and language-in-education policy in Bangladesh and elsewhere has traditionally focused on macro-level policies and their implementation. Language practices have usually been studied vis-à-vis policies to understand the success or failure of the latter. As such, language practices have been seen as distinct from policy, which is usually thought to exist only at the macro level. Policy as practice has only recently been conceptualized. This new strand of research builds on Spolsky's argument that language policy comprises three interrelated elements: language management, language beliefs, and language practices (Spolsky, 2004). Language management, also called declared language policy (Shohamy, 2006, p. 68), refers to the formulation and proclamation of an overt policy, usually in the form of a formal document about language use (Spolsky, 2004). Language beliefs, also called "perceived language policy" (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012, p. 215), are what people think should be done while language practices are what people actually do.

Language policy (LP) research, however, has not given much importance to policy as practice. It is mainly concerned with declared language policies. This notion of policy was popular with the scholars who saw language policy as "solutions to language problems" (Fishman, 1974, p. 79) in the postcolonial states. A more recent approach, dubbed as perceived language policy (Shohamy, 2006, p. 68), views policy as a set of beliefs and ideologies, that is, what people think should be done (Spolsky, 2004). It demonstrates that language policies are ideological processes which help promote and maintain unequal power relationships between majority and minority language groups (Tollefson, 2006).

The most recent approach to language policy emphasizes what really happens in people's real language practices. Termed as "practiced language policy" (Bonacina, 2010; Bonacina-Pugh, 2012), this approach highlights that a policy can be found within language practices. Language policy is seen as an interconnected process of proclamations, beliefs, and practices (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012). This conceptualization incorporates practice as a core component of policy, for the "real language policy" of a community resides in "what people actually do" (Spolsky, 2004, p. 14). A practiced language policy consists of the implicit and deducible rules of language preference which people orient to in communication (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012).

Language-in-education policies (LIEP) have traditionally advocated keeping learners' first language separate from the target language fearing cross-contamination and hoping that this makes learning easier. This "two solitudes" approach (Cummins, 2005, p. 588) has been dominant in the policy discussions. This stance largely ignores learner preferences and voices. Ethnographic research in real classrooms, however, shows that learners switch codes flexibly. The term "translanguaging" (García, 2007) has been used to describe such usual and normal practice of bilingualism without the functional separation in language use. Translanguaging has been found to be used by teachers and students in the classroom for identity performance and lesson accomplishment (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

Research on practiced language policies in the context of Bangladeshi tertiary education is very rare or almost non-existent. Although a number of scholars have studied language policy and language-in-education policy in Bangladesh (e.g., Hamid & Erling, 2016; Hamid, 2009; Rahman, 2010; Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014), they have mostly focused on declared and perceived language policies. The present research addresses this gap in the literature. I look into the practiced language policies of students in two English language courses at the University of Dhaka. Personal experience and observation suggest that English language courses mainly have an English-only declared language policy.

The English-only declared language policy is evident from the curriculum policy, methodology and materials policy, and evaluation policy, which have been included by Baldauf and Kaplan (2005) among their seven key areas of policy for language-in-education planning. In all these areas the investigated courses follow an English-only declared language policy. However, research in the context of Bangladeshi higher education suggests that English-only policies are creating language-based discriminations and are affecting learners' classroom participation, power negotiation, and identity formation (Sultana, 2014). Moreover, bilingual instruction has been found to be more effective than monolingual instruction in helping adult learners learn English, at the same time being preferred by them (Akhter, 2018). In contrast with the language policy, students mostly hail from rural Bangladesh and evaluate their own English skills to be inadequate to cope with the curriculum at the university (Akhter, 2008). It could be argued, using Bourdieu's (1991) terms, that the background of the students often do not match with the dominant cultural capital.

Given the conflict between the declared language policy and students' cultural capital, the question arises "What language policy do the students in the English language classes at the University of Dhaka adopt?" More specifically, "Do they follow an English-only or a bilingual language policy?"

I seek answers to such questions adopting a qualitative case study approach to research using linguistic ethnography as methodology. The main objective of this inquiry is to find out students' practiced language policies in the language classes at the University of Dhaka. In other words, my aim is to explore whether students in the English language classes translanguange or use only the first (L1) or the target language (TL).

### **Evolution of language policy research**

Language policy research emerged as a discipline in the 1960s. In the early days language policy used to be viewed as the “organised pursuit of solutions to language problems, typically at the national level” (Fishman, 1974, p. 79). Since then scholars have used the term to mean different things, resulting in an absence of consensus on the definition. There has been a terminology conundrum, too. Some scholars use the terms “language policy” and “language planning” interchangeably, often conjoined or hyphenated as language policy and planning or “language planning-policy” (Tollefson, 1991, p. 17) while others consider policy to subsume planning (e.g., Ricento, 2000). Cooper (1989), drawing upon Kloss (1969), offers a three-fold model of language policy in which status planning refers to the allocation of languages or language varieties to specified functions, corpus planning refers to the activities that bring changes in language form, and acquisition planning refers to the activities for language spread by increasing users. Spolsky (2008, p. 27) uses the term “language education policy” and “language-in-education policy” for the third category which is concerned with who should learn what language or language varieties. This approach to language policy, termed as the traditional approach (Ricento, 2006), views policy as a top-down process and focuses on the macro-level. Policy from this perspective is often a verbal or written statement in the form of a constitutional clause, law or a verbal or written declaration. That is why Ball (1993, p. 10) calls this approach to language policy “policy as text.”

Language practices from this perspective have usually been observed and interpreted in relation to the given macro policies to get an insight into the match or mismatch between policies and practices. An alternative to this formulation of language policy has been proposed by Spolsky (2004), who considers practices as one key component of policy. He argues that language policy consists of three interconnected elements: language management, language beliefs, and language practices. He defines management as “the formulation and proclamation of an explicit plan or policy, usually but not necessarily written in a formal document, about language use” (Spolsky, 2004, p. 11). Language beliefs are “what people think should be done” while language practices refer to “what people actually do” (2004, p. 14). Language management, he points out, often contradicts people's beliefs and practices. Language practices, which are the “observable behaviours and choices ... constitute a policy to the extent that they are regular and predictable” (Spolsky, 2007, p. 3). He argues that in order to understand the real language policy of a community, one needs to investigate what people actually do. Spolsky does not propose details of any methodology for studying policy found in practices although he does indicate that ethnography of speaking might be used for this purpose (Spolsky, 2007).

Since the 1980s, the traditional approach discussed above came under significant criticism. The main criticism against “policy as text” was that it viewed language policy as a politically and ideologically

neutral process (Tollefson, 1991; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996) that result in modernization and social mobility. A critical approach to language policy was developed since the 1980s, which Ball (1993, p.10) terms as “policy as discourse.” From this point of view, language policy is a set of beliefs and ideologies, in other words, “what people think should be done” (Spolsky, 2004, p. 14). This approach moves away from models of language policy, instead investigating the ideological processes and discourses of power and inequality that underlie language policies. Taking the notion of ideology from critical social theory, this approach to language policy holds that “all language policies are ideological, although the ideology may not be apparent or acknowledged by practitioners or theorists” (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996, p. 406). Bonacina-Pugh (2012) uses the term “perceived language policy” to refer to the conceptualization of language policy as discourse (p. 215).

Critical approaches to LP took an interest in studying language-in-education policies, seeking answers to questions such as “how do language policies in schools create inequalities among learners? How do policies marginalise some students while granting privilege to others? How do language policies in education help to create, sustain, or reduce political conflict among different ethnolinguistic groups?” (Tollefson, 2002, p. 3, 13-14). Most of the research from this perspective, however, investigated macro-discourse on the national or institutional level, rather than micro-discourse of actual practices.

Following Spolsky’s comprehensive framework for language policy discussed above, the most recent approach to language policy focuses not only on text and discourse but also real language practices. There have been a few significant studies in recent years, exploring what has been termed “practiced language policy” (Bonacina, 2010, Bonacina-Pugh, 2012; Papageorgiou, 2011). Highlighting the idea that a policy can be found within language practices and building on Spolsky (2004; 2007), Bonacina-Pugh (2012) offers a new conceptualization of language policy: “language policy is an interconnected process generated and negotiated through texts, discourses and practices” (p. 216). This conceptualization incorporates practice as a key component of policy based on the argument that the “real language policy” of a community resides in “what people actually do” (Spolsky, 2004, p. 14). A practiced language policy, Bonacina-Pugh (2012) argues, consists of the “implicit and deducible rules of language choice from which speakers draw upon in interaction” (p. 218). Studying practices can help discover the implicit rules that underlie interaction and thus make them explicit (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012).

Discovering the real language policy requires a methodology that looks into actual language interaction. While Spolsky put forward the idea that real language policy resides in practice, he did not detail any particular methodology for studying actual language use apart from indicating that ethnography of speaking may be useful. Bonacina (2010) and Bonacina-Pugh (2012) suggest the use of Conversation Analysis (CA) as a tool to study practiced language policies, arguing that Conversation Analysts describe “the interactional routines speakers engage into in talk-in-interaction” (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012, p. 218). These routines are organized in a conversation on a turn-by-turn basis. She uses CA tools such as sequential analysis of talk-in-interaction, membership categorization analysis, and deviant cases analysis to discover the practiced language policies of the

students of an induction classroom for newly-arrived immigrant children in France and concludes that “what influences language choice and alternation acts is the implicit knowledge of what is usually done” (Bonacina, 2010, p. 248).

While language policy has been traditionally studied from a sociolinguistic perspective, the new strand of policy research, that is, practiced language policies, has resulted in a convergence of research on LP and language education, code-switching, and translanguaging. Moving between languages in the language classroom has been usually viewed negatively, although there is little empirical evidence to show that monolingual classroom practices are actually superior in helping learners learn the target language (Cummins, 2008). There is “near consensus” in English language teaching discourse that use of the target language (TL) should be maximized (Turnbell & Arnett, 2002, p. 211). Empirical research, on the contrary, shows that first language (L1) *is* used in second language (L2) pedagogy and serves important communicative and learning purposes. Sampson (2012), for example, found that Spanish-speaking English learners in Colombia use code-switching in the L2 classroom for useful communicative purposes such as expressing equivalence, metalanguage, floor holding, reiterating, and socializing. García (2007, p. xiii) prefers the term “translanguaging” to code-switching to describe the normal practice of “bilingualism without diglossic functional separation.” Studying language practices in complementary schools in the UK from an ethnographic perspective, Creese and Blackledge (2010) found that teachers and students practice fluid bilingualism for identity performance and teaching-learning purposes. Participants in their study engaged in translanguaging, where “the boundaries between languages become permeable” and “overlapping of languages” rather than “separation of languages” was usual. (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p. 112).

However, studies of situated language use in the classroom as discussed above have not been abundant. Moreover, most of the studies that did explore language use *in situ* focus on the pedagogic uses of translanguaging. Looking into the underlying policies of practice – the “implicit and deducible rules of language choice” (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012, p. 218) – has been scarce in the literature. Building on the work of Spolsky (2004, 2007, 2008), Bonacina (2010), Bonacina-Pugh, (2012) on language policy, and the work of García (2007), and Creese and Blackledge (2010) on translanguaging, I explore the practiced language policies of the students in the language classrooms of two departments at the University of Dhaka.

## Methodology

I took a qualitative case study approach, adopting linguistic ethnography as methodology. Linguistic ethnography (LE) draws upon sociolinguistic and anthropological work on language and society, especially Hymes' (1972) work on ethnography of communication which offered a frame of reference for the analysis of language use in the context of the complex dynamics of social life. LE holds the view that language and social life are mutually shaping and that “close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in every day activity” (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 2). While ethnographers traditionally try to “get familiar with the strange,” LE researchers attempt to “get analytic distance on what's close at hand” (Rampton, 2007, p. 590). LE has more

connection with UK applied linguistics than anthropology and takes “language rather than culture as its principal point of analytic entry into the problems it seeks to address” (Creese, 2008, p. 234).

Linguistic ethnography seemed to be an appropriate methodology for this research for a number of reasons. First, it offered me the opportunity to look into what is close at hand in the setting of the University of Dhaka where I teach. Second, as I intended to explore policies of situated language use in the language classroom, ethnography seemed to be the most suitable method for collecting data. Third, linguistic ethnography combines tools from linguistics with ethnography. This was particularly useful because I mainly analyzed language practices in order to discover the implicit language policies.

The data was collected from language classes in two departments at the University of Dhaka through audio-recording of selected participants over two months. Students were doing a variety of language learning activities in the sessions in which they were recorded. Moreover, photographs were taken of students’ notebook pages containing language activities.

### **Students’ practiced language policies at the University of Dhaka**

The current research was conducted at the University of Dhaka where most departments offer basic English language courses to their undergraduate students from an understanding that most new students have “poor standards of English proficiency” (Chaudhury, 2013, p.32). Data was collected through linguistic ethnography of two groups of students. One group comprised 90 sophomore students of a department from the Faculty of Biological Sciences, which I call Group A. They were taking a 2-credit foundation English language course titled FC-2 – Functional and Communicative English. The other group consisted of 94 first year undergraduate students of a department from the Faculty of Science, which I call Group B. They were taking a 50-mark non-credit course called English Language. The classes for both courses commenced in January and ended in September. Each group of students had 30 hours of class time over the mentioned period. I was teaching both the courses as a part-time teacher for the two departments.

The lessons included activities on the four language skills while the main textbook used in the class was *Endeavour: An Introductory Language Coursebook* written by Sinha *et al.* (2014). Sixteen pairs of students were selected as key participants. They were audio-recorded over a two-month period. Besides, photos were taken of around 50 student notebooks containing language work. The audio-recorded activities included a variety of tasks: a comprehension check activity based on a reading passage, a task on paragraph writing, a vocabulary task, a grammar exercise, and a re-ordering task.

The recorded lesson quoted in Extract 1 below involved a comprehension check activity based on a passage on William Shakespeare’s biography. In this activity, learners were instructed to choose the most appropriate words or phrases from the passage to complete the given incomplete sentences. Students were asked to work in pairs, discuss and write the right answers in one notebook. Extract 1 shows that both the students – Dalia and Shukhi (all names have been changed to ensure anonymity of the participants) from Group A – used both English and Bangla throughout the activity – for different purposes. English was used both for communication and as a target of learning. Bangla was used for most of the procedural concerns and discussions about the task.

For example, Shukhi's started the communication in English but combined it with utterances in Bangla to discuss how much of the task had been done and what the answer for the next item was: "should we write it? Shakespeare's father (.) **likhchi** (.) mother inherited (.) **ki hobe seta bol**". In a later turn, Shukhi referred to the procedures of the given task where they were asked to write answers in one notebook after working together: "**ekjon likhbe** (.) **thik aache? ba tui lekh**". One use of the L1 figured prominently in the findings: Bangla was used to make sense of English. For instance, the two students were trying to complete the sentence "Shakespeare was baptized in ...." They had initially written a date as an answer, but later, through their discussion in Bangla, they realized that the preposition before the missing word or phrase is "in," therefore making a date unlikely as an answer. It is their discussion in Bangla through which they arrived at the right answer – "Shakespeare was baptized in Holy Trinity Church." The L1, it could be argued, was used as a process through which L2 is explored and learned. Students moved smoothly between the languages where both languages appeared normative. Neither Bangla nor English was viewed as deviant. Rather, both languages were deemed useful and students translanguaged throughout the conversation. In all the transcriptions, talk uttered in English is shown in plain font and talk uttered in Bangla is shown in bold font. Also, all original transcriptions are followed by free translation into English.

**Extract 1**

Plain font: talk uttered in English

Bold font: talk uttered in Bangla

Dalia: **ekhane ekta aache hocche**

Shukhi: Shakespeare was born on Stratford-upon-Avon probably on April 23 (.) **kintu ekhane family niye kichu bola nei (.) kothay baptize hoyeche seta bola aache.**

Dalia: hmm

Shukhi: should we write it? Shakespeare's father (.) **likhchi (.)** mother inherited (.) **ki hobe seta bol**

Dalia: **naam tou na (.) accha tahole (.1)**

Shukhi: **baptizeta thik aache (.) baptize ki chilo? 26 April 1564 (.) accha akhon kheyal kor (.) baptize je –**

Dalia: **ei! in lekha tou!**

Shukhi: **ha (.) in lekha (.) taile? ha (.)** in Trinity Church **hobe**

Dalia: **ekhane tou date dise**

Shukhi: Holy=

Dalia: =Holy Trinity Church

Shukhi: **ekjon likhbe (.) thik aache? ba tui lekh**

Dalia: **amra discuss kori**

Shukhi: Holy Trinity Church (.) **accha (.) tarporer ta? ki hobe seta bol**

Dalia: **There's one here which is**

Shukhi: Shakespeare was born on Stratford-upon-Avon probably on April 23 (.) **But nothing is mentioned here about his family (.) where he was baptized is mentioned**

Dalia: hmm

Shukhi: should we write it? Shakespeare's father (.) **have written that (.)** mother inherited (.) **tell me what to write here**

Dalia: **It's not about her name (.) well then (.1)**

Shukhi: **the one on baptize looks fine (.) what was there on baptize? 26 April 1564 (.) now notice here (.) about baptize –**

Dalia: **hey! it's in written here!**

Shukhi: **yes (.) in written here (.) then? yes (.) it will be** in Trinity Church

Dalia: **they have given date here**

Shukhi: Holy=

Dalia: =Holy Trinity Church

Shukhi: **one person should write (.) okay? or you write**

Dalia: **let's discuss**

Shukhi: Holy Trinity Church (.) **okay (.) the next one? tell me what that one will be**

Contrastive analysis might have been very unpopular with the proponents of language teaching methodologies since the late twentieth century, but the data in this study shows that learners do contrast lexical items in order to attain the accurate level of vocabulary knowledge. This can be seen in Extract 2:

**Extract 2**

Plain font: talk uttered in English

Bold font: talk uttered in Bangla

Shukla: I write it down and we (.) we discuss

Nisha: turn up **hocche** err (..) come (..) arrive (..) arrive

Shukla: **oh asha! (..) abirbhuto howa**

Nisha: **abirbhuto**

Shukla: appear? turn up (..) [appear?]

Nisha: [appear ]

Shukla: I write it down and we (.) we discuss

Nisha: turn up **is** err (..) come (..) arrive (..) arrive

Shukla: **oh coming! (..) appear**

Nisha: **appear**

Shukla: appear? turn up (..) [appear?]

Nisha: [appear ]

In the activity shown in Extract 2, Nisha and Shukla from Group A were discussing a vocabulary activity in which they were asked to find out the appropriate meanings of the given words using a dictionary and the reading passage from which the words were taken. The extract shows that Nisha and Shukla were trying to find the meaning of “turn up.” They got “come,” and “arrive” in the dictionary, but they also used Bangla equivalent “asha” and “abirbhuto howa” from a bilingual dictionary. Exploring all these words in English and Bangla, they finally decided to write “appear” as their preferred meaning for “turn up.” The expression “o asha!” in an animated tone by Shukla could be explained to demonstrate the student’s happiness in finding a Bangla equivalent of “turn up.” It appears that she understood the phrase better after knowing the Bangla equivalent. As in Extract 1, the use of Bangla was not seen as a deviation from what was normative. The students used both English and Bangla spontaneously while sticking to their ultimate goal of writing the meaning of the phrase in English. They explored the meanings in both the languages and by doing so they seemed to achieve a clear understanding of what the phrase means. The use of a bilingual practiced language policy through translanguaging is readily apparent.

A similar situation was found when the same activity was done by Orpa and Kaniz from Group B. Shown in Extract 3, the two students used Bangla to make sense of English. They successfully found out the correct form of English using both English and Bangla as resources. Kaniz used the Bangla word “prishthoposhokata” for the English “patronize” while being aware that she needed an English synonym or definition for the word: “prishthoposhokata (.) ei rokom ekta jantam (.) kintu kono synonym aache.”

**Extract 3**

Plain font: talk uttered in English

Bold font: talk uttered in Bangla

Orpa: attached to (.) attracted to (.) **holo eta** (..) **eta ki** patronize?

Kaniz: patronize (.) yes (..) **prishthoposhokata** (.) **ei rokom ekta jantam** (..) **kintu kono** synonym **aache**

Orpa: back **hobe** (.) **karon ekhane** patronize **bolte** –

Kaniz: **o o o** (.) okay (..) **paisish?**

Orpa: **paisi** (.) as per me (.) it's back up (..) support

Kaniz: support **tou oboshshoi!**

Orpa: support (.) back up **likhi**

Orpa: attached to (.) attracted to (.) **it's done** (..) **is this** patronize?

Kaniz: patronize (.) yes (..) **patronize** (.) **knew something like that** (..) **but there must be a** synonym

Orpa: **it should be** back (.) **because here** patronize **means** –

Kaniz: **oh oh oh** (.) okay (..) **got it?**

Orpa: **got it** (.) as per me (.) it's back up (..) support

Kaniz: support **definitely!**

Orpa: **let's write** support (.) back up

Similar to what Creese and Blackledge (2010) found in their study on the translanguaging practices in community schools in the UK, the students here used Bangla to discuss the activity and other procedural concerns. This could be found in Extract 3 where Orpa said, “attracted to (.) holo eta (..) eta ki patronize?” and “back hobe (.) karon ekhane patronize bolte –.” Boundaries between the two languages appeared permeable; that is, students moved between the languages flexibly. Doing that, they finally arrived at “support” and “back up” as the correct meaning of “patronize.” In both Extract 2 and Extract 3, students used Bangla as a process for achieving learning goals in English. It is important to note that the students did not deviate from their objective in the activity, which was writing down the meaning of the given words in English. In order to achieve that goal, they oriented to a practiced language policy in which they used both Bangla and English for communicative and learning purposes.

Extract 4 below shows two students, Shobuj and Nayan from Group B, completing a grammar activity. In this activity students were asked to change the given sentences into active or passive. They were also asked to notice any change of focus when they changed one into the other. They were additionally instructed to note which sentences could not be changed from active to passive or vice versa. The transcript shows that Shobuj and Nayan tried to transform the sentences using both Bangla and English. Using both the languages, they tried to find a good subject in their attempt to write a suitable active sentence. Even after transforming the sentence, Nayan said, “juddher por tara deshtake notun kore shajalo arki” apparently to reinforce the understanding of the meaning. As found in Extract 1, Shobuj and Nayan used Bangla to discuss the task and procedural concerns, as in “eta hocche it diye korte hobe (..) it (.3) na na it na (.2) last a ki it ache? ekta joto bhalo subject ana jay toto bhalo.”

**Extract 4**

Plain font: talk uttered in English

Bold font: talk uttered in Bangla

Shobuj: The city was (.) rebuilt after the civil war

(.8)

Nayan: **lekhsō? (.) city dewa ache (.) tai na::? (.) fole (.2) oi shohorer people jara (.) nogorbashi tader ki bola hoy? (.2) oiom ekta kichu (..) people dile hoy kintu common hoye gelo**

Shobuj: people (..) rebuilt after (..) people rebuilt the city (.) after=

Nayan: =rebuilt the city

Shobuj: people rebuilt the city after the civil war

Nayan: **juddher por tara deshtake notun kore shajalo arki**

Shobuj: the city was rebuilt (.) **eta** passive **aache**

Nayan: more (.) action was [deemed (.) deemed]

Shobuj: [demd (.) deemed] unnecessary (.)

