Ruminations:
The Andrean Journal of Literature

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Editorial

In a bid to embrace globalization, the modern world has fixed its gaze in a forward-looking direction, having forgotten how important it is to also look back. We have tread and trampled upon the rights of those who were there before us, and not because we have forgotten the original inhabitants of our nations, for the fact that we have named them belies that theory. But one can always name without knowing or understanding: the act of naming does not preclude the possibility of ignorance or insensitivity of those who name towards the ones named. Our annual departmental conference, ‘Routing the Rootless: Explorations into the Literature of Indigenous Cultures’, marked a small but meaningful step in (re)visiting the indigenous peoples the modern world has left behind, and (re)examining with an attitude of respect various facets that relate to indigenous communities in various parts of the world, their literature, and their oral traditions in particular.

Of the five papers selected for publication, Sucharita Sarkar’s paper traces the motherline in the work of two Caribbean women writers, namely Lorna Goodison and Jamica Kincaid, mapping the manner in which the former uses the motherline to connect with her indigenous roots as a therapeutic exercise, while the latter rues the absence of the motherline, and the trauma of its loss. She argues that the motherline has an indelible connection with our indigenous heritage, which makes it incumbent upon us to ensure that we don’t lose sight of it.

Abhay Chawla turns his gaze on the Meo community of Haryana, and its representation in the oral tradition of the community, in particular, the story, Kaulanai ki Larai, from a subaltern perspective. His paper provides an insight into the history and culture that has shaped the Meos, and pays tribute to the history of their resistance, and their struggle for dignity and self-assertion.

Soni Wadhwa critiques and problematizes the easy definitions and conceptualisations of indigeneity. She examines the politics of naming
through the lens of transgressive indigeneity and identity politics, situating her views in a study of the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz’s works, *Khufu* and *Arabian Nights and Days*.

Dr. Deepa Murdeshwar-Katre’s paper, “Sand in Our Hands: The Little-known Stories of Vasai Palghar”, takes a closer look at the oral literature of the inhabitants of the Vasai Palghar region. In particular, she chronicles the legends of the temples of the region, bringing to the attention of the mainstream these little known stories that have survived in the oral narratives of the region’s populace.

Lastly, Dr. Lakshmi Muthukumar’s paper addresses theoretical issues involved in the appropriation of the literature of indigenous cultures, and the ethics involved in this body of research, warning scholars to tread carefully and sensitively while embarking on this enterprise.

We hope these articles provide a fresh yet informed and critical perspective for those desirous of engaging with indigenous communities, with their history, and with their stories.

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Indigeneity and the Motherline: Contrasting Two Caribbean Women Writers

Sucharita Sarkar

1. The Problem of Indigeneity in the Caribbean

The concept of indigeneity is intimately linked to land and territorial rights, and questions of indigeneity are often settled through the Principle of First Occupancy (Waldron 7). Judged by this principle, the category of indigeneity becomes problematic when applied to the layered histories—of settlement, colonization, displacement, slavery, indenture, and hybridization—and the imprecise geographies of the Caribbean. The original inhabitants of the Caribbean were the nomadic Amerindian peoples like the Arawaks (Tainos) and Caribs who came from Central America over 6000 years back, and whose language and culture have been decimated ever since the colonial encounter post-1492 (Wilson). The Encyclopaedia Britannica declares that “the literature of the Caribbean has no indigenous tradition”, summarily invisibilizing the oral tradition of the pre-Columbian native cultures (Braithwaite).

Attempts to rediscover the indigenous roots of Caribbean culture have become increasingly imbricated with projects that “reassert the place of Africa in the Caribbean”, often going back to African traditions of oral storytelling, as a majority of the island inhabitants are from West Africa who were forced into the slave trade (Braithwaite). A broader interpretation of the legal definition of indigeneity allows the inclusion of the forced settlers from Africa—and also those belonging to the Afro-Caribbean diaspora—in the category of Caribbean indigeneity, as they share with the Amerindian settlers a common history of colonial exploitation and misrepresentation. This African-centred approach to Caribbean indigeneity has often used psycho-historical processes and linkages (Sutherland). In this paper, I shall focus more on the processes—
rather than on the definition—of indigeneity, such as self-identification as indigenous, myth-making about land and origins, privileging folklore and orality, invoking the past through legends and hero-figures, resisting marginalisation and erasure, and deploying narrative strategies to reclaim their landscape and histories. Patricia Mohammed uses an interesting maternal analogy for this process: “Like a child, unsexed, named after the parents it has lost, the region and its peoples continue to examine the past” (Mohammed 10).

The motherline is an important feminist/womanist strategy that synchronises with these processes of indigenous identity construction. The motherline is a Black mothering concept developed by feminist psychoanalyst Naomi Lowinsky. She defines it as “the experience of continuity among women...through which a woman is related to the ancient earth of female procreation” (2). Motherlines are “stories of life cycles that link generations of women” and searching for the motherline entails a “journey back to her female roots” by engaging with ancestors; thus implicitly coupling gender and history, maternity and indigeneity (Lowinsky 1; 13). Taking the concept of the motherline as a theoretical framework, I have examined two contrasting texts to explore the making of motherlines and their connections to indigenous histories and identities of women, families and communities. Lorna Goodison’s From Harvey River: A Memoir of my Mother and Her Island (2009) maps these motherlines to reconnect her to her ancestry and her homeland/s, and to enable her to fashion her own indigenous female identity. In contrast, Jamaica Kincaid’s The Autobiography of My Mother: A Novel (1996) explores the trauma and loss that results from the absence of the motherline, and the female protagonist’s heroic struggle that is a tribute to her imagined motherline (as evident in the title of the text). I am indebted to earlier research on indigenous ideologies of mothering, especially Kim Anderson’s (2007) lucid enumeration of indigenous maternal strategies of resistance, reclamation and refashioning.
2. The Ghost who Talks of Blood Ties

In narratives that consciously attempt to reclaim indigenous pasts, one recurring motif is the strategic use of ghost-figures who act as catalysts and doorkeepers, sharing stories and memories, guiding the journey back to the roots. Lowinsky writes, “Motherline stories are filled with the power of ghosts, stories that ground us in our ancestral roots” (141).

Lorna Goodison begins her memoir by narrating a dream—”a very vivid visitation”—where she meets her deceased mother in her celestial residence, now “in charge of sewing gorgeous garments for top-ranking angels”, and her mother Doris gives her a book: “This is that book” (2). The memoir becomes a gift from the maternal ghost, and this gift of words helps Goodison in stitching and embroidering, “reconstructing and re-imagining the story of [her] mother’s family and their forebears” (278).

Xuela Claudette Richardson, the fictional protagonist of Jamaica Kincaid’s novel, also dreams recurrently of her mother, but in her dreams the mother is a fragmentary, silent, half-erased spectre. She sings once but without words:

To this day she will appear in my dreams from time to time but never again to sing or utter a sound of any kind—only as before, coming down a ladder, her heels visible and the white hem of her garment above them (Kincaid 32).