Nayan: **eitaō tou** passive=

Shobuj: =**shobi** passive (..) more action was deemed unnecessary (.4) **korao jayna**

Nayan: **eta hocche it diye korte hobe (..) it (.3) na na it na (.2) last a ki it ache? ekta joto bhalo subject ana jay toto bhalo**

Shobuj: **accha ota baad de (.) pore**

Shobuj: The city was (.) rebuilt after the civil war

(.8)

Nayan: **written that? (.) city is the given subject (.) isn't it? (.) therefore (.2) the people of the city (.) what are people who live in the city called? (.2) something like that (..) we could write people but it would be common**

Shobuj: people (..) rebuilt after (..) people rebuilt the city (.) after=

Nayan: =rebuilt the city

Shobuj: people rebuilt the city after the civil war

Nayan: **It's like saying they rebuilt the country after the war**

Shobuj: the city was rebuilt (.) **it's in the** passive

Nayan: more (.) action was [deemed (.) deemed]

Shobuj: [demd (.) deemed] unnecessary (.)

Nayan: **this one is also** passive=

Shobuj: =**all are** passive (..) more action was deemed unnecessary (.4) **can't be transformed**

Nayan: **we have to do this with it (..) it (.3) no, no, not it (.2) does it have it at the end? the more effective subject you have, the better**

Shobuj: **okay, let's leave it alone for now (.) later**

Extract 5 shows two students Runi and Tani from Group B working on a writing task in which they were asked to put the given sentences in the correct order to produce a well organized paragraph. Similar to other extracts, discussion about the task and procedural concerns were done using Bangla.

**Extract 5**

Plain font: talk uttered in English

Bold font: talk uttered in Bangla

Runi: **eta first line**

Tani: **first a hobe hocche** in general Internet email is considerably more reliable than the postal service (.) in general (.) **eta first**=

Tani: =**eta first** (.) **dui number** (.) however during 1997(.) AOL and Microsoft Network (.) to name just the big players (.) had severe mail outages resulting in the delay (.) and in some cases loss of email

Runi: **accha (.) eta shobar last a deya bhalo hobe**=

Tani: =and many corporate mail servers have had growing pains too (.) experiencing holdups and the odd deletion.

Runi: **amar mone hocche eta**

-----  
 Runi: **this one will be the** first line

Tani: **first line will be** in general Internet email is considerably more reliable than the postal service (.) in general (.) **this one will be the** first=

Tani: =**this one will be the** first (.) number **two** (.) however during 1997(.) AOL and Microsoft Network (.) to name just the big players (.) had severe mail outages resulting in the delay (.) and in some cases loss of email

Runi: **well (.) this one should go last**=

Tani: =and many corporate mail servers have had growing pains too (.) experiencing holdups and the odd deletion.

Runi: **I think this one**

Out of the sixteen pairs of key participants, only two pairs used English exclusively. In the recorded conversations, there was hardly any evidence of what Amir and Musk (2014) called language policing, that is, “the mechanism deployed by the teacher or pupils to (re-)establish the normatively prescribed target language as the *medium of classroom interaction* in the English as a foreign language classroom”(p. 100). Students were found to use both L1 and L2 naturally and flexibly. In the recorded tasks there was no mention or policing of which language should be used. They seemed to use whichever language they deemed useful in the given context. Using L1 was not seen to be a deviation from what is normative. These findings are similar to those of Bonacina-Pugh (2012), who found that students oriented to a practiced language policy rather than a declared or a perceived language policy. The findings are also similar to those of Creese and Blackledge (2010), who reported that teachers and learners practiced fluid bilingual pedagogy adopting a translanguaging approach. The most important aspect of the translanguaging pattern was that students used L1 to make sense of L2. Students of both classes exhibited the same pattern of language policy: they oriented to a practiced language policy rather than follow the declared language policy as found in the syllabus, materials, and evaluation.

As part of the linguistic ethnographic research, photos were taken of around 50 student notebook pages containing a vocabulary task. Here too, learners were found to use both languages. For

doing the task most of the students used English-Bangla-English electronic dictionaries installed on their mobile phones while many also used English-Bangla dictionaries. Only a few of them used English-English electronic dictionaries. Figure 1 and 2 illustrate two students' completed vocabulary task which is the same task as mentioned in the discussion on Extract 2 and 3. Figure 1 shows a notebook page from Ratan (Group A), who wrote both English and Bangla meanings for most of the words. For example, for the word "conjecture" he wrote "guess," and "assumption" in English and "onuman" and "andaz" in Bangla. Again, for "notwithstanding" he wrote "jodio" and "tothapi" in Bangla, and "though" and "if" in English. In most cases he used the Bangla equivalent before the English synonym or definition.

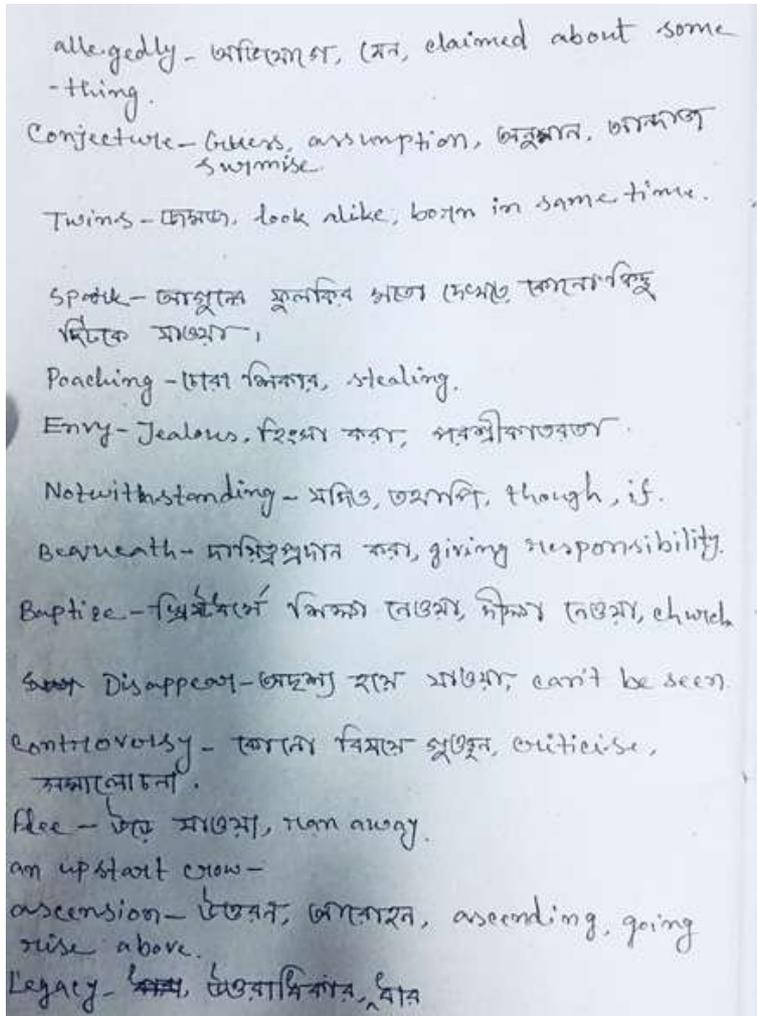


Figure 1: Students' completed vocabulary task\_1

Figure 2 shows Sumon's (Group B) work on the same vocabulary task discussed above. Unlike Ratan, Sumon wrote the meanings only in Bangla. For example, he wrote "somorthan kora" for

“patronize” and “jibonchoritkar” for “biographer.” Most other students’ notebooks containing the same vocabulary activity fall under one of these two patterns: students wrote the meanings either bilingually or the English word was written with one or more Bangla equivalents. Only a few students wrote the meanings monolingually in English. These findings echo the ones from the audio-recorded tasks: students adopted a bilingual practiced language policy.

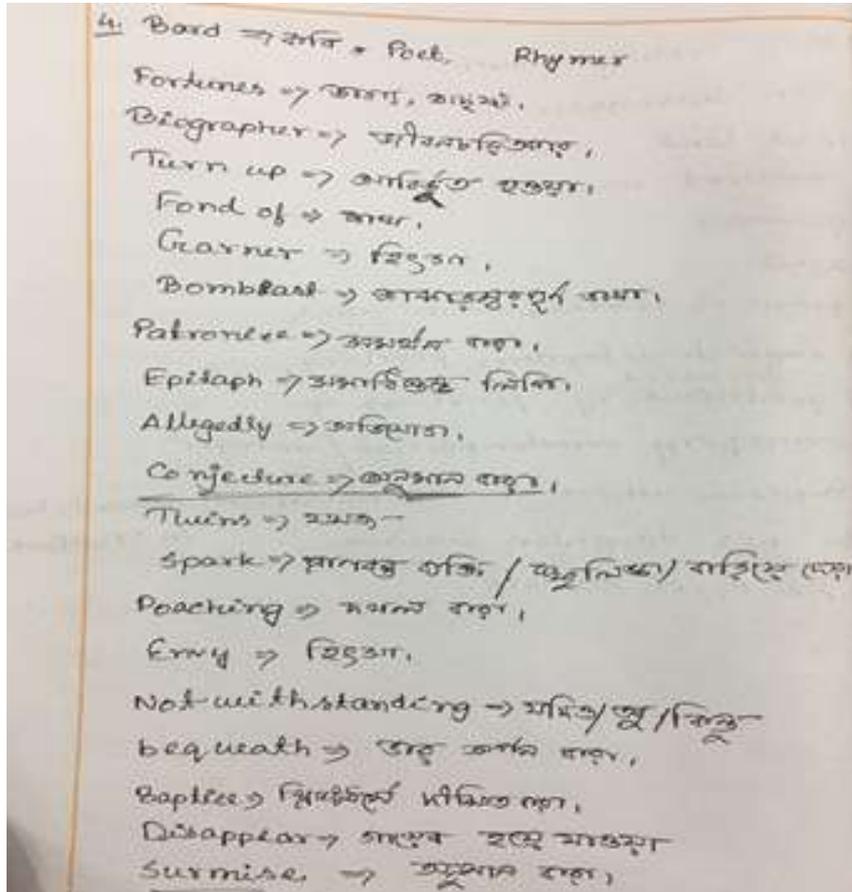


Figure 2: Students’ completed vocabulary task\_2

Contrary to the popular belief in English language teaching that the use of L1 hinders L2 learning, students’ bilingual practices in this study did not seem to hinder learning of the target language items. Using both English and Bangla, they achieved the language learning goals – be it learning new words or forms, or comprehension of the reading passage.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that language policy research traditionally focused on declared and perceived language policies. Building on Spolsky’s (2004, p. 14) stance that “real language policy” of a society can be found in “what people actually do,” I explored the de facto language policies of students in two language classes at the University of Dhaka. Spolsky opines that language

practices, “constitute a policy to the extent that they are regular and predictable” (2007, p. 3). In the linguistic ethnographic research, I attempted a close analysis of students’ language choices to find out whether there is a regular and predictable pattern in their language choices. The findings show that students use both Bangla and English in their attempt to learn English. They go back and forth between languages flexibly; in other words, students adopt a translanguaging approach for communication and learning. They fluidly switch between languages and use whichever language they deem useful in the given context. Neither L1, nor L2 is seen as a deviation from the norm. Students orient to a practiced language policy in which L1 has an important role to play in the L2 classroom. For example, students regularly use Bangla to make sense of English words and constructions. They use Bangla as a process to find the appropriate English terms. They also use Bangla to discuss the task and deal with procedural concerns. Based on these findings, one could argue quoting Cook (2001) that while “no one will quarrel with providing models of real language use for the students ... (this is) not necessarily incompatible with L1 use in the classroom” (p. 409). The translanguaging patterns in this study indicate that students make use of both L1 and L2 for communicative purposes and for achieving the L2 learning goals.

Learner voices are often unheard in the language-in-education policy research. Similarly, in the context of Bangladeshi tertiary education, students’ preferences are rarely considered while deciding on curriculum, syllabus, materials, and classroom pedagogy. By exploring learners’ practiced language policies, this study attempts to address this gap in teaching and research. However, this study was small scale; further research is necessary to ascertain conclusively the de facto language policies of students in Bangladeshi L2 classrooms.

### ***Transcription conventions***

These transcription conventions are adapted from Jefferson (2004).

- ? A question mark indicates a rising tone which may (or may not) indicate a question.
- ! An exclamation mark indicates an animated tone, not necessarily an exclamation.
- (..) Pause of about 0.5 second
- (.) Micro pause
- (.1) A dot and a number in parentheses indicate a pause in seconds within or between turns
- [ ] Left and right square brackets indicate overlapping speech.
- = An equal sign indicates a latching between turns, i.e., no break or gap between turns
- A single dash indicates a cut off either because of an interruption or self-repair
- : A colon indicates stretching of the previous sound
- Dashes indicate the end of the original transcription and the start of a free translation into English

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# Using Students' Answer Scripts in Developing Writing Skills at Tertiary Level: A Bangladeshi Perspective

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## Abstract

It is not unusual for the English Language teachers, especially in Bangladesh to come across students of different levels (advanced, intermediate, and beginner) in a class that makes it harder to plan any unique method to be applied for all of them at a time, especially in the case of teaching writing. A unique method in teaching writing is also unsuitable because there is a risk of having some demotivated students. Consequently, the task becomes challenging for the teacher as the outcome of students' achievement is inadequate. While expertise in English calls for developing four skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – in Bangladesh, there is hardly any noticeable or effective method being used developing those skills. Most importantly, little attention is paid to the implementation of effective teaching strategies to develop writing skills. This paper attempts to discuss and explore the potential of reusing students' written scripts in teaching writing. Students will engage with samples of earlier writing to identify and correct the grammatical and spelling mistakes, rearrange the ideas, and then reproduce it, thereby improving their writing skills. Students' written scripts, which are often disposed of after being checked, can be reproduced for the students to teach writing by allowing them to encounter different varieties of English language styles and common errors.

**Keywords:** Writing Skill, Teaching Strategies, L2, Demotivated Learner

## Introduction

Very few, if any, will disagree with the point that students' academic and future success cannot be achieved without their writing proficiency. Neither will anyone deny that in order to demonstrate excellence both in academic and professional domains, one, especially learners of English, both in Foreign Language and Second Language context, needs to have a good command over English. Writing skill is one of the sub-skills, also one of two productive skills, of English language proficiency. But the incentive to teach writing effectively has always been neglected and has even been relegated to a small part of the English Curriculum in Bangladesh. Although the policy makers such as the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) claim that the *English for Today* textbooks have been developed to help students attain competency in all four language skills, that is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, little improvement is noticed in the demonstration of these skills practically. However, policy makers would be unwilling to admit that this approach is not helping the students to develop adequate linguistic competency, citing the introduction of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), a type of language teaching methodology, (Richards, 2006) that aims to enable learners to communicate competently. To date, very few empirical studies have been conducted to determine the effect of any existing teaching strategies in Bangladesh. Nor has there been any attempt or research into either measuring the effect of CLT in developing writing skills or implementing innovative techniques to make the CLT approach fruitful. Moreover, the so-called test scores (most remarkably in the four public exams: PSC, JSC, SSC, HSC) do not necessarily reflect their writing competency effectively. The consequent result is their utter failure in the subsequent competitive entrance exams, like university entrance exams both at home and

abroad, leading our students most often to the “risk of academic failure” at tertiary level (Rumsey, 1998, p. 15). Dean Rumsey, quoting Jon Tompson, defines “at-risk” students as “having any one of the attributes such as unsatisfactory standardized test scores, below grade level performance in English language and communication skills, failing grades in core academic subjects” (p. 15).

As a university English teacher, I often have students of different competency levels in the classroom (advanced, intermediate, and beginner) that makes it harder to plan any unique method to apply to all of them at a time, especially in the case of teaching writing. Since I began teaching, I have encountered numerous students, either having English as their major or minor, pleading for a magic formula in a six-month-semester (24 classes), which would help them graduate (since the medium of instruction is English) and equip them with everything a proficient writer needs without toiling hard. Most students from various disciplines would express a desire to function in English-speaking academic settings as they wished to pursue higher studies abroad. Unfortunately, a large number of students who had been confident because their CGPA was high at the higher secondary level found themselves incapable when asked to write something on their own. Their written work is often full of grammatical and spelling mistakes, incoherent ideas, mixture of L1 (First Language) and L2 (English Language), and other problems. Sometimes their writing is so confusing that it goes beyond the examiners' comprehension. Certainly, students alone cannot be blamed as English is not their first language but it is the system that is producing this anomaly that should be held responsible.

### **Teaching strategies in developing writing skills in secondary and higher levels**

An evaluation of the present scenario in teaching English Language in all levels of education in Bangladesh confirms that it is mostly based on teaching formal grammar. A key component of primary, secondary, and higher English education in all government-run institutions is a mandatory inclusion of a workbook or grammar book with easy-to-solve exercises. What we have here is a system with an overemphasis on traditional grammar teaching and under-emphasized authentic writing activities. Popular modes of teaching writing in Bangladesh consists of, in Carpini's (2012) words in a different ELL context, rote instruction, grammar drills, and writing templates (pp. 98-99). Similar to many other ELL contexts, most instructors in Bangladesh, it seems, are reluctant to move from their “familiar zone of the old blue grammar book” as they can use common or less challenging activities of choosing the right answer or appropriate words, rather than authentic writing and reading tasks which call for experimentation in language usages (Carpini, 2012, p. 97). This confines the learners to the narrow domain of fill-in-the-gaps or the short answer form. There is little desire, both on the part of teacher and learner, to move beyond “traditional grammar instructions drills” and to “focus on authentic usages of language” (Carpini, 2012, p. 97). This affinity to grammar stems from the adherent notion that grammar-based study benefits the writers. Another fact might be the easy-to-handle nature of instruction for formal grammar. But the question is, how effective is the system in improving writing? Richard Braddock's significant remark best clarifies the result of teaching formal grammar in developing writing. He opines that the effect of teaching formal grammar with respect to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) is nothing but “negligible ... even harmful” (cited in Hillock, 1986, p. xv). Braddock's assertion is further implied by Hillock's (1986) research. In the

studies consulted by Hillock, nowhere did he find any evidence of the connection between formal grammar teachings and writing skills (p. 138). Perhaps we can evaluate the English teaching context of Bangladesh through the above lens where this kind of grammar drilling has been preferred and prescribed by the Education Board, administrators, and instructors all the while. The current teaching and learning preferences render no service to the learners; rather, they can be deemed “a gross disservice” (Hillock, 1986, p. 248). An examination of the questions in English Paper 1 and Paper 2 of the Board Exams (SSC) shows that the structure of the questions can be categorized as follows (also see Appendix A):

*Table 1: Topics in English Test Papers 1 & 2*

English Paper 1	English Paper 2
Choose the right word to complete a sentence	Fill in the gaps with articles
True or false	Complete the text with prepositions
Fill in the gaps with the correct form	Complete the sentences with suitable phrases (with clues)
Make a list of five objects	Complete the sentences with suitable phrases (without clues)
Write short answers to the questions	Fill in the gaps with the correct form of verbs
Fill in the gaps with suitable words	Transformation of sentences
Summary	Narration
Flow chart	Finding unclear pronouns
Fill in the gaps	Modifiers
Match	Use of appropriate sentence connectors
Rearrange	Synonym/Antonym
Paragraph Writing	Punctuation Application, Report, Paragraph, and Essay writing

Most of the question types here, except summary, paragraphs, and essay writing, do not call for any demonstration of authentic writing skills. Also, with these, students get little intensive practice and experience with the process of writing. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) emphasize that language cannot be learned in isolation, but requires articulation in purposeful contexts. That these tasks in module practice contributes little to their writing development has been proved and emphasized on by theorists (Lunsford, 1987, p. 254). Thomas Friedmann’s (1983) argument can also be put forward here to prove the futility of this system, that the only criterion behind preferring grammar drilling is “inertia” (p. 399). The National Council of Teachers of English states that “isolated workbook exercises in usage is not supported by theory and research” and “is a deterrent to the improvement of the students’ speaking and writing” (cited in Gray, 2012, p. 19). I do not, however, object to the teaching of formal aspects of grammar or the contributions of the planners and policy makers of the current curriculum of Bangladesh. My focus in this paper is to make us see the relevance of current grammar instruction method in the development of writing.

Another aspect of the present system – a long drawn tradition-bound approach in teaching writing English in Bangladesh – is composition/paragraph writing which leads students to easily memorize some common topics only to pass exams and secure good grades. The problem that stems from this is that students can hardly demonstrate their true skills beyond the familiar memorized topic in any subsequent academic and professional field. Thus the good grades become a burden for

life. Our model of teaching basic writing seems to be, as Gray (2012) says, “Sentence- paragraph-essay” (p. 23). That English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh is completely “exam-oriented” draws student to the myopic domain of “solving, practicing and memorizing the examination style model test questions” (Chowdhury & Karim, 2014, p. 49). It is as if the prime motto is not manipulation or demonstration of earned knowledge in real life communication but to manage a grade which solely determines, ironically, social and academic recognition. As a result, most secondary and higher secondary students can hardly demonstrate proficiency levels much above elementary and the top scorer cannot be expected to handle language proficiently at all (Shahidullah, 2012, cited in Chowdhury & Karim, 2014, p. 49). Thus the ultimate outcome of memorizing and cramming may not be an optimistic one for most students as it eventually leads to demotivated learners at the tertiary level.

Little access to writing in schools also consequently damages students' authentic writing ability and self-confidence, accounting for their low quality writing skills at tertiary level. This claim can further be supported by Forseman's assertion (cited in Rumsey, 1988):

When students have had little experience writing in the school setting or when their writing has been inhibited by the fill-in-the blanks, they need to develop self-respect for their own generating power (p. 37).

Moreover, studies have found that students who are encouraged to express their own thoughts and ideas demonstrate highly functional and engaging literacy (Cox, Holden & Pecket, 1997; Rumsey, 1986). Thus, the most recurrent obstacles to writing development might be as follows:

1. Grammar Drill
2. Little exposure to writing habit
3. Format of writing test

What can be done then to produce less grade-conscious but more proficient learners, or less reluctant but more motivated writers from within the pre-existing system? There can be nothing as fruitful as the introduction of, as Gray (2012) puts it, “unremitting practice” in order to develop writing (p. 19). Since teacher-student ratios in most classes are remarkably high – the number ranging, mostly, from 70 to 100 – face-to-face or one to one contact time is hardly possible in most primary, secondary, and higher secondary classes. So, naturally, English language teachers who might have the desire to do something for the betterment of the students get little scope and support from, especially, professional environments with unmotivated authority, lack of equipment and space, overcrowded classrooms, and extra work-load, to implement it. Moreover, they may not be equipped with proper training and motivation to do something innovative. Thus, the question of how we can address the widely differing needs of the tertiary level students arises. Or how do we overcome the vacuity created in the existing teaching system? One possible remedy to the above mentioned problems lies in our shared concern to fill the gap by adopting any means possible.

### **Teaching tertiary level English writing in Bangladesh**

As English language teachers at tertiary level, what can we do with students who have already

passed their adolescence to make them meet the academic requirements and equip them for a professional life? The vital time for language learning has passed and students get little help from their natural ability to acquire the target language. The first decision should be to move from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to lead the reluctant learners through the learning process. Teacher collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility are required to plan effective methods for this level and it is imperative that it is done soon. Otherwise, it might be a mammoth task to tackle the number of students who are at risk for academic failure. At this point, it is recommended that the length of students' exposure to writing activities be increased. Since numerous studies have found that a possible reason for students' inadequate writing skills is little access to writing (Cox, Holden & Pecket, 1997; Rumsey, 1998), it would not be unexpected for a student to have written nothing at all except in exam halls. Along with the increased writing exercises, it must be ensured that this strategy is applied consistently and rigorously (Rumsey, 1998, p. 77). We often regard giving lectures on how to write an essay or composition is sufficient for our students to be L2 writers as if that is the sole responsibility of a trainer. But it has been found that limited composition instruction alone cannot help improve students' writing literacy (p. 25). Short time instruction in class does not have any remarkable impact. The best suggestion is to provide more class time for writing and increase students' knowledge and use of the writing process. We can think about considering the following strategies while instructing the learners about writing (Shaunessy, 1977; Gray, 2012):

- a. regular practice at writing, instructing in writing process;
- b. exposure to models of similar writing;
- c. including skilled adult writers and classmates, peer or teacher collaboration at every stage of the writing process;
- d. one-on-one teacher student writing conference, students' engagement in writing activities at least three times a week.

After having discussed the pre-writing situation, I intend to draw the readers' attention to the state of post-writing activities; teachers' long-awaited assessments, and students' responses to this. Common and regular practices noticed in the departments are teachers publishing results as if to relieve themselves of the burden of huge bundles of scripts, with no other interaction with the students at that time except to distribute grades with students simply receiving the scripts, either with many red marks, or with some praise, along with the grades they deserve, involving high stakes as it will be included in the final grade. What is unusual, what could have been quite normal and mostly desirable here is teachers having a discussion, either one-on-one or in groups, about the problems they encountered, suggesting possible remedies, offering guidance for improvement, and motivating students. Instead, teachers always play the role of error hunters, not of a harbinger of improvement. Being completely oblivious to the fact that the purpose of the assessment is to improve students' learning, we seem to devote ourselves to grading them based on the language they are yet to learn. We are hardly aware that the assessment can offer diagnostic information for both students and teachers. Also, our methods for responding to students' written work are most often unsuitable, consequently demotivating learners (e.g., Krashen, 1985). A significant number of responses to the errors of the students are marked in red. These unsympathetic responses,

often rude to the involved because of the stigma it implies in peer groups, brings low morale and frustration. On the impact of error correction feedback, Gray (2012), citing Hillocks, says that the tone of many teacher's response, may often, "discourage students and lead them to write less" (p. 26). Moreover, the impact of error correcting feedback is not free from controversy. Though the impact of negative comments, as studies have confirmed, is destructive, the favorable effect of positive feedback has not yet been confirmed (Gray, 2012, p. 26). Then what impact does the process of checking scripts with marked errors bear on the chance of fruitful outcomes in writing development? This question might make teachers frustrated and disappointed as well as ponder over the question of how to deal with errors.

### **Reusing scripts for developing writing skills: Prospects**

While thinking about adopting an effective plan, I had in mind the following effective strategies asserted by Olson (1950, pp. 252-253): inductive teaching of sentences rather than memorizing rules; correction of written work rather than drill exercises; students proofreading rather than teacher correcting; and editorial correcting rather than using red pen or red ink.

To implement the strategies, written student work from earlier classes or assignments were considered a possible aid to teach writing skills to students at the tertiary level. However, this technique is not necessarily exclusive for the students of tertiary level. It can also be adopted at the primary and secondary levels, perhaps with slight variations based on the needs of their level.

### **Methods**

In this process, students were provided with the written scripts of either the previous batch or their own – from mid-semester work or class assignments – which are often thrown out or handed back to the students after grading. These evaluated scripts, of course, without any red marks or identifiable information, were reproduced for them as samples or models to work on (see Appendix B). Though a pair or group was assigned to work on or edit a sample script, each student was required to produce their own copy. Students could only consult with each other to improve and organize the content. They were also asked to look for problems created by lack of planning and drafting, and to comment on these on a separate sheet.

As writing skill involves both academic and writing discourse, and formal knowledge of grammar, this project was necessarily preceded by thorough instruction from the teacher (in this case, the researcher) who provided the steps in writing strategies and the salience of the revision procedure as well as how to focus on additions, substitutions, and rearrangements. Only after giving sufficient instructions or classes was this project implemented. Once students were given instructions on how to approach a given sample, the sample was assigned a particular code – either alphabetical or numerical – that would help the instructor to evaluate or compare the allotted sample and edited work. The work held the students' attention, giving them sufficient freedom to improvise written data, which facilitated students' involvement in producing a new piece of writing. Through their engagement in problem-solving in groups or pairs, they were expected to acquire the respective knowledge, skills, will, and self-regulation necessary for their own planning and revising.

### **Rationale for employing the script-reproduction strategy**

This strategy is primarily intended to have the learners engage in writing through draft-editing,

contrary to the prior isolated grammar-drill. Here the students get the opportunity to transfer their grammar knowledge through the use of writing. Writing script samples can be managed both by making the current-semester students write compositions on certain topics or taking any sample from previous semesters (as I often do). As the number of students in most of classes range from 65-75, pair or group work makes it easier to supervise easily. Also, this activity gives peer collaboration a purpose. That errors corrected by the student rather than the instructor has a greater significance has been proven by a study conducted by Lalande (1982). That peer assistance and discussion during revision has an impressive effect on student writing is supported by many studies as well (Hillock, 1996, p. 30).

Secondly, this strategy has the advantage of allowing a distinct view that encourages us to consider English language (L2) learning – either reading or writing – to be integrative, prompting learners to “use the material in a meaningful way in his or her life” (Esau & Keene, 1981, p. 697). As discussed earlier, an isolated exercise or drill can hardly help students demonstrate expertise in writing English. It can be done only when students acquire knowledge through practical use. The prospect of our proposed method which calls for students’ first-hand experience of dealing with error-correction, therefore, motivates learners to get involved in the process of writing.

Thirdly, script editing proved to have a greater scope for the students to focus on to correct the form and content. As they have to write drafts and make revisions constantly before final submission, they will have the opportunity to get involved in correcting and revising grammar usage and logical organization of ideas. This process of editing also makes a learner adept at identifying mistakes, as a result, contributing to their own error-correction regarding formal aspects of grammar, punctuation, and content. As Rosen (1987) says in “Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error-Hunt”:

Responsibility for the correctness of any given piece of writing should fall mainly on the student, not the teacher. Students learn to become accurate and self-sufficient writers by searching for, finding, and correcting their own mistakes. (p. 64)

Students may, initially, show a slower rate of progress or advancement in their error-correction or learning process, but, eventually, it will have a beneficial impact on the learners’ writing process. Usually, when a teacher takes responsibility of the task of detecting students’ mistakes, there is little motivation for students to learn from that error. There is no denying that learning occurs effectively with the practical experience of being involved in writing. This is affirmed by Rosen’s (1987) suggestion again that:

Students learn to write by writing, and they learn to write correctly by writing, revising, and proofreading their own work – with some help or direction from the teacher when necessary. They do not learn to write correctly by studying about writing or doing isolated workbook exercises unrelated to their own writing. (p. 64)

Above all, this project makes the class environment that of an interactive society, where the teacher ceases to be an all-knowing, ready-to-help, easy-to-approach robot-mentor and students assume the role of enthusiastic participants to learn from their mistakes. It is essential, says Zeller Mayer

(1989), that the writing class be a “rhetoric community” (p. 155) where both teacher and learner engage in a meaningful communication in their writing process, where learners see their errors as part of the developmental learning process that can be corrected and modified with experience.

### Conclusion

The sole purpose of this paper was to inform readers of the possibility of reusing students' response scripts in strengthening the writing skills of tertiary level students of Bangladesh. While the existing body of literature was explored and used to argue in favor of the possible significant gains in this strategy, the fact of time-constraint was not ignored completely. The stated strategy has some obvious limitations. It is time-demanding for the teacher and depends mostly on articulated tact to motivate the learners. But it has the prospect of facilitating the development of writing skills by engaging the learners in the process of self-correction. As this process incorporates a variety of errors and gives learners the authority to provide a correct form by rearranging and reorganizing a given sample, it becomes an interesting learning venture of sample-editing. Above all, a teacher can exercise the freedom to determine the sample based on students' competency levels. Thus, there is no fear of ending up with a group of demotivated students because it is largely a student-centered approach where a teacher only plays the role of facilitator and mentor (Friedmann, 1983). It is also suggested that, in order to determine the gains in this strategy, further studies need to be conducted.

*Note:* This paper was presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> IML International Conference on Language and Teaching held on 24-25 November 2017 at the University of Dhaka.

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Appendix A  
S.S.C. Board Exam Question (English Second Paper):

**1. Dhaka Board-2015**  
English (Compulsory) 2nd Paper  
According to the Syllabus of 2013

Sub Code **108**  
Total Marks: 100

Time : 3 hours

*N.B. Answer all the question. The figures in the right margin indicate full marks.*

**Part A : Grammar (60 marks)**

1. Fill in the blanks with the words from the box. You may need to change the forms of some of the words. You may need to use one word more than once.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

to	a	for	in	work	prepare	the	by
----	---	-----	----	------	---------	-----	----

It is useful (a) — students to take part (b) — social service. (c) — taking part (d) — social service, they can benefit themselves as well as (e) — nation. Student life is (f) — period of (g) — for future life. If the students do some social (h) —, they will be better prepared for giving service (i) — the nation on completion of their education. As the students have no family burden and as they get enough time during the large vacation, they can do (j) — great deal of work for the people.

2. Fill in the blanks with suitable words.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

Scientists have (a) — reported that the surface ice caps are (b) —. This is due to a rise (c) — atmospheric temperature known (d) — the greenhouse effect. According to the scientists, carbon dioxide is primarily responsible (e) — temperature rise in (f) —. The carbon dioxide is high (g) — coal and oil (h) — burn. The gas is accumulating in the atmosphere and (i) — temperature to rise. As a result, the polar ice in the North and South Poles (j) — melting.

3. Make five sentences using parts of sentences from each column of the table below.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

Education	is	the training for proper growth.
It	can prosper	the liberation of prejudice.
Nobody	ennobles	our minds and refines our sensibility.
The purpose of education		in life without education
		the process by which our mind develops.

4. Complete the following text with right forms of the verbs given in the box.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

take	work	come	dominate	keep
come	conduce	contribute	be	need

Today women are playing an important role in all spheres of life. Once they were (a) — by men. They are no longer (b) — within the four walls of their parents' or husbands' house. They have (c) — out of the kitchen and are (d) — hand in hand with men. By (e) — higher education, they are becoming pilots, doctors, engineers, teachers, administrators etc. They have (f) — able to prove their worth. They (g) — much to the economy of the country. Now it (h) — to the realization of the men that true development of the country is never possible (i) — half of the population idle at home. So, it (j) — no telling that women are playing a great role in the socio-economic condition of our country.

5. Change the narrative style of the following text. 5

"Good morning, students," said the teacher. "How are you?" "We are fine, sir. What about you?" "I am fine too. Please, sit down. Have you prepared your lesson?" the teacher asked. "Sorry, sir, we have not prepared our lesson," they replied.

6. Change the sentences according to directions.  $1 \times 10 = 10$

- (a) Television is one of the most wonderful inventions of modern science. (Make positive degree)  
(b) It was not invented overnight. (Make active voice)  
(c) Scientists spent many years and worked hard to invent television. (Make complex sentence)  
(d) Nowadays, almost every family has a television set. (Make negative sentence)  
(e) People of all ages like to watch television. (Make interrogative sentence)  
(f) The programmes telecast by television are very interesting. (Make complex sentence)  
(g) Television should telecast educative programmes. (Make passive voice)  
(h) If you watch television, you can learn many things. (Make simple sentence)  
(i) People spend their free time by watching television. (Make compound sentence)  
(j) Very few things are so useful as television. (Make superlative degree)

7. Complete the sentences.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

- (a) Many people cut trees —  
(b) Trees cause rainfall which —  
(c) If we cut trees at random —  
(d) Trees supply oxygen —  
(e) Since trees help us in many ways —

8. Complete the text adding suffixes, prefixes or the both with the root words given in the parenthesis.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

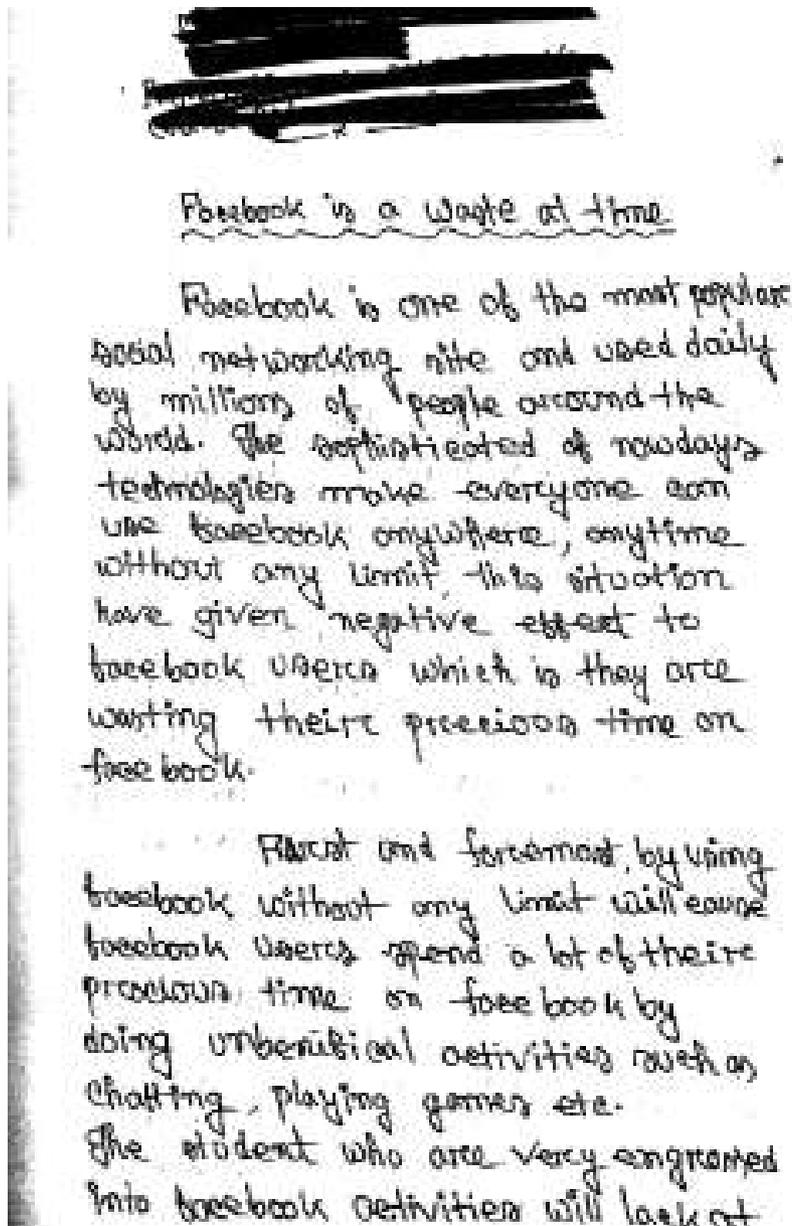
The books of famous (a) — (write) — are put on sale in the book fair. Most of the (b) — (visit) — buy books of different (c) — (publish) —. Almost no visitor returns from the fair without making any purchase. The (d) — (buy) — like to buy at a fair price. Our book fair is always (e) — (crowd) —. As (f) — (vary) — books are (g) — (play) — in a fair, the buyers get a scope to choose books. They buy their (h) — (choose) — books after a long search. This facility is (i) — (available) — in any place other than a book fair. A book fair is always (j) — (come) — to the students.

9. Make tag questions of these statements.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

- (a) Most of the students who fail in English don't have strong foundation over grammar. —?  
(b) They read only to pass the examination. —?  
(c) Teachers should motivate them to learn the basic thing. —?  
(d) They can't help learning grammar. —?  
(e) Moreover, practice is essential too. —?

## Appendix B

Sample to be used by the students with masked identity:



# Teaching EFL Writing: A Comparative Study of Bengali and English Medium Secondary Schools in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Writing in English has become a challenging task for EFL learners in Bangladesh with the written test-based assessment system and growing importance of speaking skills as part of globalization. So the need for writing skill development remains the same despite the difference in curriculum and mode of communication (native or non-native language) of educational institutions. This study discovered the similarities and differences in the teaching methods of English writing at the secondary level of English medium and Bengali medium schools in Bangladesh. Students and teachers of twelve schools in Dhaka participated in the survey. Data was collected using a questionnaire, interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings show how most of the teachers and students in every medium focused on accuracy of structure and content development rather than the process of writing. Finally, this study suggests some common teaching strategies for improving the writing skills of EFL learners, irrespective of mediums.

**Keywords:** Writing Skill, Bengali Medium, English Medium, Teaching Strategies, Specific Feedback

## Introduction

Krashen's (1982) acquisition-learning hypothesis brings out two ways of developing aptitude in a second language: either a conscious process of learning about the structure of the language in a formal environment or acquiring it by communicating in the second language, replicating the first language acquisition process. This hypothesis is reflected in the education system of Bangladesh where English medium schools ensure natural acquisition process and Bengali medium schools resemble the conscious learning theory.

While Bengali medium schools provide native language instruction and CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) based on the national curriculum, English medium schools follow the UK curriculum and offer an English speaking environment (Parvin & Haider, 2012). Most people in Bangladesh believe that proficiency in English improves with English medium based education (Hasan, 2004). In reality, though, maximum exposure to L2 (English) may ensure proficiency in vocabulary and thought process but blurs the difference between spoken and written discourse. On the other hand, the curriculum in Bengali medium schools use writing for developing content and structure rather than fulfilling the communicative purpose. In both cases, writing skill development is underappreciated despite the fact that Bangladesh has a written test based evaluation system. This problem is not visible in primary level classes where the teacher acts solely to instill the basics of L2 and students merely receive instructions. At the secondary level, learning becomes a group performance where both students and educators contribute, share, adopt, and adapt ideas. Writing becomes a complex process, merging acquisition and communication needs. Contemporary procedures require teaching writing for improving content, grammar, and vocabulary, rather than writing for writing's sake. Naturally then, learners cannot produce a proper

piece of writing in English even after learning the language as a compulsory subject for 7-8 years. This study identifies the similarities and dissimilarities between the existing methods used in both mediums for improving the writing skill of secondary level EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. It aims to find the common methods for teachers to ensure a standard performance, irrespective of the medium of instruction or curriculum. These developments can bring significant changes in the writing pedagogy of Bangladesh.

This study answers the following research questions:

- 1) What types of methods are used by English medium EFL teachers in class 8 for teaching writing?
- 2) What types of methods are used by Bengali medium EFL teachers in class 8 for teaching writing?
- 3) What are the similarities and differences between the teaching strategies used by Bengali medium and English medium EFL teachers to improve writing skills at the secondary level?

### **Literature review**

To describe its importance, Byrne (1982) presented writing skills as a learner friendly tool for language proficiency. According to him, shy L2 speakers learn the language easily through writing. Being exposed to both L2 speaking and writing also speeds up the learning process. Besides, written scripts are a significant proof of improvement and formal or informal assessment.

At the primary and secondary level, written examination has always been the sole tool for formal evaluation in Bangladesh (Khan and Akter, 2011). However, Saha's study (2017) described the negative impact of exam-oriented approach on writing skill development in both Bengali and English medium schools which affects tertiary level performance. According to him, neither Bengali nor English medium schools inspire learners to focus on writing for writing's sake. Teachers make students practice writing for the public examinations, not for nourishing creativity. Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015) considered lack of focus on writing skills at the secondary level to be responsible for the lack of success in writing at the university level. They suggested a theoretical framework for the secondary level EFL writing curriculum to determine its compatibility for the university. This framework mainly focused on teaching approach and design which included the role of learners and teachers. The review section of this paper intends to focus on these areas in detail to explore the existing EFL writing teaching strategies at the secondary level.

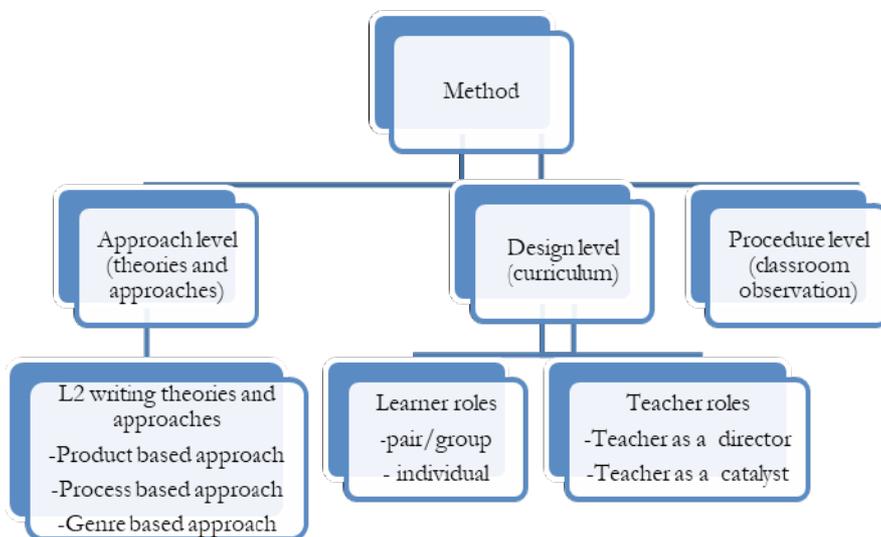


Figure 1: Theoretical framework (adopted from Hammadi and Sidek, 2015)

### Approaches to teaching writing

In secondary EFL writing curriculum, the teaching approach plays a major role (Al-Hammadi & Sidek, 2015). To teach writing, three approaches are commonly used: product based, process based, and genre based (Eliwarti & Maarof, 2014).

#### *Product-based approach*

According to Steele (1992), product-based approach is where students analyze and highlight the features of a model text given by the teacher. Then they practice only the highlighted features. In the third stage, ideas are organized through guided writing. The last stage is the free writing stage where students choose from comparable writing tasks. Independent use of the newly learned skill, structure, and vocabulary is seen in the final production.