This is a mutilated, sterile ghost, incapable of transferring legacies of the motherline. The recurring dream of the dead mother—with whom the daughter has no shared memories—is a repeated reminder of her absence. Xuela begins her narrative: “My mother died the day I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind” (Kincaid 3). Through this powerful image of the self being buffeted by dark winds, Kincaid conveys the lack of illumination and rootedness that results from the absence of a motherline.
Lowinsky claims that the motherline provides women with “carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power” (13). Goodison’s memoir is a joyous, humorous celebration of her ancestry, embracing her mother, aunts, grandmother, and great grandmothers, intimately connected to female bodies and pasts. For instance, she narrates the secret indigenous female tradition of washing “small clothes” soaked in menstrual blood in pails and then using this blood-stained water to fertilise the “roots of the flowers growing on the riverbank”, a practice which made the red hibiscus and red water grass “useful, nurturing plants” (59). This is a tradition that links women to the land in mutually beneficial ways, and it is also an autonomous practice transferred down motherlines independent of male intervention or even knowledge. Goodison’s maternal ghosts link her to her land through the river: the Harvey River that was the childhood home of her mother Doris. The waters of the river become a metaphor for the life-giving uterine waters, and she feels that “as long as I swim in it, I will be borne to safety” (Goodison 277). The Harvey River is also a metaphor for the uterine cord—the motherline—Goodison knows that if she dives under the surface of the water, she will find the “evidence of my generations”, the river holds traces of her mother and aunts who used to swim without fear like “small schools of fish” and of the native women who came to “wash acres of clothes” and talk (Goodison 277). The river becomes an extension of the metaphysical motherline and the biological uterine cord, interconnecting maternity and indigeniety through mystical and actual processes of cultural transference.

Xuela has no experience of any such connecting motherline:

That attachment, physical and spiritual, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, which was absent between my mother and her mother [who abandoned her at birth] was also absent between my mother and myself, for she died when I was born. (Kincaid 199)
Lowinsky contrasts the unifying motherline with the fractured selves of real and symbolic motherless daughters: “We try to live men: valuing separateness and achievement. These attitudes split us from our bodies and our past and leave us wandering like motherless daughters in the too bright light of patriarchal consciousness” (32). Xuela struggles alone under the oppressive hegemony of ‘patriarchal consciousness’, grappling with her fear of her father, her need for his approval, her serial sexual relationships with men with whom she forms no lasting attachment. She strategically deploys her sexualised body to win personal/political struggles with men that mimic “the relationship between captor and captive, master and slave, with its motif of the big and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak”, but this causes a split in herself and a denial of her maternalized body (Kincaid 37). Her selfchosen barrenness—“I have refused to bear any children”—is a solitary embodied resistance that traumatises her body and mind: “Each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart’s and mind’s decision never to bring forth a child” (Kincaid 199; 225). Scholars have read this resistance as heroic, a decolonizing strategy that both invokes and fashions the self as the indigenous Carib warrior woman (Morris). Xuela learns of the mysteries of blood when she secretly aborts her unborn foetus after paying money to an anonymous woman, by suffering “a volcano of pain” (Kincaid 82). The death of the mother and the absence of the motherline can here be interpreted as a metaphor for colonial history’s erasure of the indigenous past, an erasure Xuela tries to resist. The trauma of abortion becomes an act of female and indigenous defiance; as she walks back across her island after the abortion she says:

And that is how I claimed my birth-right, East and West, Above and Below, Water and Land....Exhausted from the agony of expelling from my body a child I could not love and so did not want, I dreamed of all the things that were mine (88-89).
Whereas Goodison creatively uses the motherline to connect with her roots and heal the self, Xuela counters the absence of the motherline through her political refusal to be an object of colonisation, both as herself and as a non-mother who chooses not to produce any future victims of possible oppression: “I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation” (Kincaid 226).

3. Reclaiming the Indigenous Culture of our Mothers

Lowinsky asserts that one of the functions of the motherline is to empower us to “claim our history” by giving us the knowledge of “our place among the generations” (97-98). This is similar to the ideology of indigenous mothering which values the “intergenerational process of reclamation and recovery....reclaiming of the ‘Indigenous self by seeking out culture-based knowledge and practices” (Anderson 772). In indigenous ideologies of mothering, colonial and capitalist interference is resisted through practices such as collectivism or collective nurturing of children by networks of families and other mothers; native spirituality which centralises the creative and sustaining power of the maternal body; and acknowledging the sovereignty of mothers within the family and in the community as a source of wisdom and a shaping influence on upcoming generations (Anderson).

Goodison’s memoir deploys all these strategies of indigenous meaning-making, without overtly adopting an antagonistic tone. Her memoir is woven together with stories, folk wisdom, freedom songs, anecdotes and histories of small and big resistances of her family, her community and her nation. She documents birthing customs where community women support the new mother by “bringing beautiful garments they had sewn” for the newborn; this is just one instance of collective nurturing (Goodison 9). She narrates other stories of the generosity of her mother’s relatives in Harvey River, who “as soon as they heard that you were now living hard life in Kingston, began to send you regular food baskets....filled with fresh, life-sustaining things to eat” (Goodison 184-185). Goodison also recollects old African mothering customs
like brushing the tiny feet of a newborn with a soft broom “to prevent him from becoming a ‘baffan’, or fool’, but her grandmother Margaret had to do this “surreptitiously” when her “staunch Anglican husband” David was not looking: this reveals the process of gradual erasure of indigenous ways of life under the hegemonic forces of Christianity and colonialism (14).

Goodison metaphorises the loss of indigenous culture through the story of the hardanga stitch:

Once, the hardanga stitch was lost for years and it did not resurface until an old seamstress from Westmoreland dreamt how to do it again... .It had slipped off every seamstress’s needle at exactly the same time and date in the same way that other stitches were lost by ancient Indian tribes, Inuit peoples and Celtic craft workers.

Every once in a while, when the culture of a people undergoes great stress, stitches drop out of existence, out of memory (76).

She attempts to recover the fabulous hardanga stitch from the “land of lost stitches” and it is also significant that her own mother, Doris, is a seamstress, who decides to “make her living as a dressmaker” to support her family, and her sewing room was the domain where Doris, who came to be known as Mama Goodie, shared stories with and solved the problems of other women of the community—”big woman business”— and “taught neighbourhood girls to sew, free of charge”; transferring indigenous rituals, stories and skills down generations of women (Goodison 76; 188; 216). This sewing room and the seamstress, Mama Goodie, wise and articulate, is the undeniable centre of the house, the family and the community, just as Doris’s mother, Margaret was the “undisputed boss of her house”, to whom even her husband deferred to (Goodison 56). By imbuing domestic facts with the relevance of myths, Goodison emphasizes how matrifocal families and communities are a valuable and historically revered resource for
indigenous maternal autonomy. Tragically, Xuela’s life-narrative, existing “in the wake of lost mothers” and in the shadow of her colonizing, corrupt policeman father, demonstrates no such intergenerational, regenerative process, and instead, “gives us a glimpse into a terrible aspect of our female lineage—the abuse and pathologizing of women’s emotional lives” (Lowinsky 80). There are no enabling connections with mothers and foremothers: “no one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current [of love] went out and it came back to me” (Kincaid 56). Her life is scarred by a series of abandonments and absences: her mother was abandoned by her own mother; and Xuela was initially brought up by a foster-mother, the washerwoman Eunice whose breastmilk tasted “sour” and could not nourish her; her step-mother associated her with the indigenous “shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low” and attempted to kill her by gifting her a necklace made of poisoned berries; by others like Madame LaBatte who shelter her and ask her to “regard her as if she was my own mother” but who betray Xuela by allowing her husband to rape her (Kincaid 5; 33; 66). Her story is deliberately constructed as universal and mythical as opposed to factual, and it refuses to document historically specific or geographically fixed details; instead, it centralises the death-dealing agency of the maternal body, and the little culture-based knowledge that she documents is destructive and dangerous: food cooked in sauce made up of menstrual blood that enthrals a man, but only till the spell wears off; thick black syrups brewed by native women that ensure forcible abortion of unborn foetuses (Kincaid 65; 82). Such indigenous practices that mimic the trope of colonisation and dominance of the body, coupled with her instinctive, deep-rooted femininity—that subconsciously teaches her the significance of menstruation and puberty—arms her with weapons enough to survive, resist and avenge, but not to find and feel the enabling affects of love, joy and mothering. Xuela tellingly demonizes herself as a sovereign but monstrous, devouring non-mother—mirroring again the wilful colonial act of murder of indigenous peoples—
I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once. (Kincaid 97)