#### *Process-based approach*

Harmer (2006) says that, despite different factors like topic, genre, and medium, every piece of writing goes through four stages. Keeping the purpose, audience, content structure, and suitable discourse in mind, writers plan before writing. Then they create the initial draft. In the third stage, they review the draft and make necessary changes regarding idea organization, sentence structure, clarity, etc. After going through peer reviews and required modifications, a standard, error-free “final version” is produced. Harmer (2006) called process approach a recursive process as writers keep going back and forth to plan, draft, and edit repeatedly.

#### *Genre-based approach*

According to Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta (2007), genre-based approach involves modeling, joint construction, and independent construction of a text. At first, the teacher provides a model text in a specific genre keeping learners’ needs in mind. Learners study and practice the communicative purpose, structure, and vocabulary of the particular genre. Then they reorganize the text by

bringing necessary changes in terms of sentence structure, word order, etc. Finally they produce a new text individually based on the taught genre. The instructor ensures that the final production is in sync with the target genre, vocabulary, and structure.

### ***Role of learners***

Learner participation plays a vital role in the EFL writing class (Al-Hammadi & Sidek, 2015). Unfortunately, EFL learners struggle with maintaining an even distribution of content, organizing ideas, focusing on reader, goal, choice of words, and possible errors at word and sentence level (Rass, 2015). In Ciamis (2016), school students were demotivated due to their lack of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary (cited in Friatin, 2018, p. 58). Afrin (2016) revealed a common practice of memorization among Bengali medium learners. So, individual focus on writing skill development became a secondary concern for the rest of their academic life. Recent studies of Bangladesh exhibit basic errors of EFL students at both structural and organizational levels like spelling, grammatical structure of subject-verb, preposition, use of punctuation, etc (Karim, Maasum & Latif, 2017; Afrin, 2016; Mustaque, 2014; Fahmida, 2010).

### **Collaborative writing**

Although writing does not involve as many interactive activities as speaking, researchers find many advantages of collaborative writing (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Fernández Dobao, 2012; Shehadeh, 2011; Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Storch, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Research showed that Bangladeshi teachers commonly tend to set up individual tasks for learners. Group/pair work is common for less than 30% teachers of both mediums. 70% Bengali medium teachers depend on the learner's memorization skill and 75% English medium teachers depend on fixed content of text book for learning (Milon, Alam, & Hossain, 2018).

### **Teacher as a dictator**

Teachers' role in EFL writing is further analyzed by Chaisiri (2010). His study of Thai EFL learners demonstrates the prevalence of teacher-oriented classrooms despite the successful implementation of a four staged activity which involves triggering schema, analysis of sample script, guided writing with instructor's support, and independent writing practice. Abas and Bakir (2013) examined the negative impact of Palestinian teachers' traditional teaching methods which result in nearly inactive learners and repetitive tasks in the class.

### **Teacher as a catalyst**

In case of L2 proficiency, while speaking skill needs nature (exposure to foreign language), writing skill needs nurture from EFL instructors (Brown, 2001). Harmer (2006) proposed some before-, while- and after-writing tasks for teachers, such as:

**Demonstrate** – Create awareness about genre and functional language before writing.

**Motivate and provoke** – Encourage learners through different activities to generate ideas and appropriate vocabulary.

**Support** – Give advice and constructive suggestions during student writing.

**Respond** – Check the content and structure of their draft and give suggestions, not corrections.

**Evaluate** – Highlight strengths and weaknesses of final scripts and acquire learner response regarding this evaluation.

### **Focus on context**

Before writing, teachers should encourage learners to focus on the context of the text (Bruner, 1985; Graves, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1977). Sun (2014) conducted an empirical study of 16 weeks which shows the positive effect of schemata on college students' essay writing. Afrin's (2016) study showed that more than 60% learners are not familiar with the prewriting technique in Bangladesh.

### **Connect reading and writing**

Both readers and writers have adequate knowledge of written language, schemata for interpretation and analysis of the text, and process and evaluation of information in the same way (Kucer, cited in Xiao, 2008). Cho and Brutt-Griffler (2015) showed the positive impact of combining reading and writing on middle school Korean learners' writing skill. In his year-long study of Iranian EFL learners, Mermelstein (2015) showed that extensive reading has sustainable impact on writing performance.

### **Provide feedback**

Srichanyachon (2011) demonstrated the negative impact of identifying form and structure-related mistakes rather than investigating the use of proper context and language in writing. His study showed Thai teachers' habit of assessing only surface level errors in learners' writing. In Pizarro's (2017) study, a vital role of feedback provider and medium is presented. Students highly valued instructor's comments and asked for clarification if necessary. Peer feedback was not appreciated due to their lack of proficiency in English. Learners mostly preferred oral feedback despite having detailed written feedback.

The previous studies bring forth a number of effective teaching methods of EFL writing. For the secondary level learners of Bangladesh, how many of these methods are available? Is there a difference in the method based on medium? Based on these questions, this paper conducts a comparative study of the present methodology of teaching EFL writing at the secondary level of Bengali and English medium schools.

## **Research methodology**

### ***Sampling***

Data was collected by adapting the procedure used by Milon *et al.* (2018). From 12 schools (6 Bengali medium and 6 English medium), 30 teachers and 60 students of Class 8 were selected. From each medium, 15 teachers answered the questionnaire. Sampling for focus group discussion and interviews was done according to Katsara's (2008) procedure. From every school, 5 students participated in 12 focus group discussions.

### ***Data collection tools***

Following the questionnaires of Mohite (2014), Khanalizadeh and Allami (2012), and Petrić and Czár (2003), a 28-item questionnaire for teachers was prepared and categorized as attitude, pre-writing, during writing, post-writing stages. It contained a four-point Likert-scale (Always, usually,

sometimes, never) questions to collect objective responses. By following the procedure of Ho (2006), focus group discussions were set up which gathered subjective responses from questions for understanding learner perception in the same categories as the questionnaire. Some of the participants were interviewed by applying a semi-structured design suggested by Nunan (1992). Collected data has been interpreted using pie charts to get an apparent distribution and comparison of the responses of each question. Furthermore, key points from the focus group discussions have been analyzed.

## Findings

### *Findings from quantitative data*

#### 1. Do you ask students to make a list of their ideas before writing on a given topic?

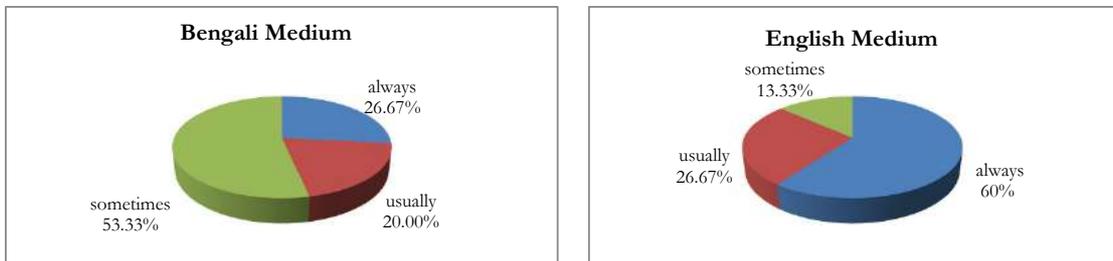


Figure 2: Use of brainstorming technique

This question was asked to find out whether teachers allow learners to plan for ideas before writing. English medium teachers were more inclined towards this technique. Figure 2 shows that 60% of English medium teachers always keep a planning stage in the writing class. On the other hand, more than 50% Bengali medium teachers sometimes include planning stage before writing.

#### 2. Do you tell students about who they are writing for?

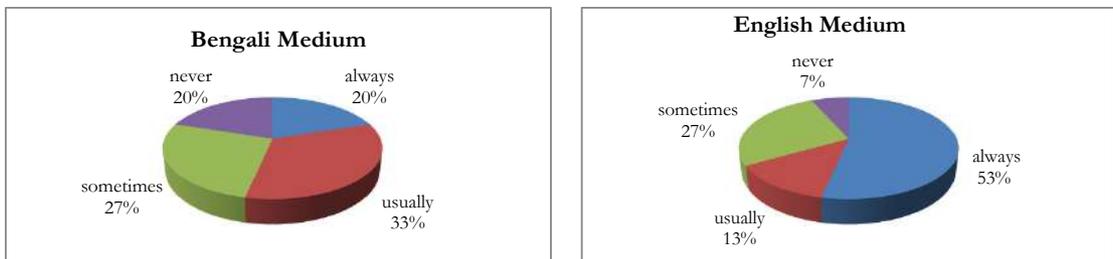


Figure 3: Use of context

This question elicited information about the teacher's attitude towards creating awareness about context before writing. English medium teachers are more conscious about this process than

Bengali medium teachers. A comparison between the two charts in Figure 3 shows that more than 50% English medium teachers focused on audience of the text in the planning stage. However, only 33% Bengali medium teachers usually informed learners about the intended audience.

### 3. Do you allow your students to have a group discussion in writing class?



Figure 4: Use of group work/pair work

This question measured the ratio of peer work in the EFL writing class. The results show that group work is rare for both English medium and Bengali medium classes. Figure 4 shows that less than 30% teachers from both mediums always employ group work in writing. Around 50% teachers in both mediums sometimes use this technique.

### 4. Do you provide samples of the writing task?

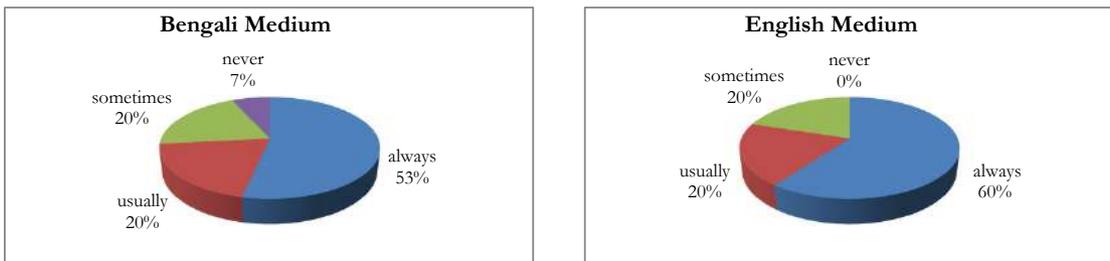


Figure 5: Use of model text

This question ascertained whether model texts played a major role in EFL writing class. Data from Figure 5 shows more than half of the teachers from both mediums use plenty of model texts in the classroom. 60% English medium teachers and 53% Bengali medium teachers always use model texts to teach writing. In fact, English medium writing classes are never taken without a model text (see Figure 5).

**5. Do you ask students to check their own writing?**

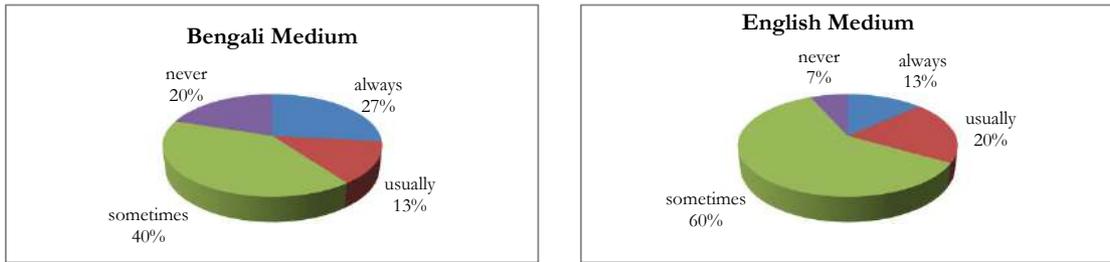


Figure 6: Use of revising/editing technique

This question aimed to identify the frequency of reviewing and editing of the written script in the classroom. Figure 6 shows that this technique is sometimes used in the classroom of both mediums. Less than 30% Bengali medium teachers always instruct learners to revise and edit based on feedback while less than 20% English medium teachers always use this technique in the post-writing stage.

**6. Do you give general comments (like good/bad, etc.)?**

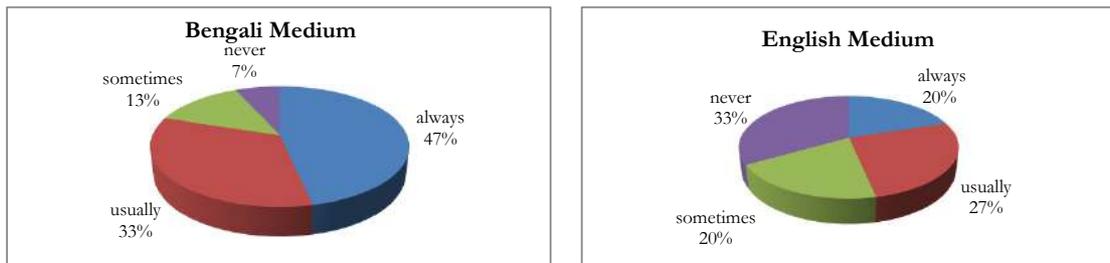


Figure 7: Use of general comments

This question aimed to identify the frequency of general comments given by the teachers. According to Figure 7, general comments are more common for Bengali medium students. Almost 50% Bengali medium teachers always provide general comments as feedback where they identify basic errors. On the other hand, 20% English medium teachers always give general comments. Only 7% Bengali medium teachers never give this type of feedback.

### 7. Do you think giving lectures about how to write is more beneficial than giving a writing task in the class?

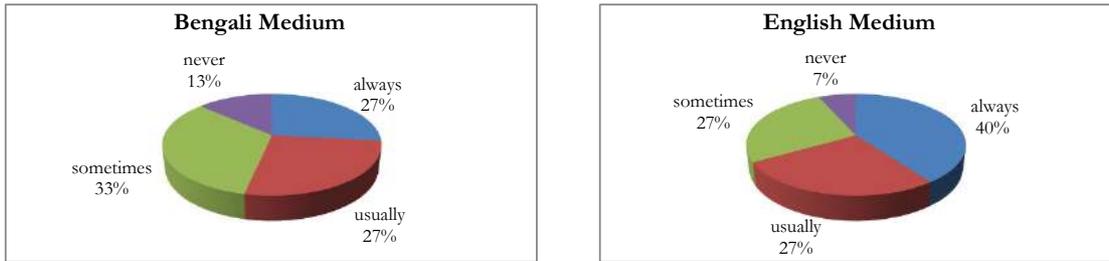


Figure 8: Use of teacher talk

This question was asked to measure how teacher-oriented the classroom was at the secondary level. Figure 8 shows that English medium teachers are more inclined towards giving detailed explanations before writing practice in the classroom. 40% English medium teachers and 27% Bengali medium teachers always give lectures before writing.

### 8. Do you believe that accuracy in grammar and correct spelling makes students good writers?

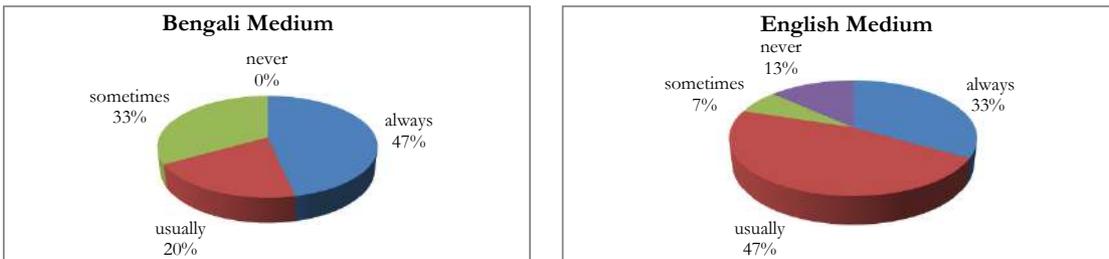


Figure 9: Importance of grammatical accuracy

The purpose of this question was to identify the teacher's view about the importance of grammar and correct vocabulary in L2 writing. Bengali medium teachers gave more importance to accuracy in writing than English medium teachers. According to Figure 9, almost 50% Bengali medium teachers believe that a grammatically accurate writer is a good writer. On the other hand, less than 40% English medium teachers always give importance to grammar for good writing.

### *Findings and analysis of qualitative data*

As part of the data triangulation process (Cohen & Manion, 1994), 60 secondary level students in small groups of 5 participated in 12 focus group discussions following Katsara's (2008) method. Some of the students also joined in semi-structured interviews. According to the subjective data, different issues were identified, such as role of the teacher, role of materials, challenges faced by learners.

Learners from both mediums preferred writing to speaking. They described how speaking brings the immediate pressure of thinking, talking, and being judged by classmates and teacher simultaneously. On the other hand, the writing process gives them time to organize, present, correct, and review their ideas multiple times before the final presentation. Some of the learners also believe that writing makes them more creative.

**Use of material:** Learners from both mediums reported that they go through common and repetitive topics for writing throughout the lessons. 10 out of 30 students in English medium schools criticized the lack of variety in topics. Most learners from both mediums appreciated common topics as the context remains familiar and the task requires less preparation. One participant from English medium explained:

We do not need the teacher's help to write about Facebook or the movie *Cast Away*. With common topics like these, we can write without any help or preparation.

Both English medium and Bengali medium students talked about the frequent use of model texts provided by the teacher. They mostly used the model text either to memorize (Bengali medium) or copy ideas and vocabulary (English Medium).

**Role of the teacher:** Learners reported the prevalence of lecture-based classrooms where the teacher introduced a new topic or corrected errors through detailed description. For most of the English medium learners, too much teacher talk resulted in lack of preparation time and unfinished tasks. On the other hand, Bengali medium learners said that they struggled with vocabulary and idea generation. So they preferred the lecture mode as it gives them ideas for new topics and necessary vocabulary.

### *Challenges faced by learners*

**Role of peers:** Learners from both mediums displayed a negative attitude towards collaboration with peers. They believed that working alone would ensure more freedom and better performance. While sharing ideas with peers seemed plausible for some learners, most of them expressed their fear about the possibility of receiving negative and less productive comments from classmates.

**Lack of preparation:** Students from both mediums showed a common tendency to start the task without proper preparation. Bengali medium students did not know about the brainstorming technique for listing ideas before writing. One of the students said:

During writing, I keep listening to the comments of the teacher and other students. This is how I collect ideas.

English medium students frequently used a mind map and gathered ideas through brainstorming in the writing classroom. However, they considered the process difficult, time consuming, and responsible for unfinished tasks. One participant from English medium stated:

The thinking and organizing idea stage seems harder than the main writing task. It takes a lot of time to come up with ideas. That is why I immediately start writing and use any idea that comes to my mind at that moment.

**Lack of revision:** Secondary level students expressed more enthusiasm about finishing the task rather than evaluating it. Revising and editing was more common among Bengali medium learners than English medium learners. 20 participants from Bengali medium believed that they revised better when they got immediate response from the teacher after writing. Oral feedback from the teacher always prompted instant correction and editing. One student from Bengali medium said:

When the teacher gives oral feedback to someone in the class, everyone else can hear it and correct their writing immediately. It helps more than the written comments from the teacher which we get in the next class.

On the contrary, out of 30 English medium students, 15 participants reported how they skipped revision and editing most of the time. As written feedback is a common practice in their schools, detailed editing is possible when the teacher checks and returns learners' scripts. They preferred written feedback as it did not expose their errors in front of peers and also stayed on record for future reference. However, late feedback bore the risk of learners forgetting about the task and not checking teachers' comments.

**Role of feedback:** Learners from both mediums considered teacher feedback incomplete and confusing in some cases. According to students, Bengali medium teachers give comments like, "vocabulary needs to be increased," "read more," "learn grammatical rules," etc. English medium teachers gave comments like: "writing needs proper organization of ideas," "revise and try to find why the sentence does not make complete sense," "repetition," etc.

### Discussion

The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that prior studies have only noted the teachers' attitudes and techniques for EFL writing in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, without any medium and curriculum based comparison. An initial objective of this research was to identify the strategies of the EFL teachers in both mediums. Results show that English medium teachers mainly focus on content development but Bengali medium teachers focus primarily on grammatical and lexical accuracy. At the secondary level, English medium and Bengali medium teachers have different perceptions towards writing. Still, they follow similar strategies when it comes to using sample texts, preparation in the pre-writing stage, and editing.

According to the study, the process approach is almost absent in the classroom. For example: brainstorming before writing is practiced sometimes. However, repetitive topics, familiar contexts, and model texts increase copying, rote learning, and reduce focus on the structure and discourse of particular genres as well as any need of planning. This outcome is similar to Afrin's (2016) study who found memorization skills practiced in Bengali medium schools.

One interesting finding is the negative effect of content without variety which makes learners lose interest in idea generation and development. This is contrary to prior studies of Rass (2015) and Ciamis (2016) where lack of proficiency has been identified as the primary cause of demotivation.

The most alarming finding is that the classes focus more on theory consumption than actual writing practice. This result is consistent with the observation of Milon *et al.* (2018). English medium

teachers, especially, focused on clarifying the topic of books. Struggles at the preparation stage is common for Bengali medium learners. On the other hand, reflection and review is not common among English medium learners. This study further corroborates Chasiri's (2010) observation that even a properly staged EFL writing classroom is still extremely teacher-centered.

The findings about collaborative writing are similar to the study of Milon *et al.* (2018). Group work is not welcomed by most teachers and learners although it is used sometimes. Learner reluctance stems from the fear of negative peer evaluation rather than their lack of competence. This result is contrary to Pizarro's (2017) findings where peers were deemed incompetent for feedback giving.

It can be fairly deduced that writing is still an individual task in EFL classrooms which is time consuming with a tedious editing process. English medium learners may plan better than Bengali medium learners but both medium classes struggle with the writing process. After writing, learners may revise from time to time but editing is only done after receiving the teacher's feedback. The study displays the pattern of commonly used written feedback at the secondary level EFL class. This feedback comprises vague and general comments on linguistic accuracy mostly and shut down any further improvement of ideas. This finding is supported by Srichanyachon's (2011) study which showed instructors' tendency to correct only surface errors of learners' writing.

The findings of this study contain data from only Dhaka-based schools so it cannot identify all the existing teaching methods and possible factors affecting the teachers, learners, and classrooms of Bangladesh. However, a common picture of the existing situation in EFL writing classroom is portrayed, regardless of medium and curriculum. The findings show a classroom with strategies solely focused on content development, not any specific writing approach. A major finding was the vague feedback learners get for their task in writing which is used for further reference. More studies can be done to find the appropriate language and process of feedback. This study also opens up the scope for further research into material development, assessment policy, collaborative writing approach, and task management in secondary level EFL writing pedagogy.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study set out to gain a better understanding of the teaching methods used in the EFL classrooms of Bangladesh at the secondary level. The findings clearly indicate that both mediums in Bangladesh use similar methods for teaching writing in the EFL class despite the difference in curriculum and language of instruction. Writing is merely an aid for organizing points and applying correct grammar and vocabulary rather than a separate skill worth developing. The process approach only resides in some of the teachers' conceptions, not in practice. It is high time to fill the gap between what the learner needs and what the teacher does in the EFL writing classroom. The only way to do this is to establish effective teaching methods for writing. Based on these findings, the following suggestions are provided:

- Variety in content should be ensured to keep learners engaged in the classroom;
- A combination of product and process approach should be applied to keep the focus on writing skills development, not only content and accuracy improvement;
- Learner-centred classroom should be in practice;

- Instead of general comments, clear and concise feedback should be given about specific parts of the written task;
- Peer involvement should be visible in the pre-writing and post-writing stage.

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# Tasks for the Transition: A Needs Analysis to Determine Bangladeshi High-school Students' English Needs at University

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## Abstract

In Bangladesh, high school students have trouble doing English tasks when they enter university due to their high school's medium of instruction and their need for both English *and* academic skills. One way to prepare students for university is to develop programs around tasks they will do at university. This study documents three phases of a needs analysis to design a summer English program for students at Notre Dame College (NDC) in Bangladesh. The three phases identified where students would need English when they graduate, tasks they would need to do, and situations in which they would do those tasks. In Phase 1, teacher interviews and student questionnaires revealed where students would need English. In Phase 2, to get a sense of situations and tasks in which students would need English, I interviewed teachers, spoke with students, and observed classes at four universities. In Phase 3, to understand how relevant situations, tasks, and media were to more students, questionnaires were given to 240 students across universities. Results were situations, tasks, and commonly-used media for developing the NDC curriculum.

**Keywords:** needs analysis, MOI, task-based language teaching

## Introduction

In Bangladesh, many high school students have trouble doing English tasks at university. Although English is mandatory through high school, students have difficulty giving presentations, writing essays, and emailing their professors in English. Several factors make it hard for high school students when they enter university, where English is prevalent. First, the medium of instruction (MOI) varies from one high school to the next; some are Bangla-medium institutions that follow the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum, whereas others are English-medium institutions that follow different curricula (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013). Second, students need English skills to perform certain tasks successfully and *academic* skills too (Khan & Ivy, 2015).

One way to prepare students for English and academic challenges is to design programs around university-level English tasks. This study reports on the first three phases of a needs analysis (Long, 2005) that was carried out from 2014-2016 to design a summer English program for students at Notre Dame College (NDC) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The needs analysis was carried out to determine which tasks at university were done in English; those tasks would then form the basis for the NDC summer English program's curriculum. Short-term English programs designed around university-level English tasks can prepare high school students, regardless of their high school's MOI (Murtaza, 2016), for both the English and academic challenges at university.

## Background literature

### *Task-based language teaching*

This study falls within task-based language teaching (TBLT). Specifically, since the purpose of this needs analysis is to identify *real* university English tasks to create the curriculum for the NDC

summer program, I adopt a strong form of TBLT (see Long, 2015). In this section, I define “task” and “TBLT;” discuss the role of experiential learning in TBLT, and then review the core components of TBLT; “needs analysis” is one of TBLT’s core components.

“Task” and “TBLT” have different definitions. I adopt Long’s (1985) definition of “tasks,” as “the hundred and one things people *do* in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. ‘Tasks’ are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists” (p. 81). Almost anything can be a task, such as completing a form or using a supermarket’s self-checkout lane, as long as it is part of learners’ everyday lives. “TBLT” is an approach to language education where those everyday tasks are at the heart of a program (Long, 1985; Norris, 2009). In other words, in a TBLT program, tasks are at the heart of class activities, the curriculum, goals and objectives, teaching and learning materials, and assessment.

Experiential learning is a key feature of TBLT. In an experiential approach to language education (Dewey, 1933), the experience of *doing* a task helps students learn both the task and the language they need to carry it out. The task and the language are linked; because they are linked, the NDC summer program can prepare Bangladeshi high school students to complete university English tasks by *doing* those tasks with students. By doing those tasks, students will also acquire the language they need to carry them out. Experiential learning is a cornerstone of TBLT programs.

A strong TBLT program has several core components. Components include needs analysis, task selection and sequencing, materials and instructional development, teaching, assessment, and program evaluation (Davis & McKay, 2018; Norris, 2009). When each of these components is based on tasks that are relevant to students’ lives, they function together as a whole program that is designed to help them meet their needs and deliver a learning experience for them (Norris, 2016). When any one of these components is missing, the capacity of the program to help students meet their needs is diminished.

The needs analysis is the most crucial component in a strong TBLT program. If a needs analysis is not carried out to identify tasks that students need to do with language, then there is less glue to keep the program together to help students meet their needs. Needs analysis involves using different data-collection methods and different sources to triangulate those tasks that are most relevant to learners’ lives (Long, 2005). After a needs analysis, educators have a set of real-world tasks to design, develop, or update their programs.

### ***Needs analysis***

Needs analysis is the most relevant program component for this study. A needs analysis can be carried out to analyze different types of needs, using different data-collection methods and information sources to find out what those needs are. In the context of TBLT, the most appropriate type of needs analysis is a *task-based* needs analysis (Long, 2005). Here, I describe different types of needs analyses. I then discuss task-based needs analysis and needs analyses done in Bangladesh.

Needs analyses can be done to identify different types of needs. In language programs, there is usually a direct relationship between type of need and a program’s curriculum design. A type of need might include communicative functions for a program built around the four skills. However,

for a content-based program, the type of need would be the content. The type of the needs analysis depends on aspects of the language program, including stakeholders' beliefs about language learning.

In TBLT, the most appropriate type of needs analysis is a *task-based* one. Task-based needs analysis came about with Long's (2005) "Second Language Needs Analysis." Long discusses the importance of triangulating tasks by using multiple data-collection methods and sources of information to learn what those tasks are. For example, instead of jotting down their own ideas about what first-year undergraduate students at university need English for, EFL teachers might conduct focus groups and interviews with first-year students. Additionally, teachers might administer questionnaires to professors who teach first-year courses. Based on information obtained through the multiple data-collection methods and sources, the teachers have a rich body of evidence about first-year university students' tasks.

In Bangladesh, there are few published needs analyses, and none has been task-based. Two needs analyses done in Bangladesh are worth highlighting. First, English in Action (EIA) conducted a series of baseline studies to gather information they could use to guide their English programming (EIA, 2009). In one of these studies, EIA examined people's motivation for learning English; researchers developed two questionnaires and orally administered them to thousands of teachers and students in primary and secondary schools. Second, the NCTB did a needs analysis to update their national English curriculum (NCTB, 2012). The needs analyses reported in these studies are problematic in two respects. First, it is unclear how questionnaire items were created or where they were taken from. Second, the types of needs being analyzed were communicative functions associated with the four skills. These needs analyses are of limited use for TBLT programs.

### **Study purpose**

The purpose of this study is to document the first three phases of a task-based needs analysis, carried out from 2014-2016, to design a summer English program for students at NDC in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Specifically, phases correspond to three of the phases outlined by Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006) for doing needs analysis (p. 44; see Figure 1). This study documents the following three phases: language-use domains (Phase 1) and language-use situations and tasks (Phase 2-3).

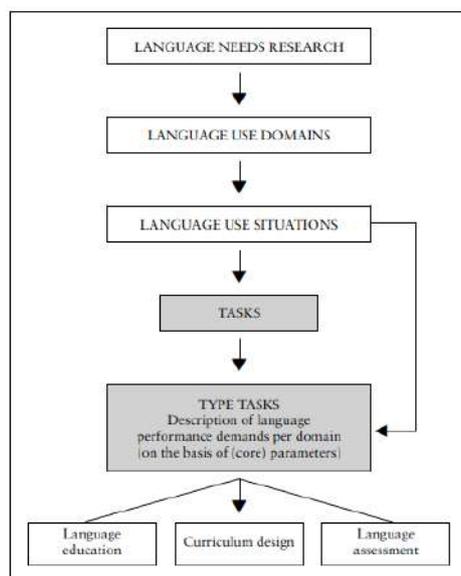


Figure 1: Van Avermaet and Gysen's (2006) outline for a task-based needs analysis

Each of the three phases is distinct. The *language-use domain* is where students need to use language (e.g., the workplace). *Language-use situations* refer to specific situations in a domain for which language will be used (e.g., emailing students and reviewing lecture material with them). *Tasks* and *task types* break language-use situations down further. *Tasks* for reviewing lecture material might include comprehension questions for students, writing legibly on a whiteboard, and giving practical examples to illustrate concepts. *Task types* are sets of similar tasks (see Oxford, 2006).

### Phase 1

The purpose of Phase 1 was to identify the domain where NDC students would need to use language. Although I suspected that private and public universities would be the most relevant language-use domain for high school students, additional evidence was needed to support the development of a summer English program around tasks. Therefore, Phase 1 consists of the following two data-collection methods and sources: interviews with NDC teachers and questionnaires given to NDC students.

### Methodology

#### Research questions

Phase 1 was guided by five research questions (RQs). The RQs seek to elicit information about tasks, how frequently tasks are carried out, reasons for which NDC students need English, where students report they will need English in the future, and where students were using English. These five RQs are listed below.

- RQ1. What are the tasks for which NDC students need English?
- RQ2. How frequently are these tasks carried out?

- RQ3. What are the reasons for which NDC students report needing English?  
 RQ4. Where do students report needing English in the future?  
 RQ5. Where do NDC students use English now?

### **Data-collection methods**

Two data-collection methods were used in Phase 1. Methods were interviews (with teachers) and questionnaires (given to students). Data-collection methods were developed in an iterative way; I used information that I learned from teacher interviews to guide the development of items on the student questionnaire. Each method is discussed below.

The first method was interviews with NDC teachers. I developed an interview protocol and an interview guide to keep interviews on track. The protocol had multiple sections, detailing the purpose of the interview, timing and location, materials and equipment needed, questions, and opening and closing statements. Information from the interview protocol was then built into an interview guide, which I kept on hand during interviews. The interview guide has different columns of questions, with questions in different columns being asked depending on an interviewee's answers to prior questions.

The second method was a questionnaire. Questionnaire items were developed based on information obtained from teachers. The questionnaire had five sections: bio-data, future English use, reasons for English use, current English use, and task and task-frequency identification. The format of items varied by section, consisting of short-answer, Likert-type, and selected-response items.

### **Data-collection sources**

There were two data-collection sources in Phase 1. Sources were Bangladeshi students and teachers at NDC. Interviews with teachers were conducted first, followed by the administration of questionnaires to students in an intact class. More information about teachers and students follows.

Teachers were the first source of information about where students would need to do English tasks. Five English teachers at NDC were interviewed. These teachers had been teaching English for 7-20 years, were skilled English users, and included self-identified male and female teachers. I contacted these five teachers to ask if they would participate in an interview because I knew them; I taught English at NDC for about eight months as a Fulbright English teaching assistant. L1-Bangla teachers of English at NDC were the first source.

The second source about students' task-based needs were NDC students. About 130 students from an intact English class in grade 11 (Arts group) were given the questionnaire. Most students identified as Bangladeshi, but some identified as members of minority groups (e.g., Tripura and Garo). Students were 14-18 years old. Most students lived in Dhaka to attend NDC but were from other parts of the country; at the time of completing the questionnaire, students had lived in Dhaka from six months to eighteen years. Twenty-two students claimed to speak languages other than Bangla.

## Procedures

Procedures for conducting interviews and handing out questionnaires can each be broken into two processes. The two processes include preparation and administration processes. Preparation and administration for interviews are discussed first, followed by the preparation and administration of questionnaires to students.

Preparing for the interview with NDC teachers involved multiple steps. First, once the interview protocol and guide were developed for interviews with teachers, I piloted the interview guide by interviewing three English-speaking Bangladeshis. Second, after finalizing the interview guide, several English teachers at NDC were contacted by phone or email to ask if they would participate in an interview. Third and finally, times and dates for interviews were scheduled for whenever was most convenient for teachers.

The “administration” of the interview had multiple steps. First, at scheduled interview dates and times, I Skyped teachers. Second, after small talk, I thanked teachers for their time, explained why they were being interviewed, and asked their permission to record the call. I also told teachers that information they shared about students' needs would be confidential and that the interview would last about 30 minutes. Third, I interviewed teachers. Finally, a day or two after the interview, I transcribed the Skype audio and reviewed the transcription for teacher responses that I could use to develop the student questionnaire.

Student-questionnaire preparation involved multiple steps. First, responses from teachers to questions in the interview guide were developed into a questionnaire. Second, I piloted the questionnaire with five, L1-Bangla individuals to get their feedback. Third, as a result of the L1-Bangla participants' feedback, I learned that some Bangladeshi students might not know how to respond to Likert-type items. Therefore, in the next step, when the questionnaire was given to the Arts group of students, the teacher was asked to review how to respond to Likert-type items with them. Fourth, the questionnaire was handed out to students. Finally, students who chose to respond put their completed questionnaires and signed consent forms into the teacher's mailbox; questionnaires were returned to the research assistant, who then scanned and emailed them to me.

## Analyses and software

Interview and questionnaire data were analyzed in several ways. First, interview transcriptions were analyzed in Evernote by coding responses to interview questions with different colored highlighting. Data from transcriptions were then translated into questionnaire items. Second, questionnaire data were analyzed by calculating frequency and descriptive information for students' responses and by summarizing comments to open-ended questions. Due to a restriction of space, only frequency and descriptive information are presented, but I encourage anyone to look at students' comments in the “Phase1.csv” Excel spreadsheet at the website (<https://sites.google.com/site/toddhavilandmckay/>).

Frequency and descriptive information from student questionnaires were analyzed in R (R Core Team, 2018). To present responses to Likert-type items, I used the Likert package (Bryer & Speerschnieder, 2016). While the raw data are available in an Excel spreadsheet at the website, I decided to use R so that others could reproduce my tables with the R syntax.

## Results

The results from Phase 1 are presented in two sections. First, I talk about the number of student questionnaires that were returned and analyzable. Second, I discuss the frequency and descriptive information from student questionnaires. Readers are encouraged to inspect the raw data (see website).

Out of the 130 questionnaires given to students, 89 were returned (return rate = 68%). Out of the 89 returned, 8 were excluded for different reasons. Some of the excluded questionnaires had only bio-data sections filled out. For others, response patterns were confusing. For example, on one returned questionnaire, only 3 of 28 Likert-type items were responded to; thus, I could not tell if no response meant “Not at all” or something else.

I discuss results from the questionnaire in the order questions appear on the questionnaire. Specifically, I discuss results to the following questions: “Where will you need English in the future?” (Section II), “Why are you learning English?” (Section III), “How often do you use English in the following settings?” (Section IV), and “Outside of school and homework, how often do you use English in the following situations?” (Section V). Responses to the last question (Section V) are about tasks.

Students’ responses to “Where will you need English in the future?” are shown in Figure 2. To help interpret trends in responses, I added a horizontal line at  $y = 40$  because 40 is about half the number of completed questionnaires received from students. Although some students will use English with their family, at Open University, in the army, or in diploma courses (short certificate programs), quite a few think they will need to use English as part of their studies at National University, at private or public universities in Bangladesh, and if they go abroad for travel, or to pursue a degree outside Bangladesh. Many Arts-group students see themselves needing English for higher education.

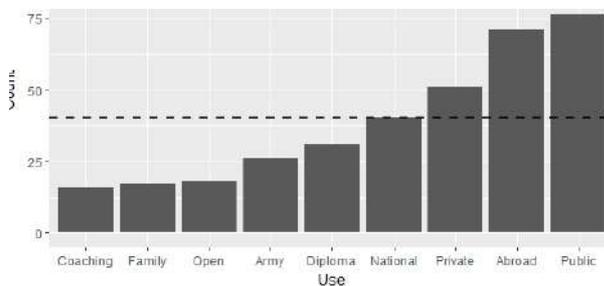


Figure 2. “Where will you need English in the future?”

Students’ responses to the “Why are you learning English?” question are shown in Figure 3. Based on these responses, 30-40 students are learning English to get their high school degree and pass the HSC exam, and many are learning English to read textbooks, get a good job in the future, and to get a university degree. Thus, these responses also indicate that students see themselves needing to use English at university.

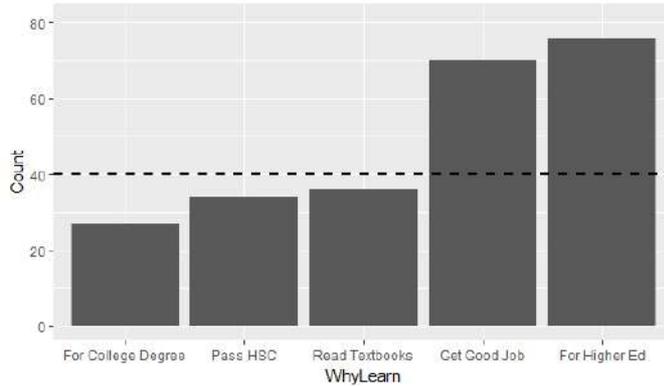


Figure 3. "Why are you learning English?"

Students' responses to the "How often do you use English in the following settings?" question are shown in Figure 4. Responses indicate that about half of the students use English "somewhat frequently" in NDC classes, but the other half does not. Students also do not use English much on campus outside of class, at home, or with friends. These results are not surprising because Bangla is the dominant language for most students and members of students' families.

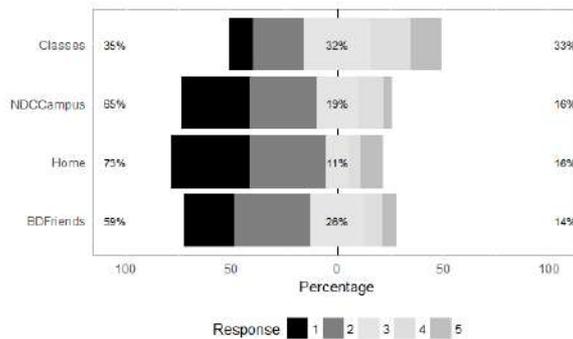


Figure 4. "How often do you use English in the following settings?" ("1" = 'Not at all' and "5" = 'Very often')

Finally, students' responses to "Outside of school and homework, how often do you use English in the following situations?" are in Figure 5. Most students in Bangladesh do not have laptops or desktop computers, but smartphones are everywhere; therefore, it is not surprising to see that tasks include browsing the Internet, watching TV or movies, sending text messages (SMS), and using Facebook (FB). Eyeballing tasks towards the bottom of Figure 5, it seems that students use English much less frequently for job-related tasks, such as using LinkedIn, applying for jobs, putting together a resume, or giving a talk or speech. Students also use English less frequently for some communication tasks, like talking on Skype or sending emails, probably because much of their communication takes place via phone call or text. Responses in Figure 5 give a sense of the tasks that high school students use English for.

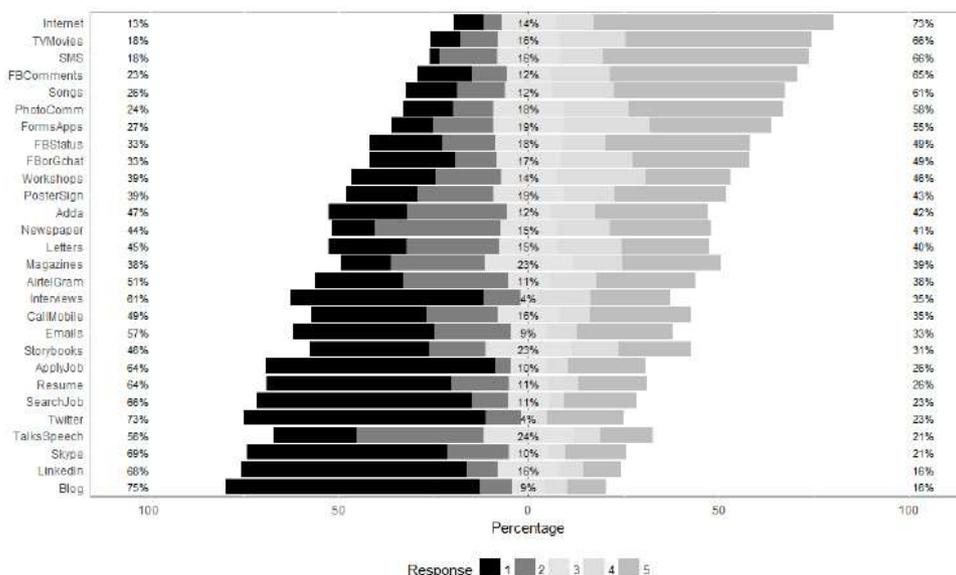


Figure 5. “How often do you use English in the following situations?” (“1” = ‘Not at all’ and “2” = ‘Very often’)

In summary, Phase 1 results offer insight into why, where, and how NDC students use English. Most students think they will need English to continue learning at university, and that is why most of them are learning English. Students use English in classes at NDC but not much outside of class. The tasks they do use English for seem to be those they can do with their smartphones, including texting and communicating on social media. Results also indicate that students see university as a domain where they will need English when they graduate.

### Phase 2

In Phase 1, the most frequent English tasks involve social media and their smartphones, and the university is where they indicated they would need English. Therefore, I had two goals in Phase 2: (1) get an *initial* sense of the situations in which high school students would need to use English and the tasks they would need to do at university, and (2) identify commonly used media at university. Situations, tasks, and media could then be integrated into the NDC summer English program. To meet both goals, I interviewed university teachers, observed university classes, and spoke with university students at two public and two private universities. I discuss data-collection methods, sources of information, procedures, and analyses. This section concludes with a set of situations, tasks, and commonly used media.

### Methodology

#### Research questions

Phase 2 was guided by three RQs. Each of the three RQs corresponds to each type of information I was trying to elicit in this phase: information about situations, tasks, and commonly used media. These three RQs are listed below.

- RQ1. In what situations do students need to use English when they enter university?
- RQ2. Within each situation, what are specific tasks students need to do at university?
- RQ3. What types of media (if any) are most commonly used at university?

### **Data-collection methods**

There were three data-collection methods in Phase 2. Methods included interviews (with teachers), focus group discussions (with students), and classroom observations. To keep interviews and focus groups on track, I used another semi-structured interview guide. Questions on the guide covered (1) demographic information; (2) how English was used by students in classes, at other places on campus outside of class, and in other areas of students' lives; and (3) with foreigners and students' peers. I took freehand notes when I observed classes as long as doing so did not disrupt teachers.

### **Data-collection sources**

There were two sources of information in Phase 2. Sources were faculty and students at each of the four universities. Faculty members included both part-time and full-time employees. Students who participated in focus groups were those enrolled in these faculty members' classes. Students had different MOI backgrounds. Faculty and students were teaching or learning in lower-level courses. At each of the four universities, I obtained information about situations, tasks, and commonly used media from faculty and students in English and non-English courses. Non-English courses included environmental science, history, pharmacy, and public administration courses.

### **Procedures**

The procedures I followed at each university for interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations were all similar. In this section, I talk about how I recruited faculty and students from the four universities. Next, I go over the procedures I followed for interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups. Finally, I talk about how data were assembled for analysis.