While the motherline empowers and enables Goodison to reclaim her indigenous history and replenish her maternal heritage and culture, the absence of the motherline spurs Xuela to claim culture of her colonial conquerors through her martyrdom—to replicate their eradicative agency by repeatedly and self-destructively re-inscribing the history of indigenous annihilation on her own maternal body. Xuela’s psychodrama of “sadomasochism” gives her agency to resist but not to regenerate (Holcomb and Holcomb). Goodison’s personal motherline allows her to embrace the political; Xuela’s political struggle decimates her personal maternity.

4. **Mixed Races, Scattered Nations: Linked by Mother Tongues**

The motherline, as discussed above, posits a continuity of generations that is strategically opposed to the colonial politics of interference and disruption. Colonial conquest and exploitation had silenced and marginalised the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and, ironically, it was a common consciousness of this shared history of subjugation that made the disparate inhabitants of the 700 islands, 13 sovereign states and 17 dependent territories cohere and self-identify as Caribbean. A legacy of this common history is the mixed races that populate the Caribbean islands. The two texts discussed in this paper are located in different island-nations—Goodison’s maternal memoir is set in Jamaica and Kincaid’s story in Dominica—but they are linked through their shared colonial past. Lorna Goodison’s mother’s grandfather, William Harvey, is a white settler from England who marries a woman of African descent and stamps his name on Caribbean land: Harvey River is named after him. Goodison’s maternal
grandmother is also of mixed ethnicity—she has an Irish father and a West African “Guinea woman” mother (39). Lorna Goodison’s father’s mother had “Arawak blood in her...copper-coloured skin and that jet black hair” (139). Xuela is also of mixed ethnicity, being the daughter of a Carib mother and a half-Scottish, half-African father; yet instead of syncretizing her hybrid heritage, she—and the gazes of the others she constructs herself through—empahsizes the difference between her hyphenated identities, a difference that exposes the brutal, violent juxtaposition that yoked together the African and the Carib:

I was of the African people, but not exclusively, My mother was a Carib woman and when they looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but had survived. (Kincaid 15-16)

The families thus bear the genetic imprint of colonisation in their mixed lineages, and one of the ways of resistance to this intrusion of whiteness is to centralise the indigenous and African past, the past that is prior to and untainted by colonial imprint.

Lowinsky emphasises the need to “speak the mother tongue”, which she defines as the ability to “sink down into a world outside ordinary time, to sink into what we feel in our bodies and in our emotions, to allow ourselves to see with the inner eye as well as with the outer” (38). The process of teaching the mother tongue is symbolically represented in Goodison’s memoir by the ritual of the mother opening the mouth of the newborn daughter and rubbing her finger dipped in sugar “over and under the small tongue to anoint the child with the gift of sweet speech” (5). Her grandmother Margaret had done this to her mother Doris, who had repeated the same ritual with the author, Lorna Goodison, to give her “the gift of words” (274). Empowered by the magical, mystical process, Goodison recounts the dreams of her mother Doris; dreams where Doris’s own maternal grandmother
Leanna “sitting astride her grey mule right next to her bed” takes her pillion, galloping across the territory and history of Jamaica; back to the indigenous past, and to the colonial encounter:

They rode past the time, before cane, when Jamaican people planted mainly corn and cassava, hunted wild boar and coneys, and went to sea in magnificent boats they had fashioned from trees; when their artists made sacred wood carvings that would survive for hundreds of years; when their scientists discovered how to extract poison from the root of the cassava; when they played an early form of soccer and lived mostly in peace, till three leaking ships filled with lost men came towards them bearing Hard Life. (203-205)

Leanna is the West African Guinea woman who bears the child of an Irish sailor but “refuses to let him rule her”, her “magical African power infuses this memoir” (Balee 234). Leanna also dreams of the nightmarish Middle Passage, where she is “one of the Africans packed into the hold of the slaver. . . .crouched and chained, wedged tightly against the bodies of other Africans squatting in their own excrement” (Goodison 44). These dreams alternate with other dreams where Leanna cautions Doris to “control the silver”, which refers to the “time in the history of Jamaica when all the silver coinage on the island had found its way into the hands of enslaved men and women, enslaved Africans who . . . .had bought their freedom and their own land with these small sums of silver money” (207). Goodison’s mother tongue is sweet — dipped in sugar — and her accounts of the past are tinged with genial humour and acceptance. Along with narrating idyllic stories of the time “before Columbus encountered the island of Jamaica”, when the parish of St. Elizabeth was the “site of significant Arawak and Taino settlements”, a history later erased by colonial mapmakers who renamed the parish St. Elizabeth, Goodison humorously recollects persistent African folk beliefs that consider
the “travelling soldering man” to be the “Jamaican incarnation of Ogun, the West African god of iron, now coming to weld the pots and pans and chamber pots of transported Africans” (Goodison 136; 194). The dreams in the mother tongue bring the indigenous and the African pasts together, expand her re-visioning of the past from her family to her nation, and enable her to create a common Afro-Caribbean indigenous identity.

In contrast, Xuela has no access to her mother tongue; she says, “I do not know what language she spoke” (Kincaid 198). Instead of sharing mother tongues, her stepmother constructs silences “filled with pure evil” between themselves, and to Xuela silence becomes “the only form of self-punishment” and imprisonment: “to live forever locked up in an iron cage made on your own silence” (Kincaid 55; 60). Her whole life is a struggle to assert her own agency against pain and silencing. To her, the death of her mother — who “was of the Carib people” — is symbolic of the annihilation of the indigenous races:

Who were the Carib people? For they were no more, they were extinct, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case. That these people, my mother’s people, were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness... they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves. (197-198)

This is a pessimistic confession of despair and denial. Xuela avenges her loss of mother tongue by marrying the English doctor Philip Bailey, a man born into “the conquering class”, part of a race that thrived on “the successful disruption of other peoples’ worlds”; her victory lies not only in her sexual domination, but also in the fact that she conquers him through her command of language, gradually denying him access to communication:
I mediated for him, I translated for him. I did not always tell him the truth, I did not always tell him everything. I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived, eventually I blocked his entrance into all the worlds he had come to know (Kincaid 211; 224).

After her self-engineered act of revenge and after she oversees her husband’s burial, she is left alone, though unafraid, waiting for the “sound of much emptiness” to overcome her (Kincaid 224-226). Her simultaneous victimisation and self-determination is a “triumph of ambivalence” and emblematises the post-colonial predicament of indigenous peoples (Simon).