Several steps were involved in recruiting faculty and students at universities. I would contact a faculty member by phone or email, explain the study's purpose, clarify that none of my work was being done to evaluate teaching or learning, and ask if we could meet in person to talk about the needs analysis more. During the meeting, I answered the faculty member's questions about the needs analysis, explained what participation would entail, and gave them consent forms to review and sign. Lastly, I told faculty members that I would make my notes available upon request.

Several steps were involved for the teacher interview. The interview usually took place either immediately before or after the class I was invited to observe. Right before starting the interview, I asked the faculty member's permission to record the interview and take notes, I showed them the interview questions, and I explained that no identifying information was being collected. At the end of the interview, which lasted about 30 minutes, I showed the faculty member my notes and thanked them for their help.

Next, I followed several steps in observing classes. Usually, after initial contact, the faculty member would tell me the date and time for a regular class they wanted me to observe. I would walk with the faculty member to the class or would arrive early to class on my own. In most cases, I sat at the back of the classroom during class; during the last five minutes of class, I introduced myself

to students and explained what I was doing there. In some cases, the faculty member asked me to introduce myself at the beginning of class and answer a few questions. After class, I showed my handwritten notes to the faculty member.

Procedures for recruiting students for focus groups varied. I requested students' participation in focus groups when I introduced myself before or after a classroom observation. However, some faculty members insisted on selecting students for focus groups themselves. I tried to ensure that students were recruited in a particular way for focus groups, but sometimes faculty members made decisions that would have been inappropriate for me to challenge. I met students in groups of about 4-10, sometimes right after class but sometimes at a later date. I met with groups in empty classrooms on students' home campuses. Before the focus group discussion, I talked about the purpose of the needs analysis, set "ground rules" for discussion, and reviewed the consent form with them. I also told students that I spoke Bangla, so they could switch between English and Bangla if they wanted to. Right before asking questions, I asked students' permission to start recording, explaining that no identifying information would be collected. After the 30-minute focus group discussion, I thanked students for their help.

Finally, to prepare to analyze the data, all interview and focus-group recordings were transcribed in a Word document. Classroom observation notes, along with backup notes from focus groups and interviews, were typed in Word. All documents were uploaded to NVivo for analysis and coding; in total, 34 documents were uploaded.

### **Analyses**

I analyzed all the data from interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations in NVivo. After uploading documents to NVivo, I scanned them for emergent themes (see Mackey & Gass, 2015). "Themes" were tasks and commonly used media. Once individual tasks were identified, they were grouped according to situation. Situations, tasks, and commonly used media could then be used to create the NDC summer English program's curriculum (see Van den Branden, 2016).

### **Results**

I discovered multiple English tasks and situations that students need English for at university. I was also able to pinpoint several commonly used sources of media that students and faculty members use at university. Although I do not present the results of the qualitative analysis in detail, please see the NVivo source and node reports at the website.

During the analysis, I started by identifying different tasks that students need English to do at university; these tasks were then grouped into situations. Situations are listed in the left-hand column in Table 1. The number of English tasks that students need to do in each of those ten situations varies, ranging from three to nine tasks per situation. To design the NDC program's curriculum, situations can be used to create lesson units, and individual classes within units can be structured around a situation's tasks.

Table 1. Situations and tasks at the university level

<i>Situations</i> tasks	Sources	Refs
<i>Applying for a job</i>	7	11
answer questions about job fit	2	3
create a CV or resume	4	4
fill out job applications	1	1
greet people	3	3
<i>Debating issues</i>	3	3
counter others' arguments	1	1
express ideas and points of view	1	1
summarize key information	1	1
<i>Delivering presentation or speech</i>	18	35
answer audience questions	1	3
create PPT slides	2	3
introduce yourself and classmates	1	3
prepare poster	2	4
present information to an audience	16	20
critique your own presentation	1	1
research information on websites	1	1
<i>Initiating university life</i>	10	18
fill out admission form	3	4
fill out library form	1	1
navigate university webpages	1	1
read orientation materials	1	1
read university prospectus	1	1
speak spontaneously on a topic	6	7
write admission essay	1	1
<i>Managing course logistics</i>	15	27
access class info on FB	6	7
access class info on Google Classroom	1	1
check e-mail from faculty	1	1
post on class FB page	1	1
read notice boards	8	9
remind faculty to take class	1	2
send an SMS to faculty	1	1
send apology e-mail to faculty	1	1
send e-mail to faculty	4	4
<i>Opening a bank account</i>	2	4
communicate with tellers	2	2
fill out account slip	1	1
fill out transaction slip	1	1
<i>Participating in club activities</i>	12	18
access online materials	1	1
club activities	11	13

create print materials	1	1
greet potential staff and sponsors	3	3
<i>Reading and understanding print instructions</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>6</i>
read doctors' prescriptions	2	2
read print instructions	1	2
read product information	2	2
<i>Understanding a course lecture</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>41</i>
answer questions	6	6
ask questions	5	5
provide explanation to the class	2	2
read the textbook	7	10
read PPT slides	5	5
take notes	9	9
watch films or YouTube videos	4	4
<i>Writing an essay</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>7</i>
access academic journals	2	2
brainstorm ideas for essay	1	1
read academic journals	1	2
write a short essay	1	1
write a thesis statement	1	1

*Note.* “Sources” are the number of documents uploaded to NVivo, and “Refs” is the total number of individual references about tasks and media across documents.

I also identified media that was commonly used at university. The list of media is shown in Table 2. Knowing what media is commonly used at university is helpful in designing the NDC summer English program; by using these media in the program, students will, hopefully, have an easier time using them when they enter university. Therefore, knowing what media is commonly used at university will be helpful in creating educational materials.

Table 2. Commonly used media at the university

Media	Sources	Refs
Movies	17	22
Music	10	13
TV series	6	6
YouTube videos	12	19
News (paper, TV)	13	23
Novels or books	1	1
Diary	2	2
Blog	4	5

### Phase 3

In Phase 3, my goal was to examine the extent to which information about situations, tasks, and commonly used media from Phase 2 were relevant to the lives of a larger group of university students. Therefore, in Phase 3, I developed a questionnaire and gave it to 239 students at private and public universities to fill out. Before discussing students' responses to the questionnaire, I discuss the data-collection method (the questionnaire), student sources, procedures, and analyses.

### *Methodology*

#### Research questions

Phase 3 was guided by two RQs. Because data were collected from only a handful of teachers, students, and classes in Phase 2, I wanted to get a sense of how relevant that information was to the lives of a larger group of students. Therefore, Phase 3 was guided by the following RQs:

- RQ1. To what extent do the situations and tasks identified in Phase 2 pertain to the larger student body?
- RQ2. To what extent are the forms of media identified in Phase 2 used by the larger student body?

#### Data-collection method

To help answer RQs 1 and 2, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was a paper questionnaire, which was developed from the information about situations, tasks, and commonly used media learned in Phase 2. Here, I discuss how items were developed from the information in Phase 2, the structure of the questionnaire, and my reasons for typing the questionnaire in English and not in Bangla.

An important aspect of the questionnaire was how items were developed from information in Phase 2. On the questionnaire, situations were question stems, and tasks were listed as items beneath the question stem (see Table 3). Students were asked to indicate how important English was for doing those tasks on a scale of 1–5. In this way, information about situations, tasks, and commonly used media learned in Phase 2 were developed into a paper questionnaire for a larger body of university students.

Table 3. Moving from qualitative tasks and situations to questionnaire items

Applying for a job	When <b>applying for a job</b> , how <u>important</u> is English to...	Not important				Very important
answer questions about job fit	1. answer questions about job fit?	1	2	3	4	5
create a CV or resume	2. create a CV or resume?	1	2	3	4	5
fill out job applications	3. fill out job applications?	1	2	3	4	5
greet people	4. greet people?	1	2	3	4	5

A second aspect of the questionnaire was its structure. There were three sections on the questionnaire: demographic, situation + tasks, and media sections. Questions in the demographic section were about students' academic year, major, age, dominant language, hometown, MOI, and time spent in an English-speaking country. Questions about commonly used media asked students to indicate how frequently they used different media. Finally, questions in the situation + tasks section asked students to indicate how important English was for doing certain tasks at university.

I chose to type the questionnaire in English for three reasons. First, English is the MOI at universities in Bangladesh; although students differ in their English use, all students are used to reading and writing in English to take exams, read PowerPoint slides, and follow lectures. Second, I translated the questionnaire from English to Bangla before giving it to university students, but some translations were strange because many academic terms are used in English anyway. Third and finally, although many students know the Bangla for academic terms more commonly used in English, some students from English-medium backgrounds are unfamiliar with the Bangla for *academic* terms. Therefore, I typed the questionnaire in English.

### Data-collection sources

Sources of information were undergraduate students. About 60 students from each of the same two public and private universities I discussed in Phase 2 completed the paper questionnaire ( $N = 239$  in total). Students' average age was 21 years. Students were studying many different subjects. Of the 239 students who completed the questionnaire, 149 were male and 90 were female, 89 were from outside of Dhaka, and 38 were from English MOI backgrounds.

### Procedures

There were two sets of procedures for the paper questionnaire. Prior to handing out the questionnaire to students, I piloted it with two Bangladeshi peers. After a few minor revisions, I handed the questionnaire out to students at each of the four universities by visiting their university cafeterias at lunchtime. Universities did not have a student listserv. I printed stacks of questionnaires, went to a university cafeteria, approached students sitting in groups, explained who I was and what I was doing, and then asked them if they had five minutes to complete the questionnaire. If they said "Yes," I gave them questionnaires and sat with them while they completed them so that they could ask me questions if they had any. I was able to get 239 questionnaires from students in three days.

## Analyses

Frequency and descriptive information from questionnaires were analyzed in R (R Core Team, 2018). To present responses to Likert-type items, I used the Likert package (Bryer & Speerschneider, 2016). Raw questionnaire data and the R syntax are available at my website. In the results section, I discuss responses for the commonly used media first followed by responses to situations + task sections.

## Results

In this results section, I discuss responses to two sections of the questionnaire. Since I gave an overview of students' profiles above, here I discuss students' responses to the commonly used media section and the situation + tasks sections of the questionnaire. Students' responses to each section are discussed next.

Responses to the commonly used media section are in Figure 6. University students most frequently use English when watching YouTube videos, listening to music, and watching movies. Students' responses indicate that they are split in their use of English to read and watch the news, watch TV, and read novels and books. Few students use English when writing in their diaries or on online blogs. These responses are helpful in two ways: they indicate media commonly used by university students and provide additional evidence in support of using some media for the NDC program's educational materials.

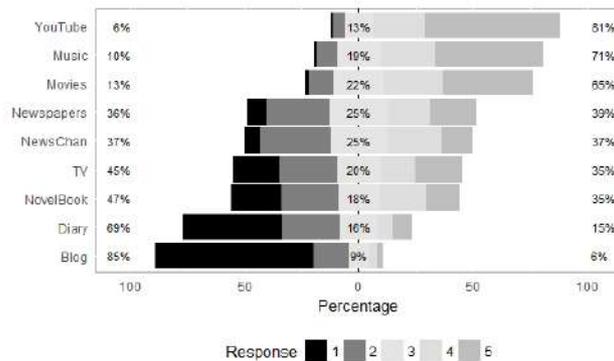


Figure 6. Responses to “How often do you use English in the following situations?” (“1” = ‘Not at all’ and “5” = ‘Very often’)

The next set of sections students responded to were the situation + tasks sections of the questionnaire. Only one situation, “Participating in club activities,” was not added to the questionnaire because I learned that few students participate in clubs at university. My discussion of students' responses to the situation + task sections of the questionnaire are broken down into two sub-sections: overall trend in responses and two exceptions to the trend.

There is a trend in students' responses to the nine situation + tasks sections. Patterns of responses for each situation + task section are shown in Figures 7–15 (“1” = ‘Not at all’ and “5” = ‘Very often’). Students' responses across all figures show that students think English is overwhelmingly important for doing most of the tasks listed in the questionnaire. The overall trend in students'

responses is a trustworthy indication of how important English is for many university-level tasks; thus, these situations and tasks are a great starting point for developing course units and individual lessons for the NDC summer program.

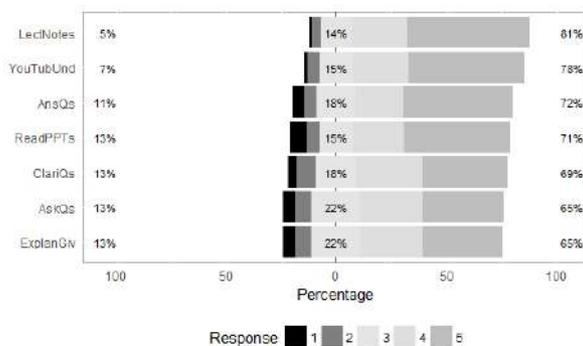


Figure 7. “Understand a course lecture”

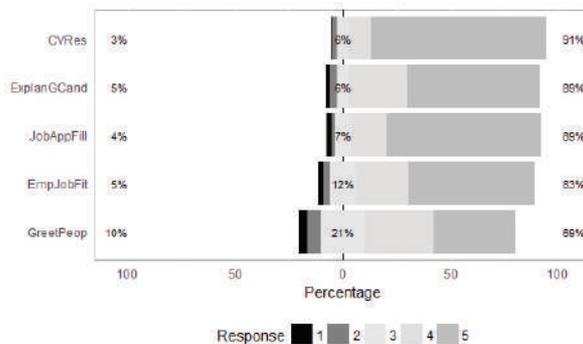


Figure 8. “Applying for a job”

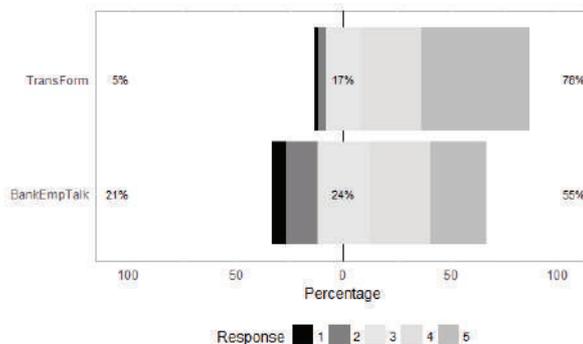


Figure 9. “Open a bank account”

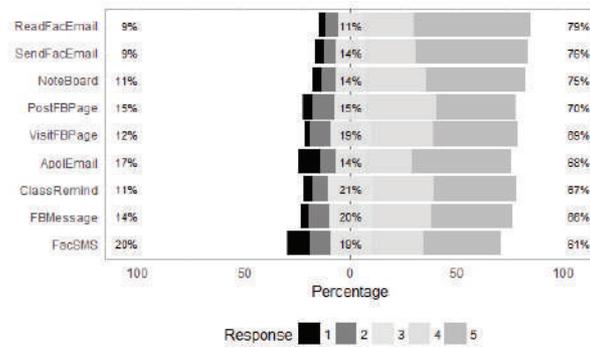


Figure 10. "Manage course participation"

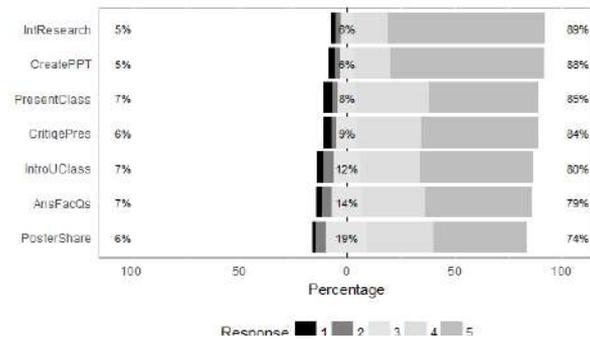


Figure 11. "Give a speech or presentation"

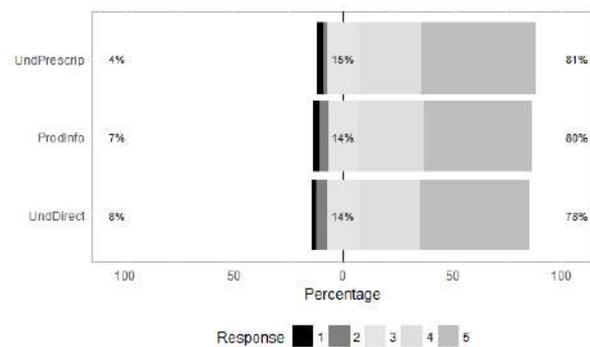


Figure 12. "Read instructions"

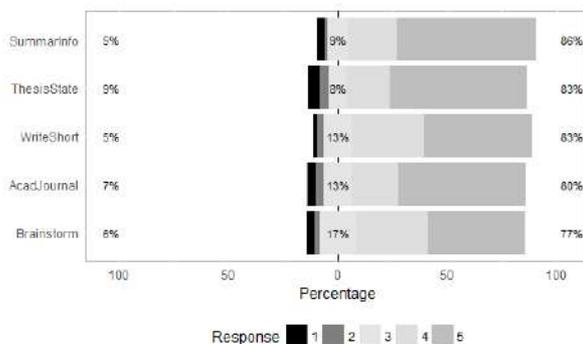


Figure 13. "Writing an essay"

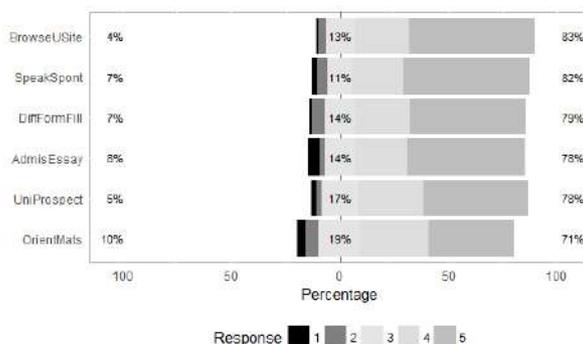


Figure 14. "Starting at university"

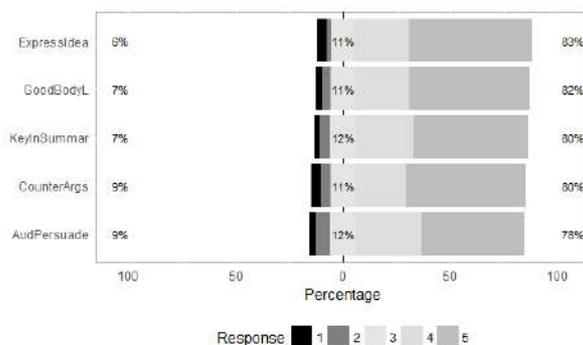


Figure 15. "Debating issues"

There were two exceptions to the trend in responses. First, for the "Open a bank account" situation, students noted that English was not so important when talking with employees at the bank (*BankEmpTalk*); when speaking with bank employees, students probably use Bangla. Second, for the "Manage course participation" situation, 20% of students noted that English was not so

important for sending text messages to faculty (*FacSMS*) because students probably rarely do that to begin with. There were just two exceptions to the overall trend.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This needs analysis makes an important contribution to the TBLT literature. Few *task-based* needs analyses have been published in language education. This needs analysis adds to the body of task-based needs analyses by Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006), González-Lloret (2003), and Huh (2006), among others; more published task-based needs analyses means more real examples of how educators can better align program goals and objectives with students' needs.

This needs analysis makes three important contributions to ESP work in Bangladesh. First, English educators in Bangladesh are increasingly aware that high school students are having trouble doing tasks in English when they graduate and enter university (Khan & Ivy, 2015); therefore, a task-based summer program could prepare students for both English *and* academic tasks they will need to do at university. Second, most high school students in Bangladesh need to take the SSC and HSC exams; these exams are high-stakes exams, so the teaching and learning of SSC/HSC content is prioritized over the English and academic skills students will need in their future studies (Tahereen, 2014). A task-based program could help high school students orient themselves to university life after having spent so much time focused on national exams. Finally, scholars have noted that differences in students' abilities to use English and English-medium (or MOI) policies at the university level may intensify divisions between students, and between students and faculty (Sultana, 2014); therefore, a task-based summer program could help put students on equal footing by preparing all of them to succeed in their academic work.

This study also contributes to the push to improve research methodology and data-sharing in applied linguistics. First, Cumming (2014) recommends making “a full description of the research, preferably including the raw data, available to other researchers” (p. 14); all data and materials from this study are openly available. Second, I make this study's materials and data available so that all results can be replicated. Third, although R is used less frequently than SPSS or Excel by many applied linguistics (Loewen et al., 2014), by making R syntax available, communication among the research community can be improved (Mizumoto & Plonsky, 2016).

Finally, the most important contribution of this study is to the NDC summer English program. Although many components of a language program need to work together to deliver a learning experience that will help meet students' needs, a needs analysis is a good starting point for developing a “defensible curriculum” (Brown, 1995, p. 36). I reported on the systematic collection of information about the tasks students need to do with language when they enter university so that all future steps in the design and development of the NDC summer program would be geared towards meeting students' needs.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, doing research in Bangladesh is a blessing and a curse. For Bangladeshis, it is considered an honor to participate in research (see Hamid, 2010), making it easy to recruit participants. However, I cannot ignore my role as a Western researcher, which no doubt

biased findings because I was able to gain access to research sites and people that would have been difficult for others to access. Second, results of this needs analysis might be less relevant for other programs. Task-based English programs are contextualized because they are developed around the needs of the students enrolled in them. While the findings of this needs analysis can be useful for designing other programs, stakeholders at other programs should look into additional tasks that might be relevant to the lives of the students in their programs.

*Note:* The author would like to acknowledge the support of Notre Dame College and thank the students for participating in this study.

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# Teaching English Listening Skills at the Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Teaching English listening skills, though very fundamental, is usually neglected at the secondary level EFL classroom in Bangladesh. This study primarily aims at discovering the current scenario of teaching and learning of listening skills at the secondary level and the reasons for this negligence. It also examines the English listening skills curriculum offered by the NCTB of Bangladesh. This study further proposes some strategies for the development of listening skills. Data was collected from 130 students and 22 English teachers of 11 schools based on the stratified random sampling. For collecting the data, a typology of mixed methods research (QUAN-QUAL) was performed where the data collection instruments were a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire. Secondary level EFL teachers and students participated in the study. The analysis reveals that in most cases the secondary level EFL teachers do not follow any particular method to teach listening skills and they lack knowledge of effective listening skills teaching strategies. The results also show that the NCTB curriculum does not provide proper directions in this regard. Finally, this paper discusses the implications of the findings and offers some recommendations for the considerations of all three groups of stakeholders: authorities, teachers, and students.

**Keywords:** Listening Skills, Secondary Level, NCTB, EFL, ELT

We have seen that traditionally, listening is labeled as a “passive” skill but this is both misleading and incorrect. Listening is practically an active skill because the listener is involved, for instance, in guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting, and organizing (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara, 2013, p. 137). Though this is considered an important skill, at least theoretically, by the secondary level institutions, we do not see any practical implications of it in the secondary level EFL classrooms in Bangladesh. Listening skill classes are generally unheard of at the secondary level institutions. It is not a part of the terminal assessments of the institutions which even makes the development of listening skills a neglected issue in the EFL classroom. This negligence ultimately affects students’ listening proficiency negatively and consequently their speaking skills. These problems and limitations have been created as most of the learners and teachers do not possess enough knowledge about the importance and strategies of developing listening skills. However, the problems can easily be overcome with the listening tasks becoming inspiring and advantageous for both teachers and students if they have proper knowledge of the importance of listening skills and necessary strategies to develop them. The primary goal of this study is to investigate whether the teachers of the secondary level schools follow any particular method in teaching listening. Another objective of the study is to examine what difficulties students face in developing listening skills in the secondary level EFL classroom. The final objective of the study is

to relate the findings of the study to the standard process of teaching and learning listening skills at the secondary level institutions of Bangladesh. To meet the objectives of the study the following research questions were modeled.

**Research question 1:** What methods/activities do English teachers follow/carry out to develop students' listening skills?

**Research question 2:** What difficulties do students face in developing their listening skills?

**Research question 3:** What strategies can be undertaken to develop students' listening skills in the EFL classroom?

To answer these questions, a brief survey was conducted in 11 secondary level schools of Dhaka city and its surrounding areas in order to elicit the views of the students and the teachers. The survey results are presented and discussed in this paper systematically. Finally, based on the findings and analysis, some pedagogical implications have been highlighted for all the concerned stakeholders.

### **History of English Language Teaching in Bangladesh**

Although Bangla is the official and native language of Bangladesh, proficiency in English has also been argued to be vital for the country's prosperity and connectivity. According to a Euro Monitor International report (Pinon & Haydon, 2010), English proficiency plays a critical role in the international manufacturing and services markets (e.g., the telecom industry, banking, retail, mining), and consequently in the country's economy.

In Bangladesh, English is not a new phenomenon. Its origin and spread goes back to its political history when it was part of the Indian subcontinent under the British Empire. The British Empire ruled the subcontinent for more than two hundred years and consequently, English became the official language of British India. It was Lord Macaulay's Minute of 1835 that, for the first time, addressed the necessity of teaching English in the South Asian subcontinent (Krishnaswamy and Sriraman, 1995). This same view is also supported by Dutta, Selim, and Mahboob, and Choudhury in F. Alam *et al.* (2001).

In 1947, the Indian subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan. Pakistan was comprised of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (present day Pakistan), and English was the only medium of communication for both the regions. Hassan (2004) observes that the question of language loomed large after 1947 with the creation of two nation states – India and Pakistan – and India opted for Hindi while in Pakistan, attempts were made to make Urdu the state language. In the face of violent protests by the people of the then East Pakistan, culminating in the tragic shooting death on February 21, 1952, both Bengali and Urdu were made the state languages of Pakistan and English became the common language for communication between East and West Pakistan (Hasan, 2004). Thus, during the Pakistan period, English enjoyed the status of second language and it was taught as a functional language in secondary schools in Pakistan (1962 report of Curriculum Committee).

In 1971, East Pakistan was separated from Pakistan to become an independent country called Bangladesh and Bangla became the state language of Bangladesh. In the process, the status of English was drastically reduced. Bengali replaced English in all official communications – except

those with foreign missions, countries, and in the army, where English continued to be the official language. The schools, where students had previously been able to sit for secondary and higher secondary examinations in three languages like Urdu, Bengali, and English, became single language institutions (Alam *et al.*, 2001, p. vii).

In post-liberation Bangladesh, English lost its official status but it enjoys an important unofficial position. English became a foreign language while Bangladesh emerged. But considering its importance in our social life, English is now studied as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum through primary, secondary, higher secondary, and university levels. McArthur (1996) locates Bangladesh in the ESL territories. However, elsewhere he says that, in Bangladesh, English is neither a second language nor a foreign language. The status of English is in between. In this connection Sarwar (2013) opines, “English has the status of an unofficial second language in Bangladesh and is compulsory from the primary level in all state run schools where the medium of instruction is Bengali” (p. 154).

English now is used by the government, semi-government, and private organizations or companies along with Bengali. It is instrumental in interpersonal, commercial, and official communication as well as other academic purposes. In a nutshell, therefore, it may be said that English language teaching enjoys a special status in Bangladesh, for both domestic and international purposes.

### **Importance of English Language in Bangladeshi Education**

Students in Bangladesh learn English in primary schools, secondary schools, and, to some extent, in the undergraduate level along with their major subjects. Rasheed (2012) illustrates that one of the overarching aim of making English language a compulsory part of the curriculum in both primary and secondary schools is to enable Bangladesh to partake in the global marketplace so that its citizens may feel at ease in working at home and abroad. In other words, patronization of literacy and development of communicative skills of English are fundamental to national development.

Regarding the importance of learning English in Bangladesh, Imam (2005) reports, “In Bangladesh it is now essential for even factory workers, who earn less than the minimum wage, to know some English, the language of the labels on goods and packaging” (p. 480).

Considering the needs of the time, English has been made a compulsory subject in all levels of education in Bangladesh. According to Quader (2017), “English is an academic subject mandatory at all levels of education in Bangladesh, from the lowest till graduation from university and has a heavy weighting in the curriculum” (p. 26-27).

In course of time, to impart appropriate English education, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was first introduced in the secondary and higher secondary levels of Bangladesh in the 1990s by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board keeping the notion of developing communicative competence in the global context (Binoy, Sultana, & Basu, 2007).

### **Language skills: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing**

The four skills of language (also known as the four skills of language learning) are a set of four capabilities that allow an individual to comprehend and produce spoken language for proper and

effective interpersonal communication. The complete learning of a language means acquisition of four major skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing and three sub-skills – pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Barman, 2017, p. 84).

The general order of learning language skills is listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But Jeremy Harmer (2011) observes that “Teachers tend to talk about the way we use language in terms of four skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (p. 265). But she is a little critical of this order and teaching skills separately.

### ***Importance of listening skills***

Listening plays an important role in communication in people’s daily lives. As Guo and Wills (2005) state, “it is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values” (p. 3). According to Mendelson (1994), “of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50 %; speaking 25-30 %; reading 11-16 %; and writing about 9 %” (p. 9). Emphasizing the importance of listening in language learning, Peters (2001) states that “no other type of language input is easy to process as spoken language, received through listening ... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the inter-workings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills” (p. 87).

Listening has an important role not only in daily life but also in classroom settings. Anderson and Lynch (2003) state that “we only become aware of what remarkable feats of listening we achieve when we are in an unfamiliar listening environment, such as listening to a language in which we have limited proficiency” (p. 3). Most people think that being able to write and speak in a second language means that they know the language; however, if they do not have efficient listening skills, it is not possible to communicate effectively. That is, listening is the basic skill in language learning and over 50% of the time students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening (Nunan, 1998).

To summarize, listening has an important role both in daily life and in academic contexts as it is crucial for people to sustain effective communication. Emphasizing the importance of listening, Anderson and Lynch (2003) state that listening skills are as important as speaking skills because people cannot communicate face-to-face unless both types of skills are developed together. Listening skills are also important for learning purposes since through listening students receive information and gain insights (Wallace, Stariha & Walberg, 2004).

### ***Secondary level English language curriculum of NCTB and its focus on listening***

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh has offered a curriculum for teaching English at the secondary level. The latest NCTB 2012 Curriculum has covered the four skills of language learning.

The curriculum thus suggests that the language skills-practice activities based on the text materials have to be carried out keeping in mind the following principles:

- All the four basic language skills would be practiced in the class.
- Skills should be practiced in an integrated manner – not in isolation.
- Skills practice should be done in meaningful contexts, i.e., practice in language use should go beyond the textbook and include real life situations.
- Interactive activities should be carried out between teachers and students, and more importantly between students and students. (p. 73)

Another important part of the curriculum document (Brunfaut & Rita, 2017, p. 5) concerns the stipulation of two compulsory exam papers, including a description of their content focus and section weightings. An analysis of this information indicates the following:

- Limited weight is currently allocated to the assessment of listening and speaking skills, namely 10% each of the first exam paper (vs. 40% for reading and writing) and no assessment in the second exam paper (vs. 45% grammar and 55% composition).
- Listening and speaking skills need to be assessed through continuous assessment, developed by the teachers themselves (vs. the testing of reading, language in use, and writing through centrally commissioned examinations).
- Listening should be assessed using the item formats of multiple-choice, gap filling, and matching.
- Speaking assessments need to elicit short descriptive/narrative performances and question-answer sessions on familiar topics. The performances need to be assessed in terms of length (5-10 sentences), coherence, acceptable English, and pronunciation.

### ***Practical scenario of teaching listening skills in Bangladesh***

Though the NCTB has framed some guidelines regarding teaching English language skills at the secondary level, the practical scenario of the implementation of the language curriculum is different (Kaiser & Khanam, 2008). Kaiser and Khanam (2008) observe that the main focus is on reading and writing; listening and speaking are given less importance. The authors of this paper are testimony of such practice. There are no listening lessons in schools and no listening skills test is taken in the examinations. Teachers generally do not care about this skill much and the instruments to enhance listening skills are available only in a few institutions in the urban areas. This results in making the students poor in listening and, in most cases, students cannot understand the lectures of teachers when they speak or instruct in English, and do not understand the messages of authentic spoken English materials.

Rahman (2014) states that teachers usually do not focus on the development of the four skills. They are exam-oriented and in the examinations only two skills – reading and writing skills – are tested. So, two other major skills – speaking and listening – remain neglected in the EFL classes (p. 1). In addition to this negligence, Haider and Chowdhury (2012) observed that “teachers had a tendency of slipping in to Bangla after starting a sentence in English” (p. 17).

In general, we see that teachers consider “listening” as the easiest skill to learn, so they do not care much about teaching this skill but, in reality, most students find it difficult to understand authentic English language. This gap has inspired the researchers to conduct a study in order to explore the reasons behind this negligence and the poor listening skills of students.

### **Teaching listening skills: An overview**

Rost (2005) confirms, “In L2 development, listening constitutes not only a skill area in performance, but also a primary means of acquiring a second language” (p. 503). Listening also plays a life-long role in the process of productive communication (Alam and Sinha, 2009). Hedge (2000) says that to establish oneself in this sound system-based society, one must develop a lofty level of aptitude in listening.

### ***Listening is an active skill***

We have seen that, traditionally, listening is labeled as a “passive” skill but it is both misleading and incorrect because the listener is involved, for instance, in guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting, and organizing. This view is strongly supported by Vandergrift (1999). He says:

Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance. Coordinating all this involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the learner. Listening is hard work. (p. 168)

### ***Psycholinguistic account of the listening process***

Rost (2005) writes that listening consists of three basic processing phases that are simultaneous and parallel: decoding, comprehension and interpretation. He provides a brief summary of each phase:

- **Decoding** involves attention, speech perception, word recognition, and grammatical parsing;
- **Comprehension** includes activation of prior knowledge, representing propositions in short term memory, and logical inference;
- **Interpretation** encompasses comparison of meanings with prior expectations, activating participation frames, and evaluation of discourse meanings.

In addition to this psycholinguistic account of the listening process, Flowerdew and Miller’s (2005) listening model pays attention to more individualistic and variable dimensions such as:

- the learners themselves
- social contexts, and
- cross-cultural interactions

Rost (1990) even sees the listener in certain circumstances as “co-authoring” the discourse, not just waiting to be talked to and to respond, but by his responses actually helping to construct the conversation.

### ***Key principles to teach listening skills effectively***

David Nunan (2015) and Mike Rost (2002) suggest the following principles in this regard:

- Incorporate a wide range of text types into listening lessons
- Incorporate a range of pedagogical and real-world tasks into lessons
- Incorporate strategy training into teaching: predicting, inferring, monitoring, clarifying, responding, and evaluating.

### **Learner difficulties in listening**

Penny Ur (1999, p. 44) gives a list of some probable listening difficulties:

- I have trouble catching the actual sounds of the foreign language.
- I have to understand every word; if I miss something, I feel I am failing and get worried and stressed.
- I can understand people if they talk slowly and clearly; I can't understand fast, natural, native-sounding speech.
- I need to hear things more than once in order to understand.
- I find it difficult to “keep up” with all the information I am getting, and cannot think ahead or predict.
- If the listening goes on for a long time I get tired, and find it more and more difficult to concentrate.

### **Guidelines for ideal listening texts and tasks**

To overcome the difficulties listed above, Penny Ur (1999) suggests the following texts and tasks which can be followed by the teachers in the classroom to help students (p. 44-45).

#### ***Authentic listening texts***

Authentic listening texts are those that originally emerged in the course of some type of communication outside of the classroom – a casual conversation in a coffee shop, a news broadcast, a train announcement, and so on – and are subsequently imported into the classroom for teaching purposes.

Informal talk: Most listening texts should be based on discourse that is either genuinely improvised, spontaneous speech, or at least a fair imitation of it. Speaker visibility and direct speaker-listener interaction are mostly needed.

Single exposure: Learners should be encouraged to develop the ability to extract the information they need from a single hearing. The discourse, therefore, must be redundant enough to provide this information more than once within the original text.

#### ***Listening tasks***

Create Expectations: Learners should have in advance some idea about the kind of text they are going to hear.

Provide a Purpose: Similarly, a listening purpose should be provided by the definition of a pre-set task, which should involve some kind of clear visible or audible response.

Ongoing Listener Response: Finally, the task should usually involve intermittent responses during the listening; learners should be encouraged to respond to the information they are looking for as they hear it, and not wait till the end.

### ***Types of activities***

No Overt Response: The learners do not have to do anything in response to the listening; however, facial expression and body language often show if they are following or not. They might listen in this way to stories, songs, or entertainment (films, theater, and video).

#### Short Responses

- Obeying instructions
- Ticking off items
- True/false
- Detecting mistakes
- Cloze tests
- Guessing definitions
- Skimming and scanning

### ***Follow-up task***

#### Longer Responses:

- **Answering questions:** Questions demanding full responses are given in advance.
- **Note-taking:** Learners take brief notes from a short talk.
- **Paraphrasing and translating:** Learners rewrite the text in different words.
- **Summarizing:** Learners write a brief summary of the content.
- **Long gap-filling:** A long gap is left somewhere in the text for learners to fill in.

#### Extended Responses

Here, the listening is only a “jump-off point” for extended reading, writing, or speaking: in other words, these are “combined skills” activities.

- **Problem-solving:** Learners hear about a problem and try to solve it.
- **Interpretation:** An extract from a piece of dialogue or monologue is provided, with no previous information; the listeners try to guess from the words, kinds of voices, tone, and any other evidence what is going on. Alternatively, a piece of literature that is suitable for reading aloud can be discussed and analyzed.

McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara, (2013) divides listening activities into: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening categories (pp. 9-10). Wilson (2008) provides a lot of hands-on examples for each stage:

***Pre-listening activities include*** a short reading passage on a similar topic, predicting content from the title, commenting on a picture, and reading through comprehension questions in advance, etc.

### ***Tasks for while-listening activities***

**Extensive listening activities** include putting pictures in a correct sequence, following directions on a map, checking off items in a photograph, completing a grid, timetable, or chart of information, answering true/false or multiple-choice questions, predicting (preceded by a pause), constructing a coherent set of notes, inferring opinions across a whole text, etc.

**Intensive listening** deals with specific items of language, sound or factual detail within the meaning framework already established. These activities include filling gaps with missing words, identifying numbers and letters, picking out particular facts, etc.

**Post-listening activities** may include writing a summary, doing a role play, writing on the same theme, studying new grammatical structures, and practicing pronunciation.

There is, of course, no such person as the “typical learner.” Learners are usually at various stages of proficiency, and they differ in many characteristics – age, interests, learning styles, aptitude, and motivation and so on. Any one specific set of materials may not provide examples of all the types of activities listed above. If the range and variety in a book that teachers are using is very limited, Penny Ur (1999) suggests, they may be able to remedy this by improvising their own activities or using supplementary materials (p. 45).

### **Research Methodology**

#### ***Institutions***

For collecting necessary data for the research work 11 educational institutions were visited. It took the researchers around 20 days starting from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> November to complete the visits to the institutions, which were all located in Dhaka district and has Bangla as the medium of instruction (Bangla medium schools).

#### ***Sample and data collection methods***

As the study focuses on the development of teaching listening to students of English particularly at the secondary level institutions, the data was collected from the students of classes IX and X and their concerned English/English language teachers. The quantitative method was employed to collect data from the students using a questionnaire survey. Based on stratified random sampling, a total 130 students from 11 schools were selected. Among them, 65 were male and 65 were female students. They were aged between 15 and 17 years. The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure that it included all questions on major and important issues required for the development of listening skills. During the survey, we ensured that the respondents understood the questions and all relevant items well. They were encouraged to ask questions to get their confusions cleared. The results of the quantitative survey were then tallied on MS Excel. The results are displayed in percentages in tables below.

Qualitative data was collected from 22 concerned English teachers from those 11 schools. The instrument used was the semi-structured interview. Teachers were invited to participate in an interview session individually and to answer the questions. They were clarified about the purpose of the study and all relevant issues related to the questions. The interviews were audio recorded and short notes were taken on note sheets. The interviews took place in a cordial atmosphere in their own institutions. On average, an interview lasted approximately half an hour.

## Analysis of data

### *Quantitative data analysis of students' questionnaire*

Present Status of Students' Listening Skill: The following table shows that only 18% of students have good listening skills while the rest 82% of students' listening skills were either satisfactory or poor. Among them 8% students never thought about listening skill status.

Table 1: Present status of students' listening skill

Status	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Very good	4	3%
Good	20	15%
Satisfactory	80	62%
Poor	15	12%
Not thought about listening skill	11	8%

Students' Level of Understanding Regarding Listening to BBC, CNN, English Movies, or Any Other Authentic Sources of English Language: The following table shows that not a single student can completely understand any authentic native sources of English language. 75% of students responded that they understand moderately or even less than that.

Table 2: Students' level of understanding regarding listening to BBC, CNN, English movies or any other authentic sources of English language

Level of Understanding	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Completely	0	0%
Mostly	33	25%
Moderately	77	59%
A little bit	15	12%
Very little	5	4%

Teachers' Role in Encouraging Students to Improve Their Listening Skills: Teachers are the key people in language teaching. The study, however, revealed the opposite. The result shows that though around 58% of teachers are playing their role by encouraging the students to develop their listening skills, 42% of teachers are seen as not serious enough in this case.

Table 3: Teachers' role to encourage students to improve their listening skill

How Often a Teacher Encourages Students to Develop Listening Skills	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Always	23	18%
Very often	52	40%
Often	36	28%
Occasionally	6	5%
Rarely	11	8%
Never	2	1%

Language Lab Facilities Students Enjoy: The data shows that more than half of the students, around 55%, do not enjoy any lab facilities and only 45% enjoy language lab facilities without headphones. Not a single student enjoys the lab facilities with headphones.

Table 4: Status of language lab facilities

Facilities of the Language Lab	Total Number of Students Availing the Facilities	Percentage of Students Availing the Facilities
The lab is well equipped with the devices and headphones for each student	0	0%
The lab is equipped with loud speakers only	59	45%
No language lab	71	55%

Use of Multimedia to Develop Listening Skill: Table 5 shows that only 19% of students experience regular multimedia backed classes. On the contrary, 63% of students use the multimedia sometimes. 18% of students never get any multimedia-based classes for developing listening skills.

Table 5: Use of multimedia to develop listening skill

Use of Multimedia to Develop Listening Skills	Total Number of Students Availing the Facilities	Percentage of Students Availing the Facilities
Always	2	1%
Very often	23	18%
Often	28	22%
Occasionally	34	26%
Rarely	19	15%
Never	24	18%

Students' Participation in the Classroom to Develop Listening Skills: From the data, we see that in the classroom more than half of the students are slightly interactive in nature. 53% of students interact during class while 47% of students are less interactive.

Table 6: Students' interaction in the classroom to develop listening skill

How Often Students Interact in Class	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Interactive Students
Always	19	15%
Very often	46	35%
Often	44	34%
Occasionally	9	7%
Rarely	7	5%
Never	5	4%

How Interactive are the English/English Language Classes? The study found that only 19% of students feel that their English or English language classes are very interactive. 81% of students feel that their classes are moderately or poorly interactive while 7% of students feel that the classes are not interactive at all.

Table 7: How Interactive are the English/English language classes?

Level of Interaction	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Interactive Students
Very interactive	19	16%
Moderately interactive	46	39%
Poorly interactive	44	37%
Not interactive at all	9	8%

Students' Participation Outside of Classroom to Develop Listening Skills: The following table shows that the students are not concerned about listening skills outside the classroom because only 12% of students interact with their teachers or friends outside the classroom to develop their listening skills. 28% of students never interact with anyone outside the class. 60% of students sometimes interact with others outside the classroom to develop their listening skills.

Table 8: Students' interaction outside of classroom to develop listening skill

How Often Students Interact Outside Class	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Always	2	2%
Very often	13	10%
Often	52	40%
Occasionally	11	8%
Rarely	16	12%
Never	36	28%

What Language is Mostly Used in the Classroom by Teachers as Input? The data shows that only 10% of students find that their teachers use English mostly in the classroom. On the other hand, 65% of students report that their teachers use both English and Bangla in a mixed way.

Table 9: Language used mostly in the classroom by teacher as an input

Language Used by the Teacher in Class	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
English	13	10%
Bangla	32	25%
Both	85	65%

Feedback of Teachers While Students are Asking for Clarifications: The table shows that almost 94% students find their teachers very supportive when they ask any questions. Only 6% students find their teachers not enough interactive.

Table 10: Feedback of Teachers to Students Asking for Clarification

Teacher Feedback	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Very interactive	70	54%
Moderately interactive	52	40%
Poorly interactive	5	4%
Not interactive at all	3	2%

Number of Weekly Dedicated English Language Classes to Develop Students' Language Skills: The following table shows that 57% of students do not experience any language class in a week. Only 43% of students experience only one language class in a week.

Table 11: Number of English language classes is held by the students in a week

Number of Dedicated Language Classes	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
No language class	74	57%
Once a week	56	43%
More than once week	0	0%

Number of Listening Skill Assessments or Classes Held in Every Six Month Term: From Table 12, it is seen that only 38% of students have one to three continuous assessments on listening and speaking skills. On the contrary, 62% of students face no listening or speaking assessment.

Table 12: Number of listening skill assessments or classes held in every six month term

Number of Continuous Assessments	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
No assessments	81	62%
1-3 assessments	49	38%
More than 3 assessments	0	0%

Difficulties Faced by Students While Listening to Authentic Spoken English: The data shows that most of the students, around 79%, find it difficult to understand English vocabulary while listening to authentic English. Almost 73% of students cannot understand the fast speech. 57% of students are unable to understand the native-like pronunciation and accent. 41% of students

understand the words but they cannot interpret the message. 40% of students face all the above-mentioned problems including failure to understand the short forms and connected speeches. Only 2% of students face no difficulties.