As historical perspectives, we may read Kincaid as focusing on the tragic finality of the gradual loss of indigenous races, while Goodison’s text foregrounds the optimistic continuity of indigenous people — both men and women — by weaving their past and present with the African survivors of the Caribbean. Even in Leanna’s nightmares about the middle passage, the cursing, suffering Africans on the slave ship are consoled and soothed by music “which took its rhythm from the waves on which the ship of darkness rode”, indigenous beats that in later years, Jamaicans would call “Rocksteady” (Goodison 45). This is Goodison’s affirmative journey to the spiritual roots of her people achieved through her enabling mastery of the motherline and mother tongue, and she “locates herself in relation to her kin in great loops of language that intertwine generations” (Lowinsky 78). Goodison’s search for her motherline is affirmative, humanist and inclusive, and she does acknowledge, “it also makes room for tributes to her male antecedents”: upright grandfather David, forthright Irish maternal great-grandfather George Wilson, enterprising paternal great-grandfather William Harvey, and of course, music-loving Vivian Marcus Goodison, the caring husband and loving father (Lewis 86).
Goodison’s memoir ends in a series of deaths, deaths of her mother and her aunts. Yet, the dead — like the past — are never lost, they revisit their loved ones in their dreams: “After my mother’s death, her sister Ann would swear that all the Harvey girls came regularly to visit with her... all dressed up in their finery and walking into the town of Lucea” (Goodison 273). When Goodison grieves over her mother’s death, she is surrounded by a “loving circle of women”, whose “sounds of consolation”—they chant the “Jamaican Om”, “nuh mine nuh mine nuh mine nuh mine”—“pushes back her grief (266-268). Even as Goodison mourns the death of her mother, “with long eyewater running down” her face, she remembers her mother’s voice, “Bring me an onion...Don’t forget me”, and she does not, inscribing her mother, her ‘people, her ‘generations’ as Jamaicans call their blood relations” and her land in this memoir through her “gift of words” (273-274). Xuela, on the other hand, despite her heroic feminist resistance, ends her account in negativity, absence and void:

This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become.... Death is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things (Kincaid 228).

Whereas Goodison’s memoir transcends colonial history and celebrates indigenous community ties; Xuela embodies indigenous victimhood and resistance, but cannot reconnect to her community.

To conclude, the two texts I have studied demonstrate the value of the motherline in mapping our indigenous pasts and shaping our future in procreative and affirmative ways, and the disconnectedness and near-impossibility of any such attempt in the absence of this motherline. Lowinsky claims that, “Our feminine souls are rooted in the Motherline” (216). Expanding the scope of the statement, I would argue that our indigenous souls are rooted in the motherline. As women, to rediscover this soul, we need to trace our motherlines back to the land, to the origin of our self, family and race.
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Routing the Rootless: Orality and the Meo Identity

Abhay Chawla

Introduction

Meos are the inhabitants of a region in North-west India in between the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, a region which was called Mewat (IGI, 1909:313). Formerly Hindus, most of them belong to Rajput families who embraced Islam four centuries ago (Shamsh 17), although a lot of the Hindu customs were still practiced as late as the mid-20th century! In answer to the question, “What’s your religion?” a present-day Meo answers, “Islam”. Yet the whole Meo society is divided into Pals and Gotras, with clear exogamous rules. The cultural articulation of the Meo identity is thus deeply contestatory (Mayaram, 2004).

Mewati is the spoken language of the region. Termed a dialect, it has no script of its own and can be written in both Persian-Arabic and Devanagiri scripts. The language, therefore, has an indeterminate status (Grierson, 1908).

Origin of the Meos

There are various theories about the Meos and their inhabiting the area called Mewat. Their mythological origins are described in Colonel James Skinner’s (1778-1841) illustrated Tashrih-ul-Aqwam (an account of the origins and occupations of some of the sects, castes, and tribes of India). The Meos could have been the Mids, a pastoral-nomadic migratory group of North-west India between the seventh and eleventh centuries, or they could be the offspring of the men who constituted the army of Alexander the Great, who were left back under his governor Seleucus Nicator to guard the conquered Indian territory of Sind, or the progenies of Raja Jaswant as described by Crooke in his book, The Tribes and Castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh, Volume III,
History of Marginality

The starting point for the marginality of the Meos, in the absence of any other records, can be taken as their displacement from the Doab by the Rajput clans of Dors, Tomars, Bargujars and Chauhan as enumerated in the Gazetters of the United Provinces (UP). There is no written record of the Meos (except during Qutabal-Din’s period) and, as a result, their above mentioned displacement has been conjectured by scholars (Mayaram, 2004: 22). From various documented accounts it is quite apparent that Meos were constantly viewed as a problem for the state of Delhi as well as Ullwar. They were known to indulge in criminal activities like looting and thieving and were in general known to maintain a rebellious stance towards the state and were looked upon as the “Other”. However, from their perspective, it was their lands which had been occupied; the state of Delhi was the usurper.

Hunter, in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, writes: “They gave much trouble to Lord Lake’s forces in the Maratha War of 1803, while in the mutiny they and the Goojars were conspicuous for their readiness to take advantage of disorder” (314).

There is also the matter of their mixed culture, curious to outsiders in general. The Meo conversion from Hinduism to Islam explains their cultural practices straddling the two religions. Diverse explanations are available regarding Meo conversions, and it is unclear if the conversion was a one-time process, a complete movement associated with conquest, or whether it occurred as a gradual process over an extended period of time. Jagga records in Rajasthan show that by the early eighteenth century, Meos had started to keep Muslim names for their babies, though the process was still fragile, and Major Powlett observed in the second half of the nineteenth century that “Meos are now Musalmaan in name but their village deities are the same as those of the Hindus” (Alwar Gazetteer).

In fact, this tenuous process continued until Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi started the Tablighi Jama’ at movement in Mewat in 1926.
The movement caused the Meos to gradually distance themselves from Hindu customs and to adopt Islamic customs. This was further accelerated by the rise of communal forces, and subsequent communal riots in the run up to the independence of the country. All this occurred over a span of a few decades in the early 20th century.

Most information in the public domain came from British authors who based their understanding of the Meos on the writings of one Major Powlett who in turn based his understanding on Persian texts containing the then state’s perspective of the Meos. The Meos never got their side of the picture into any written text. In fact, towards the end of the British rule the Meos again seemed to be at the wrong end of the political spectrum. With independence looming on the horizon and the hardening of the communal forces, there were riots that broke out in Alwar, Bharatpur and adjoining areas. There was a mass migration of Meos from Bharatpur into Alwar and Gurgaon, and some of them migrated to Pakistan.

Oral Traditions

These stories were composed by bards or mirasis of various Meo Pals in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. Dariya Khan, Gurchari Mev Khan, Kaularii k larai and Panch Pahar ki larai are some of the popular stories. Mayaram (2004) feels the story Kaulani ki larai’ is a Meo creation unlike the other stories which were mirasi creations.

Kaulani ki larai

The background narrative of the story is as follows: Meos were notorious for their turbulence and predatory habits till their subjugation by Bhakhtawar Singh and Viney Singh of the Alwar Kingdom who broke up large turbulent villages into a number of small hamlets; thereafter the Meos became docile (Shamsh, 34).

Meo society is divided into 12 Pals. Then there is a 13th Pallakra having an inferior status with respect to other Pals. In addition there are the Nepaliyas who don’t fall into any Pal.
As documented by Mayaram (2004), abridged.

The story is from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century and shows the tense relationship between the Meos and the Naruka Rajput state of Alwar.

It was after the 1803 Maratha war that Alwar signed an alliance with the British which allowed Mewat to be divided into two territories, one administered by the princely states under British Paramountcy and the other administered directly. Kaulani is situated in northern Alwar around Ramgarh and Ghata near the present day town of Firojpur Jhirka.

The story is divided into three parts with the first part called the “Battle of Hathi Singh or Jhir Ki Larai” while the second part is called “Battle of Bhopal Singh or Kaulani ki larai” and the third part, the “Battle of Kanvar Jahaj”.

Two brothers, Jabbar and Jhangir Khan, who are Khanzadas chaudharis live at Mubarakpur and are informers for the government. They have the power to give up to six months imprisonment or punishment of kath koyra. The maharaja of the Alwar State, Bhaktawar Sngh, gifts Jabbar with a siropav, horse, woollen shawl and a turban for his work as an informer.

Jabbar’s horse is stolen by Ravat Mev of Sivana. He thinks the Kaulani Meos of Baghora Pal have taken it. Jabbar captures Jalam, a Baghora Meo in the bazaar. Rai Khan, a chaudhari of Baghora Mens, and is angered when Jabbar collects all the Khanzadas of Mubarakpur and takes the matter to the Alwar court. Rai Khan threatens to take revenge unless Jalam is released but Jabbar refuses to release him.

Fourteen Meo thamas capture the Khanzadas’ cattle in retaliation. In the resulting battle at Kaulani, the seven brothers of the Khanzada chaudhari are killed.
The Rajput general Hathi Singh is sent to avenge the Khanzadas’ defeat. Hathi Singh’s army reaches Firozpur and pitches its tents. Ahmad Bakas, the nawab of Firozpur, belongs to the Mugal qaum. Mansa Meo a Daimrot Meo of Ghata Basi called the Rao Sahib of Ghata takes the horse of Hathi Singh thinking it belongs to a gypsy. Ghata had been refusing to pay revenue to the state. 200 girls, 900 cows and 70 are captured by Nawab Ahmad Bakas’ army and shut in the fortress of Firozpur. Among the captured are Musi and Maddi, the daughters of the Daimrot Meo, Mansa of Ghata. Hathi Singh shuts Musi in a palanquin and sends her to Tijara while Maddi is made to undergo nikah with the nawab despite her protests and sent to Loharu.

The Diwan of Alwar commands that Kaulani Baksa, the chief of Ratnagarh and Kehargarh return the Khanzadas cows, or else his village will be attacked after the Rajputs take their ritual bath. While the army bathes at the temple of the goddess at Jhir, the Meos close all routes and attack them from four sides. The Gorval, Baghora and Ravat Meo clans join forces, and Hathi Singh is The Daimrot Meos have ever since been grateful to the Baghora Meos for this. This is the battle of Hathi Singh or Jhir. The headless Corpse of Hathi Singh is buried at Jhir where a cenotaph has been erected.

In the second part of the narrative called “Battle of Kaulani”, Raja Bakhtawar Singh’s mother’s brother, Bhopal Singh takes up the challenge to conquer the wild or the region of Baghora Pal. His army camps at Pata and he calls his informers Syalti and Bhagmal who are Nai Meos to tell him the name of the Meo leaders and to spy on the Meos. Syalti and Bhagmal arrive at Kaulani and suggest that the Meos pay the government the rate of eight annas per plow, and the rest would be absolved. At first, the entire village collects eight annas per plow. However Sale Khan Meo refuses to give the eight annas or accept another’s authority. The other Meos also take their money back. Bhopal Singh now attacks Kaulani. Mahadev predicts in a conversation with his wife Gora that the Meos will win. The battle is waged for three days until Bhopal Singh is killed.
The third part of the story is called “Kanvar Jahaj ki Larai”. It begins with Baktawar Singh writing to his nephew, Kanwar Jahaj, a Rao of Jaipur to take up the challenge of avenging Bhopal Singh. Jahaj declares that he will break up the Meo pals, defeat Kaulani and establish a fortress there.

The force reaches Baghor, near Tijara, located thirty two miles northeast of Alwar. Jahaj attacks Kaulani along with 500 men. The Meos surround the Rajput force. Wave after wave of Rajput onslaught is repulsed, and Kanvar Jahaz retreats.

Bhakhtawar Singh calls for an astrologer asking him how he might repair the enmity with Mewat. The pandit predicts a battle for twelve years and peace after twenty four. The Rajput thakur, Bhairu Singh, lives in Kotijhana in the Jaipur kingdom. Bhakhtawar sends Bhairu to Kaulani. He lives among the Meos disguised for twelve years. He becomes a pagdi bhai. The palace at Kaulani is repaired.

Bhaktawar’s successor Banni Singh later sends an army of 12000 to Kaulani. A statue of Raghunath (Rama) is placed in the temple in the fort. Ever since then, the village has been known as Raghunathgarh government records.

**Culture, Representation and Identity**

Oral traditions give a glimpse of a society bereft of written records. As one studies the stores as well as the transcripts of various other stories one notices a repetition of certain keywords. Keeping in mind that these stories were scripted by different mirasis (bards) working for different Pal groups with this story possibly scripted by Meos themselves, it is quite a coincidence that there are surprising similarities between the stories. These similarities are irrespective of the time and context in which the stories were composed and sung.

The overall theme of the story is about Meo identity, that of being a fearless warrior. It is a subaltern narrative of the valor of the Meos in the
face of a cunning and powerful enemy. It is about their honor, their land and the injustice meted out to them.

While the state texts about the event read as, “Refractory Mewattee subjects who were in constant rebellion. . .” (ASSR, 25), in the subaltern narration the Meos describe themselves as “markhana” or brave. A petty feud between the Khanzadas and Meos blows into a war between the Rajputs and Meos, and shows the resentment in Alwar establishment against the wild Meos. The categorical story narration categorical states that when the Khanzadas took their complaint to the Alwar King, the king’s diwan cautioned him against interfering in the intra community feud as Khanzadas and Meos stay together. However his advice is overlooked and the state intervenes. The war is a zero sum game with the victor taking it all i.e. land, women and cows, who become trophies of the victor while the vanquished men are generally expendable and hence killed.

The motifs used in the story are that of feuds and battles; treachery and betrayal, honor and revenge.

The Dhol or drum and nishan or the flag are shown as symbols of power, pagdi or turban exchange as a sign of brotherhood and ritual baths, prayers and mahadev as symbols of righteousness and faith.

The notion of rebellion and seeing themselves as rebels comes out during the course of the story but is highlighted by the particular incident in the third part of the story when a Rajput disguised as a rebel comes and stays with them for twelve years and they are ready to make him a pagdi bhai.

Some key aspects of the above story are:

The story is centered on the Bhagoria Pal of the Meos. Their area of habitation is referred as ‘bihar bhum’ or the ‘wild land’ and its chief or chaudhari as the ‘bihar pat rav’ or ‘Rao of the forest’. Hence Kaulani, a major village of the Bhagorias has topography of hills, and ravines crisscrossed by streams, giving a sense of inaccessibility.
In all the three parts of the story, Meos are able to outsmart a superior enemy.