Table 13: Difficulties faced by students while listening

Difficulties Faced by Students	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Unable to understand the pronunciation or accent	73 out of 130	57%
Unable to catch the message	52 out of 130	41%
Unable to understand the vocabulary	101 out of 130	79%
Unable to understand the short forms & connected speeches	51 out of 130	40%
Unable to keep up with the speed of the speech	93 out of 130	73%
All of the above	51 out of 130	40%
No difficulties	2 out of 130	2%

### *Analysis of qualitative data collected from teachers' interviews*

A total of 22 English teachers were interviewed. They represented two geographical locations: Dhaka city and Savar Thana. Prior to the interview, teachers provided information on their personal background through a question (see Appendix B). Teachers' backgrounds are summarized below.

Most interviewed teachers (86%) were male; the rest 14% were female. Their ages ranged between 22 and 48. All of them were of Bangladeshi nationality and spoke Bangla at home.

With the exception of 2 teachers (9%), all teachers (91%) had completed graduate studies – mainly BA (Honors) in English. The teachers' experience levels ranged between 1 and 15 years of teaching English. They taught typically both Class 9 and Class 10.

The interviews were conducted in the time given by the teacher. The interviews took place on the school grounds, usually in the office or a classroom. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and consisted of 10 questions. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B. The questions focused on the English listening activities they undertook in their classes and the difficulties they faced in developing their students' English listening skills. The data, the summary of their answers to the interview questions, are presented below.

Most Important Language Skill in Teachers' Opinions: 10 teachers (45%) stated that they consider writing the most important language skill because the examinations mostly focus on writing skills. Speaking is the most important skill according to 8 teachers (36%) as they think English is learnt for communication purposes. Only 3 teachers (13%) stressed the importance of developing students' listening skills. They think listening is necessary to make communication meaningful and successful. Only 1 teacher (.045%) responded that reading is the most important skill to be taught in the class. Here it is found that only 30% of teachers are concerned about the need for developing students' listening skills.

How Much Institutional Facilities Teachers Get To Conduct Listening Skill Activities in the EFL Classroom: Most of the teachers were found disappointed about the institutional facilities.

18 teachers (82%) stated that they did not get any institutional facilities like language labs or multimedia classrooms to teach listening skills. Only 4 teachers (18%) stated that they sometimes had access to a few language lab facilities to develop students' listening skills.

All the teachers suggested that the institution should provide them with more teaching facilities, especially language lab facilities. They also added that the institution should set dedicated language classrooms to teach language skills, especially listening skills, to help students achieve a satisfactory level of listening skills.

Similarly, all the teachers also stressed the necessity of organizing specific teacher training programs so that they could equip themselves with the knowledge and strategies of developing listening skills.

Language Used by the Teachers in the EFL Classroom: Though all the teachers (100%) agreed on the point that they should use mainly English in the class, they also said that it was not always possible because of several limitations. For instance, students' inability to understand all the messages, short class time, pressure of completing the academic syllabuses, etc. Only 4 teachers (18%) stated that they tried to use English language all the time. But the other 18 teachers (82%) confessed that they used both English and Bangla as the medium of instruction in the classroom.

Playing the Role of an Ideal Language Teacher Especially in Teaching Listening: Out of 22 teachers, 19 teachers (86%) stated that they did not get any opportunity to take any measure to develop students' listening skills. As the reason they showed that they had to be involved with different activities apart from taking classes like making question papers, conducting exams, evaluating the answer scripts, implementing different events of their institution, etc. So, they had very little time to take any extra initiative for the development of the students' language skills. The other 3 teachers (14%) stated that sometimes they used some easily available devices like their mobile phones and speakers in the class to take some listening lessons.

General Standard of Students' Listening Skills According to Teachers: In this regard, the views of the teachers are presented below:

- The general standard of the students' listening skills is not up to the mark. The listening proficiency of a large number of students is poor.
- Very few students are capable of communicating fluently.

Activities Undertaken by the Teachers to Teach Listening: 13 teachers (60%) stated that they rarely undertook any listening activities in their classes. 3 of these (13%) teachers said that this weakness existed because listening was not included in the syllabus and one pointed out that the handbooks for Classes 9 and 10 did not include listening tasks. 2 teachers (9%) also referred to the prominence of reading and writing skills in the final English exams where listening and speaking skills were neglected. 7 teachers (31%), on the other hand, reported that they often undertook listening activities, and 2 teachers (9%) said they sometimes did undertake some listening activities.

The main examples of listening activities undertaken by the teachers were:

- a) teachers reading a text out loud and students listening to it (6 teachers reported)

- b) students listening to questions and class discussions asked by the teachers (8 teachers reported)
- c) playing audio recordings and videos from the Internet (4 teachers reported)
- d) listening to each other during pair work activities (2 teachers reported)
- e) playing songs/rhymes (1 teacher reported)
- f) watching a documentary on a topic related to the textbook (1 teacher reported)
- g) rote repetition of words/phrases/sentences spoken out loud by the teacher (1 teacher reported).

Difficulties Faced by the Teachers While Teaching Listening: All the teachers reported that students were not concerned enough about the development of their listening skills. They were not motivated enough to learn listening skills because it was not included in the main examination. Although there was a provision for continuous assessment of listening skills, it was not held properly. So the students were less conscious about this skill.

17 teachers (77%) stated that there was no dedicated language classroom for the students. Again, 15 teachers (68%) stated that the class time was too short to take any extra step to help students develop their listening skills.

12 teachers (54%) blamed the curriculum as the main hindrance towards the development of students' listening skills.

### **Findings and discussions**

From the data, it is found that the development of students' English listening skills is given very little attention in the secondary level EFL classrooms. Poor and inadequate language lab facilities and large class sizes were seen as mainly responsible for this weakness. In addition, some linguistic factors such as students' limited access to English resources and the interference of their mother tongue, Bangla, were found to make the students use English less and Bangla more in their English lessons. Furthermore, it was also found that pedagogical issues such as the restricted range and type, and lack of purposefully-designed listening and speaking activities in the lessons do not really encourage the development of students' English listening and speaking abilities. At the same time, however, secondary school students were found to be keen on having more English classes and doing more activities in their English lessons to develop their listening comprehension and speaking skills. An extensive range of varied listening and speaking skill activities, and communicative language teaching approach in English lessons, can create a positive environment at the institutions where students can be motivated to use English and enhance listening activities in their classrooms and institutions.

From the qualitative data derived from the answers to teachers' interview questions, it was found that, both in terms of the teaching and assessment of English listening skills, a majority of the teachers had little training on teaching and assessing listening. It was also found that very few teachers purposefully worked on the development and evaluation of their students' listening skills. Teachers who even worked on the development of their students' listening skills used very limited strategies and activities. Some of the activities used included listening to the teacher reading a text out

loud, listening to questions asked, and discussions made by the teacher. At the same time, however, teachers were found to be willing to introduce the ideas and strategies in teaching and assessing listening skills in their English classes, but they were also found to be quite affected by the limitations and challenges they had. Some of the challenges and limitations they encountered were the lack of teacher training programs, scarcity of materials and equipment that can support the teaching and assessment of listening and speaking skills, and too few contact hours to ensure sufficient practice in listening. Furthermore, as suggested by some teachers' comments, as well as by a rough estimate of teachers' English listening and speaking proficiencies by the researcher, it is worth mentioning that much more attention should also be given to increase teachers' communicative skills in English, and raise their awareness of the implementation of the curriculum.

It became clear through the interviews that any initiatives taken with respect to the assessment of secondary students' English listening skills will need to be considered within a) the wider context of the teaching and learning of these skills, and b) the context of other levels of the education system (primary and lower secondary).

### **Pedagogical recommendations**

On the basis of the analyzed data and the findings, the following recommendations can be put forward which, if considered, may help improve the overall quality of the ELT programs at the secondary level education of Bangladesh.

#### ***Recommendation for the Policymakers and NCTB***

- Proper awareness about following the curriculum objectives regarding teaching listening and speaking skills should be raised among the secondary level EFL teachers.
- Learning outcomes given in the secondary level English language curriculum should be written in a more specific and precise way, and the teachers should be equipped with appropriate language skills assessment approach.
- Continuous assessment, which is mentioned in the secondary level language curriculum, should be properly implemented at the secondary level institutions and the concerned authorities of the Ministry of Education should inspect the process at regular intervals.
- In addition to the above recommendations, the listening skills assessment should be included in the terminal examinations.

#### ***Recommendations for institutions***

- For teaching language skills in the right manner, a language lab in every institution is a must. The language labs should be equipped with audio and visual aids like multimedia projectors, modern sound system, headphones, and the Internet.
- Teachers should be encouraged to use mainly English as a medium of communication as well as the medium of instruction most of the time inside and outside of English classes.
- Regular teacher training programs should be undertaken for orienting the teachers towards effective language teaching methods and assessing students' listening skills.

#### ***Recommendations for teachers***

- If any institution cannot afford a language lab, teachers should not overlook the skill;

rather, they can use affordable and available technological devices like smartphones and the Internet to develop students' listening skills.

- Teachers should ensure continuous assessment of the development of students' listening skill according to the recommendations of NCTB.

### ***Recommendations for students***

- Students should pay more attention to developing their listening skills for their own benefit. Though it is not included in the terminal examination, they should not wait for their teachers or institutions to help them. They must be autonomous learners.
- They should be more interactive inside and outside the classroom. They should be proactive in order to make the best utilization of the resources available, including their teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored and reported the teaching and learning situations of English listening skills in Bangladeshi secondary level institutions. It comprised a mixed-method study, which involved a review of relevant prior studies, a review of the English language curriculum of Bangladeshi secondary level education, semi-structured interviews of English teachers, and a close-ended questionnaire survey of secondary level students. Data was collected from 11 government and private schools in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The findings suggest that the majority of English language teachers in secondary schools are not yet ready to implement a system of continuous assessment of their students' English listening and speaking skills.

In addition to this outcome, it should be noted that the observed lack of readiness does not solely apply to teachers but also appears to occur at the level of the curriculum, schools and their facilities, and learners. Furthermore, the challenges to implement continuous assessment are not only restricted to the area of assessment, but also concern current practices in the teaching and learning of English listening skills at the secondary level.

The data also indicates that students' exposure to oral English is currently very limited. It is observed that most of the English classes are carried out in Bangla with the primary focus on the teaching of reading and grammar. In addition, the types of activities are very restricted and most of the schools lack pedagogical materials and language lab facilities.

The study, therefore, finds that several educational, linguistic, pedagogic, practical, and technical factors currently inhibit the implementation of effective development and assessment of listening skills in English. Nevertheless, both the teachers and the students showed a positive attitude towards strengthening the activities needed to develop listening skills in English classes at the secondary level.

Though this paper has brought out a good number of findings about the practical scenario of teaching listening skills and identified some deficiencies that the learners and teachers have in developing listening skills, it has some limitations too in terms of samples, instruments, and task

types. It represents the findings from only one region of Bangladesh. If the samples had been drawn from some more regions, the paper might have had more comprehensive and reliable results. For future research, this paper proposes to include more institutes from other regions and to use more instruments like the listening proficiency test of the learners, interview of students, and focused group discussions for developing a richer and more balanced database and thus exploring more valuable findings.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Questionnaire for Students

#### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COLLECTING DATA

#### TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS: HOW FAR BANGLADESHI EDUCATION SYSTEM FOCUSES ON ITS DEVELOPMENT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

#### Questionnaire for Students

##### *Personal Information*

Name: ..... Class:  
..... Group: .....  
Name of your School: .....  
Thana: ..... District: .....

Please circle the number of correct option/options as answers to the following questions or statements.

#### 1. How, you think, is your listening skill?

- a. very good    b. good    c. satisfactory    d. poor    e. not measured or thought about listening skill

#### 2. How often does your English language teacher encourage you to develop listening skill?

- a. Always    b. very often    c. often    d. occasionally    e. rarely    f. never

#### 3. What is the condition of the language lab of your school?

- a. The lab is well equipped with the devices and headphones for each student.  
b. The lab is equipped with loud speakers only.  
c. There is no language lab at all.

#### 4. How often does your teacher use multimedia or language lab to develop your listening skill?

- a. Always    b. very often    c. often    d. occasionally    e. rarely    f. never

#### 5. How often do you ask your teacher to repeat the part/parts when you miss to understand while listening?

- a. Always    b. very often    c. often    d. occasionally    e. rarely    f. never

#### 6. How do you find your English/English language classes?

- a. very interactive    b. moderately interactive    c. poorly interactive    d. not interactive at all

#### 7. How often do you interact with your friends/teachers to develop your listening skill?

- a. Always    b. very often    c. often    d. occasionally    e. rarely    f. never

8. Which language does your teacher mostly use in the English/English language classes?

- a. English                      b. Bangla                      c. both

9. How do you find your teacher in the classroom while you are asking some questions?

- a. very interactive                      b. moderately interactive                      c. poorly interactive                      d. not interactive at all

10. How many English language classes are held in a week?

- a. once a week                      b. more than once classes a week                      c. no language class

11. How many listening skill assessments or classes (according to NCTB) are taken by your teacher in every six months' term?

- a. no assessments                      b. 1-3 assessments                      c. more than 3 assessments

12. How much do you understand BBC English, CNN English, English movies or other authentic sources of English language?

- a. Completely                      b. mostly                      c. moderately                      d. a little bit                      e. very little

13. What difficulties do you face while listening to your teacher, authentic texts like BBC, CNN or English movies etc.? (You can choose more than one option)

- a. I do not understand the pronunciation/accents
- b. I cannot catch all the message/information
- c. I do not understand some vocabulary
- d. I do not understand the short forms and connected speeches
- e. I cannot keep up with the speed of the speech
- f. all of the above
- g. I face no difficulty

Thank you for your kind cooperation

#### Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions for the teachers

### TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS: HOW FAR BANGLADESHI EDUCATION SYSTEM FOCUSES ON ITS DEVELOPMENT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

#### Interview Questions for Teachers

(The information collected will be kept confidential)

Name:....., Designation: .....

School:.....

Thana: ..... District:.....

You are humbly requested to answer the following questions:

1. Will you mind introducing yourself in brief?
2. How long have you been teaching English? Give a brief history of your teaching career.
3. Which of the language skills is the most important in your eyes? In which order the language skills should be taught?
4. Do you take any classes only for listening development of your students? If yes, then how?
5. Which language do you use mostly in the class? Why?
6. Do you use multimedia or any other technology to develop students' listening skill?
7. What type of institutional facilities do you get to teach speaking & listening?
8. How is the general standard of the listening skill of your students? Give your comments in favor of your report.
9. What difficulties do you face in teaching listening skill?
10. What activities do you undertake in the classroom to improve your students' listening skill?

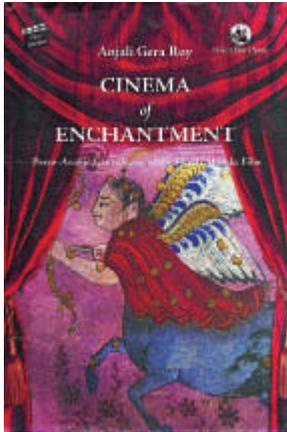
Thank you for your time and kind co-operation

## *Book Review*

# The Magical Heritage of Hindi Movies

Shamsad Mortuza

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## ***Cinema of Enchantment: Perso-Arabic Genealogies of the Hindi Masala Film***

Anjali Gera Roy

New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2015. 252 pp.

ISBN: 978 81 250 5966 0

In Salman Rushdie's *Shame* the narrative epicenter is a mysterious town called Q where three mysterious sisters give birth to a son called Omar Khayyam who, rather accidentally, goes on to meddle in the military affairs of Pakistan. The magical son of a-unit-of-three-mothers, Omar keeps claiming himself as a peripheral man, yet finds himself in the political mire notwithstanding the aesthetic reputation of his Persian namesake. While the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality is common in texts that espouse magic realism, seldom do we get to find serious academics adopting a “fantastical” approach in their critical analysis of real life phenomena. Anjali Gera Roy's search for an Arab-Persian tradition in Hindi films exemplifies one such attempt.

Roy reminds us of a town that is located across the political border of India and has a name that begins with Q. Qissa Khwani Bazaar is a town in present day Pakistan that houses the birthplace of three legendary figures of Bollywood: Raj Kumar, Dilip Kumar and Shahrukh Khan. Roy's 2015 book, *Cinema of Enchantment*, sets out to trace the magical origin of Bollywood movies. The illusion with which Hindi films enchants us all, according to Roy, has a secret recipe of *tilism*, an occult practice. Roy concerns herself with the import of Perso-Arabic genres of *Qissa* (orally narrated stories) and *Dastan* (stories), which have been indigenized to fit into the Bollywood mode. Her method may be guilty of harping the orientalist stereotypes, then again she has enough narrative examples to substantiate her claims. In particular, she is interested in the way the Mughal Muslim tradition has permeated into popular imagination and contributed to a technique of creating a spellbound impact on the audience: “Tilism-e Hoshruaba,” or “enchantment that steals away the

senses.” She is careful to point out the subdued role of *Dharma* (religious) and *Darshan* (philosophic) tradition of Hinduism in mainstream Hindi movies. The central argument of the book follows the trail of thought that recognizes Hindu narrative and visual genres as the basis of iconography and ideology of Indian cinema, but finds in Persian-Arabic tradition its fantastical emotion and in Urdu its language of expression. The author goes a step further to identify the Arab Qissa and Persian Dastan as the plotting style to observe: “As opposed to the lens of fantasy through which the illusionism of Hindi cinemas been traditionally perceived, the book suggests that tilism [enchantment] might provide a demotic framework for examining its magical universe” (4).

After reading the book, Roy’s claims do not seem completely out of place. The tradition of *dastangoi* (narrative style) was already injected into the Lakhnavi tradition of theater. In the nineteenth century, the Persian narrative style was both incorporated in and appropriated for the local theater by Mir Ahmed Ali and his fellow dastangos (professionally trained narrators) Amba Prasad Rasa and Hakir Asghar Ali Khan of Lucknow. The tradition was enriched by the inclusion of local practices that initiated a new and distinctively Indian chapter of the Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah that eventually found its way in Hindi film industry.

Roy divides her book into nine chapters. The first chapter introduces *Bhakti* and *Ashiqi* as two diametrically opposite trends; the former resonates with the Radha-Krishna motif, while the latter pursues the Laila-Majnun one. According to Roy, the infidelity and incestuous elements in the Radha-Krishna plot make it an uneasy candidate for *bhakti* (spirituality), allowing the *Ashiqi* (devotional love) tradition of Laila-Majnun to thrive in Hindi movies. The attenuation of religiosity can also be caused by Bollywood’s reservation against restricting itself to any “monolithic theological constructs” (14).

For a large multi-ethnic, and linguistically and culturally diverse country, India has traditionally maintained its syncretic heritage. Hindi films therefore depict the cultural and linguistic adaptability. The popularity of Urdu Sha’ir, Sha’iri and the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb (Culture) informs the book’s third chapter. The large scale migration of the educated middle class Munshis (writers, clerks or accountants) supplied the movie scene with a culture that contributed to the demand and acceptability of Urdu as the filmic register. Whether Roy will make a similar claim under today’s political climate in India is an entirely different issue.

Roy’s scholarly search has been on the sematic and symbolic codes of Hindi movies that can be traced back to the Persian Arabic tradition. She scans the plots of many films to identify the *Qissa-i-Laila Majnun* tradition that valorizes *Isbq* (love) as a type of spirituality which can be viewed as an alternative *dharma*. Similarly, in the fourth chapter, titled “Shehzadas, Houris, Divs and Djinnis,” Roy finds a connection between the paradoxical “virtuous seductress” on screen and their supernatural counterparts in the Middle-Eastern lore.

The central argument of finding the presence of the Oriental narrative style is present in Chapter Five where *Dastan* is presented as the filmic formula involving love, beauty, warfare, and trickery. The thematic idea of destiny is pursued in the next chapter where the formulaic representation of *waqt* (time) is dealt with. These themes are the building blocks of “Filmistan” (the title of the seventh chapter) which offers a respite from everyday troubles for the viewers. The attraction of

fantasy is the subject matter of the eighth chapter where Roy reflects on a wide range of story-telling devices. She touches upon the Western mimetic trend that has given birth to the realistic notion. The problem of using folk motifs within the modernist frame is also discussed before tackling the postmodern question. Roy's final verdict rests with the conviction that Hindi films should be called "Cinema of Enchantment" (18). In the last chapter, she expands the scope of enchantment to label it as an "Alternative Aesthetic of the Hindi Masala Film."

Roy uses ample secondary sources to forward her ideas. The use of scholarly references allows Roy to probe into the commonplace assumption that Hindi movies are formulaic or "bad copies" of Hollywood movies. She ends up outlining a formula of her own, but not without the academic backing of others, before tracing its originary moments in Persia and Arab. At times, it seems that she is too cautious in making an independent claim. At a time when history is being rewritten with prescriptive agenda, Roy's careful treading is understandable. On a separate note, Hindi films in recent times have a new mode of expression and an international audience. Today's audience is much more diverse than the mutually intelligible linguistic groups of the region. More and more we get to see films involving expats and a westernized hybrid generation who have little concern for the Hindi/Urdu debate. Hinglish is here to stay.

At the same time, the screen size of Hindi films demands this new mode of expression and cultural resonance. The introduction of live-streaming and cine-plexes are cases in point. Movie makers are torn between the challenges of addressing an audience who would like to watch movies in both small tablets or mobile phones and large screens with surround sound and 4D effects. How do you find enchantment when technology is creating the ultimate space of simulation? Roy's book is a valuable historical document to identify different fissures behind the genealogy of Hindi films. The book is important because it deals with issues that are easy and convenient to forget, especially in a culture that is making a quantum leap.

### **Note to Contributors**

*Crossings: A Journal of English Studies* is an annual double-blind peer-reviewed journal of scholarly articles and book reviews. *Crossings* invites contributions in the fields of language, applied linguistics, literature, and culture from the academic community.

Contributions should not have been previously published or be under consideration for publication elsewhere. Each contribution is submitted to at least one reader on a panel of reviewers and only those articles recommended by the reviewer will be considered for publication. However, the final decision rests with the Editorial Board. Acceptance letters will be provided on request after the Editorial Board's final approval.

### ***Manuscript Requirements:***

- Must be written in English
- Style: MLA 8 (Literature/Cultural Studies), APA (Applied Linguistics/Language)
- Must be double spaced in 12 point Times New Roman font
- Must include abstract, text, tables, figure captions, and references in a single .doc or .docx file
- All figures, graphs, and pictures must be in black and white.
- Abstract should be 150–200 words
- Include up to five keywords
- Use American spelling
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- Incorporate all notes into the text or include under a subheading (Notes) before the Works Cited or References page.
- Endnotes and footnotes are strongly discouraged.
- Paper length: 2500-6000 words (limit reconsidered at the discretion of the Editorial Board for exceptional articles)
- Must be professionally edited before submission

Papers requiring extensive editing after acceptance by reviewers will be rejected by the Editorial Board.

All papers will be checked for plagiarism.

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