Meos are innately trusting and are ready to make a pagdi bhai of the Rajput Bhairu, who has stayed with them for 12 years inspite of them fighting a war with the Rajputs. The story does mention that Bhairu comes with loads of wealth and convinces the Meos that he is a rebel.

A Meo will not bear injustice. “Fourteen Meo thamas advance and capture the Khanzadas’ cattle in retaliation for Jabbar’s act of injustice.”

The shared religion between Khanzadas and Meos doesn’t seem to be a critical factor in defining the community. Group interests are shown in shifting loyalties.

Meos had close social linkages with the other non-Muslim castes. In the second part of the story Bhopal Singh is killed by the spear of Moti Brahman who is fighting alongside the Meos.

There is an intra - Pal political angle to the story where the Bhagoria is shown obliging the Daimrot Pal by freeing their women, cows and men from the fort of Firozpur. So even in a common enemy, intra - Pal politics is exhibited in the story.

The fight between the Meos and Rajputs about land and revenue can be gleaned from various references i.e. “Ghata has been refusing to pay the revenue of the state”, “Baksa refuses to pay revenue for Mohammadpur”, “Syalti and Bhagmal arrive at Kaulani and suggest that the Meos pay the government the rate of eight annas per plow”. The land and revenue is an indirect reference to who subjugates whom.

Meo oral narratives answer the question “Who are we?” Without this information there is no identity. A narrative binds complete strangers who share a national space, and “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson).
Representation is the production of meaning through the use of language. According to the Oxford dictionary, to represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination, to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in our senses. For example, the statement: ‘The Meos release the cowgirls, cows and men after breaking into the fortress of Firozpur’, represents the audacity, ferocity or criminality of the Meos, depending on whose lens one is reading the text with. The way we understand complex and abstract concepts like ‘brotherhood’ and ‘criminality’ is through a system of representation. We organize, cluster, arrange and classify concepts, and establish complex relationships between them. When we see a statement like Khanzada Jabbar’s horse is stolen by Ravat Mev of Sivana. He thinks the Kaulani Meos of Baghora Pal have taken it, Jabbar captures Jalam a Baghora Meo in the bazaar, we are liable to forge a link between the Meos and Khanzadas, a link of enmity. It is therefore easy to infer that Meos and Khanzadas were from a different stock while in reality they were from the same stock and were just feuding.

Culture is defined as shared conceptual maps, languages, and codes that govern the relationship between concepts and signs. Codes are used to fix relationships between concepts and signs. So Meos breaking into the fortress of Firozpur to free their girls, cows and men would be defined as an act of dacoity/criminality but when the Nawab’s army captures them and shuts them in the fortress, it is defined as a ‘valid state response’. It all depends on whose code it is that we are employing to interpret the action.

The conceptual map being used by the reader or ethnographer can change the view drastically, so that the same action could be seen and from different angles. Besides a shared conceptual map, one needs a mechanism of exchanging meanings and concepts, and this purpose is fulfilled through the use of language. The shared conceptual map has to be translated into a common language that helps people of a community correlate concepts and ideas with words, sounds and images. Music and songs are such a
shared language. An oral tradition, with specific keywords, pitches, tones, styles and settings, makes for a very powerful representation of the shared conceptual map of a community and its social narrative, both for the community itself and for others.

In this instance, a pastoral-nomadic migratory group who, over time, has been displaced by stronger powers and has their lands usurped, does not wish to recognize the latter’s superiority. Further this group views events around them as being unfair to them. Their self-image is that of a free and fearless people, and this image, they try to maintain at all costs. The additional complexity of religion needs to be negotiated. They worship both Islamic pirs and Hindu gods.

As Major Powlett writes; “In the second half of nineteenth century, Meos are Musalmaan in name but their village deities were the same as those of Hindus.” This is apparent in our story where the narrative states that Mahadev predicts in a conversation with his wife Gora that the Meos will win.

The oral tradition further deepened this self-view in which each Pal showed off his bravery in shining word-images woven by the mirasis and added on to the corpus of the Meo oral traditions. In this text the additional facet of intra Pal politics is also shown where the Daimrots are shown to be eternally grateful to the Baghoras.

As a result, even when peasantization of the Meos was complete, the identity of rebellion, criminality and anti-state posturing as repeated in their oral traditions was deeply etched in the Meo ethos. The power of a story repeatedly retold is amply clear: a discourse revolving around a conceptual map of a fiercely independent people who will bow before no authority, who define their own rules, go where they wish, and take things they think are rightfully theirs. This social imprint from a scholar’s perspective, one whose conceptual maps are generally statist are bound to give the community a stamp of being ‘anti-state’ or ‘rebellious’.
Meos are an ethnic group. According R. A. Schermerhorn’s (1970), the definition of an ethnic group is

An ethnic group is...a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group (Sollors 1981, p.262).

Kubayanda (1987, p. 128) notes that the primary function of minority discourse is

not to make an accurate description of historical events, but rather to raise the national conscience by addressing questions that have to do with the minor self vis-a-vis the national identity or sovereignty and with the perceived conflicts between freedom and autocracy, between Utopia and reality. Its purpose is to project a minority ethos.

What these stories were doing was not simply rescuing a silent history but rather a story, a narration with a deeper meaning. It was the Meo constructing a face for himself in a world that seemed to be always at odds with him.

Finally, as the Canadian philosopher of Communications Theory, Marshal McLuhan coined the phrase “medium is the message”, the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. A story of valor sung by the mirasis, their voice intonation as the story progresses and the speed of rendition all add to the
message being delivered: “we the fearless unconquerable community who will not tolerate subordination even if we have to give our lives”.

References


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Transgressive Indigeneity

Soni Wadhwa

A textbook study of indigeneity would look something like this: pick an author from the already labeled native histories within traditions of national literatures, look for her treatment of majority-minority relationships and politics, then look for the tropes that project nature in a particular light and bingo! you have your own intervention in the growing body of studies around native literatures. This strategy has several merits: bringing out for consumption those various names that deserve attention and study is only one of them. However, my premise is rooted in the question of the already accepted definitional approach to the study. One of the things that have now begun to lurk around the studies of native literatures is the crisis of naming. Who should be called native or fourth world or first peoples or autochthonous? Or, who can claim that status or category? Do these questions gain different nuances when the speaker is from that supposedly native and non-native identity? Does our way of doing lit-crit change when we deal with this category?

Such nasty questions apart, the problem still remains: who is indigenous? Australian legislation alone can come up with at least 67 definitions (Roach and Egan 27). While it has been an extremely difficult question to answer, the gist of definitional paradigms thus depends on two things: subaltern status and first occupancy. It gets quite murky when despite so many definitions and paradigms, the authorities seem to have given up or left a far more open ground for inclusion with the criterion of self-determination forming a major component of naming and claiming: one is indigenous if one simply claims to be so. It gets even murkier with the question of literature. Does indigenous literature come from indigenous people only? How strongly is the idea of indigeneity predicated on group identity? This paper aims to capitalize on the ambiguities spotted by these questions, and use them to locate indigeneity in a different sense, that is, in all its gestures and movements of crossing the limits (of naming, of definitions).
Let us begin with an alternate understanding of the situation. Indigeneity, like the notions of identity, tends to get trapped within the limits of boundaries. It gets predicated on collective or group rights, and is therefore, at several times, merged with ethnicity. However, the rise in the theoretical studies of identity has also been the narrative of critiques of the notions of identity. Identity has given way to multiple identities and these have begun to be understood as existing in a spectrum. Naming is understood also in terms of the baggage of compartmentalization that comes with it. What has begun to be increasingly clearer is that naming and rooting identity in that naming is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, walling in and walling out.

A gesture in transcending these boundaries, problematizing them, pointing out their impotence in the face of subversive contexts, breaking free of the shackles of given identities becomes a gesture in transgression. Michel Foucault in among the first uses of ‘transgression’ as a conceptual, linguistic, philosophical category used it to understand alternate sexuality. His framing of the concept is very relevant here to locate identity-based context of indigeneity. Transgression becomes a category of experience: it enables one to articulate that which lies between names or any other sets of entities or recognition. Here is a rather long statement by Foucault on the subject:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties
which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (33-4)

What Foucault suggests is that the mechanism of transgression is not about oppositions or mockery. It does not in itself seek to disturb the notions and entity of foundations and thereby origins. Otherwise, it would be a violation and violence of some kind. On the contrary, transgression is some sort of innate force that identifies the presence of excess within limits and the things which are limited and defined by such limits. That excess bursts open somewhere on the thresholds, and oozes into the supposedly other categories. Foucault says: “Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being -affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time” (35).

These thoughts quite aptly summarize the fecund possibilities of transgression - its limits, its limitlessness, and above all, its liminality. Like heterotopia, among others of Foucault’s musings, transgression becomes a metaphor and an idea to engage with the spaces between the spaces. In the context of literary history, historiography and criticism, transgression gains enormous proportions of disturbances in the way it begins to reveal the fissures among categories. This sense of transgression is of immense use while strategizing the location between given identities.

Chris Jencks’s simple rendering of transgression with an extensive study of the concept is much closer to my project of understanding indigeneity here. As he puts it,

To transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation. Analytically, then, transgression serves as an extremely sensitive vector in assessing the scope, direction and compass of any social theory . . . (Jencks 2)
A sense of continuum is essential to understand transgression. A little later Jencks quotes John Jervis: “Transgression . . . involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories” (4). It is this sense of transgression that proves useful here to work with the question of identities and identity-based literature. In the category of indigenous literatures, it helps to combat the essentialist approach of defining the content by the biological, historical, or biologically historical being of the author.

Let me elaborate on this notion of transgressive indigenity with the help of the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, and is considered one of the most important voices of Arabic literature. The question is why read particularly him in an act of transgression? A little bit of it has got to do with his identity, and another bit has got to do with his aesthetics. Here is an author - a twentieth century Muslim, writing in Egypt and writing in Arabic, though that’s an oversimplified view of who he is! So we see that his rootedness in that particular time and place does not in any way categorize him as an indigene. That explicatory and interpellating category could in fact be reserved for the tribal populations, and other such marginalized groups. So in the politics and strategies of naming, Mahfouz does not come across as bearing any such status.

But what he writes could be seen as problematizing identity-based origins of aesthetics, especially with reference to two of his works: *Khufu's Wisdom* and *Arabian Nights and Days*. Both the novels deal with very different materials and if history is a part of making identity and indigenous identities, then it is relevant to say that both the novels deal with very different moments in history. And it is what Mahfouz does with these historical materials that is worth pausing at.

Let us take the case of *Khufu's Wisdom* first. It is one of his novels about ancient Egypt. A time that is accessible to us only in its presence in museums, and historical and archaeological research. It is a time that
has been the source of immense creative speculation, as The Mummy film series in popular culture would easily point out. It is also a very highly romanticized area of especially world history. It has touched us in many ways - the legends around Tutunkhamun have even scared us, the legends around Nefertiti have charmed us. High school students, especially in the US for instance, are asked to write about it in their rhetoric and composition classes, under the topic, “Was Egyptian Civilization a Black Civilization?” So it is a very contested area. Because we do know much specifics about the people of its times, there are many who would like to claim that ancestry and history for themselves. If Africa is equated with the Black presence, and since Egypt is part of Africa, then simple equation would tell us that its peoples were the Blacks. However, to attribute such a glorious phase of human achievement and beauty to the Blacks does not arguably bring out a simple closure. Since the facts about the bodies of the ancient Egyptians are not conclusively established, we have all sorts of people claiming that site for different purposes. As if it were open to arguments. Whoever can argue well takes away ancient Egypt as ancestry.

Enter Naguib Mahfouz in such a situation. Khufu’s Wisdom is among his earliest works. He has also written at least two more novels about ancient Egypt. But this one is exceptionally simple. Khufu is the king. It is prophesied that instead of his own son, somebody else would inherit his throne. He kills that other newborn baby but that is what he thinks. That little boy grows up and becomes a brave soldier in Khufu’s very own army and even saves him from being murdered by his own son. Khufu, in his wisdom, makes him the king. There is a lot more going on and this is only the gist of it. So here is a twentieth century Arab writing about a moment from several centuries ago, without any personal, supposedly indigenous-identity-based access to it and yet he comes up with a magnificent tale. Nothing that Mahfouz writes is overdone. We see examples of contemporary writers who spew out pages after pages of research on the readers while writing about a historical period. As if research were a virtue in itself. As if the knowledge
that you collected in the process of writing your novel were important in itself and deserved to stand alone. The ease with which Mahfouz writes his story is refreshing. Khufu could have been any king, ruling anywhere. Rituals, hierarchy and gods of his times aside, he is a king plagued with questions of how a king ought to rule. Mahfouz’s creative handling of Khufu and his wisdom is layered with complexity. Though we understand that the people were bronze or brown in colour, it is not rubbed in our faces. Mahfouz renders his tale with an ease that is easy to be allured by.

But what is relevant here is the way in which indigenity or the idea of origins becomes a question that is left alone. How did Mahfouz distill that part of history into a narrative that is not forced? This is where indigenity in all its transgression could be seen at work. Some things need not be a prerogative of origins-based identity. There is something else that makes identity a shared concept, a shared being.

The most obvious question that arises is how to site this transgression in Mahfouz. In the novel, one of the characters quotes Kheny: ‘artists are a sex between female and male’. Perhaps that is true for the other aspects of identity formation and retention too.

In other words, the whole world is a diaspora world. Could it not be possible that the whole world is the indigenous world too? Aren’t we all indigenous in ways that play with the titular vocabulary of indigenity? Aren’t we all indigenous in ways that alter our equations with naming? Aren’t we all somewhere between indigenous and non-indigenous? The so-called indigenous literature could also be about the aesthetic, the formal ground and the indeterminacy of both to name and categorize texts. The problem of interpretation and the essentializing shackles of naming and their dangers are too oppressive anyway. It is not a fabrication of far-fetched projects in philosophy and literature. Consider the larger interdisciplinary findings and view:
“[T]he out-dated, oft-repeated essentialist notions of the minority law that define what an ‘authentic’ minority is gives minority activists little choice but to homogenize and nationalize their identity politics. Only minorities that manage to conform with the expectations of the minority law are taken seriously as real minorities in national and international arenas” (quoted in Roach and Egan 31).

What Kingsbury highlights is the mechanism of exclusion inbuilt in the project of politics of indigenous groups. If some people are indigenous to a place, aren’t others by default alien and encroaching?

Let us briefly consider Arabian Nights and Days. On those of us who have had any kind of access to the Arabian Nights, even as fairy tales, Mahfouz’s book works like a charm. It is one of Mahfouz’s later works, and critics often categorize it with his phase of existential quest. Among other things, it is about an almost magical-realist treatment of The Arabian Nights. It is important to note that it is “almost magical-realist” because one would require a much greater familiarity with a critical vocabulary to understand and possess Arabic literature. It is surely a twentieth century treatment of classical texts, possibly in the vein of postmodern rewriting, but postmodern might be a dangerous term to apply here. What Mahfouz does is that he takes the characters from the classical tales and gives them his own twists and turns. It is again a very subtle way of doing narratives from the margins. Again, Mahfouz’s simplicity is charming. His retelling of Richard Burton’s text simply disarms you as a reader and lovingly pulls you into itself.

Therefore, Mahfouz becomes an iconic case of transgressive indigenity. He receives two different traditions - legends around ancient Egypt and the Egyptian tradition of The Arabian Nights and renders them into stories of generic being. He gently takes the stories that belong elsewhere in time and history and churns out precious pieces of world literature.
Works Cited


Sand in Our Hands: The Little-known Stories of Vasai-Palghar

Dr. Deepa Murdeshwar-Katre

The word ‘indigenous’ originates in colonial references wherein the culture and literature of the colonizer was different from that of the native, and the literature of the latter came to be known as ‘indigenous’. It is the significant ‘Other’. Correspondingly, all literature in India as a colony of the British would have been considered ‘indigenous’. In the post-colonized scenario, the word indicates literature in English as against regional language literatures. It also refers to the ‘tribal’ as contrary to ‘urban’ or ‘mainstream’, which has been immensely influenced by the literature of the colonizers. However, in India, as Dr. G. N. Devy in the introduction to Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature states, “It is almost impossible to characterize all of India’s tribals in a single ethnographic or historic framework. In the Indian context, the term ‘tribal’ is too layered to be a synonym for ‘indigenous.”

While most countries of the world have two types of literature, the ‘tribal’ and the ‘mainstream’, in India, there are broadly three types, viz., the ‘tribal’, ‘rural’ and ‘mainstream’ or ‘metropolitan’. Dr. Devy, in his observation on parampara in After Amnesia, broadly divides it into the “Marga - the metropolitan or mainstream tradition, and Desi - regional and subcultural traditions”(18). He thus includes the literature of the villages - the gramin (14) - in the second group - the important link between the two extremes of ‘tribal’ and ‘urban’. Many of the stories of these villages are intimately and intricately connected not only with the tribal but also mainstream literature of olden times. They are thus the bridge between the tribal and urban worlds. While a lot of attention and money is being given for tribal welfare and the preservation of its art and folklore, the art and oral literature of the villages has been largely ignored. This paper explores the ‘village’ connotation of the word ‘indigenous’ and attempts to
bring to light the oral literature of the people of an area in the shadow of the metropolis of Mumbai, viz., the Vasai-Palghar region.

The Vasai-Palghar belt adjacent to north-western Mumbai is a land rich not only in its farm produce but also in its local (to use Ramanujan’s term) “tellings” (Richman 24) of stories from ancient India that are rooted here. This is the Dandakarany-ka-kshetra of the Ramayana, as maps of ancient India indicate. The western part of this land was Surparaka, from where Surpanaka seems to have come. There are stories of Adiravan and Mahiravan, her brothers, who were caretakers of this area that came under Ravan’s empire. There are areas whose legends talk of the visits of Ram and Lakshman, of the camps of Krishna and the Pandavas. The ancient temples that dot this place have stories connected with those in the Puranas. Besides these, are the stories of how the prominent deities of the land came to be. This paper will move from the local to larger narratives.

Let us begin with the story of the famed Jeevadani temple in Virar and the local legend behind it. It is said to be one of the fifty-one shakti-sthals of the Indian subcontinent. Aeons ago, in the village at the foothills of this mountain, a cow would come to the land of a farmer, and graze from morning to sunset. One day, out of curiosity, the man followed the cow up the hill. At the top was a plateau, where the cow stopped. Suddenly, there appeared a radiant lady at the spot. Assuming her to be the owner of the cow, the farmer demanded that she pay him for feeding her cow for that long. The lady was on the verge of paying him, when the man told her he was an untouchable. At that, the lady disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared; the cow letting out a heart-wrenching cry, jumped into the valley below. To this day, the mystery behind the action of the lady and the cow remains an enigma, but a temple was built there for the resident goddess of the mountain, and in commemoration of the cow’s sacrifice, the mountain and the goddess began to be called Jeevadani - one who gives life (Patil 15-16). Locals give this goddess the credit for the peacefulness and harmony of this region. Initially, in a
little cave, a small temple was built, and people would climb up the mountain path to worship the goddess. The popularity of the goddess as a fulfiller of dreams and prayers grew far and wide, and a concrete staircase of around 1400 steps to the temple was built. Now, a huge temple with modern amenities, including a ropeway to carry those unable to climb up, stands in its place.

The second temple in this region, whose origins are connected with the Puranas, is that of Vajreshwari in Vasai. As the name suggests, she is the goddess with the ‘vajra’, the lightning. The story of this temple states that it was on this hill that Sage Vishwanitra performed his penance to become the Brahmarishi. The god Indra, feeling threatened by the power of the penance, threw his ‘vajra’, the lightning, at the sage, who was deep in penance and did not realize the impending harm. The goddess Shakti or Parvati intervened, held the ‘vajra’ in her hand and threw it away on another mountain which flared up and so, began to be called the Mandakini when it cooled down - the ‘manda’ (‘cool’ or ‘cooled down’) ‘agni’ (‘fire’). It also resulted in the seven spots where boiling water ripped through the earth’s crust. These hot water geysers are still there at Vajreshwari and thousands of people with ailments or simple faith throng this area. A temple was built where the goddess is said to have stood, held and thrown the ‘vajra’; she was the ‘Vajreshwari’ and the place too was named after her.

Another famous temple in the forests of Vasai is the Tungareshwar temple which is supposed to have been built by Parashuram, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu.

This is the area he settled down in after he left Kashmir. It is from here that he is said to have reclaimed the Konkan. The two ponds here, viz., the Parashuram Kund and the Ram Kund, are said to have been formed by the arrows shot by them when they were here. These are deceptively deep, and have been the cause of death by drowning of many tourists. The Chakreshwar Mahadev temple at Nirmal in Nalasopara too is said to
have been built by Ram when he was in exile here. The pond near the temple is also said to have been formed by Ram’s arrow just like the Banganga in Mumbai.

There are places with their stories connected directly with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. For instance, the village of Chandeep is considered as the place where Sage Sandipani, Krishna’s guru, resided and that it was here that Krishna had received his training as warrior and administrator. The word ‘chandeep’ is said to be a corruption of the word ‘sandeepani’. The Shiva temple there is revered as an ‘atmalinga’, a linga naturally born out of the rock, and worshipped by the sage himself. There is a group of slate-like rocks, five on one sideband, one by an ancient tree, symbolizing the five Pandavas and Krishna. The Pandavas are said to have taken shelter here during their exile and listened to Krishna’s discourses at the spot.

The next story is of the Chandika temple a few kilometers from Chandeep at Juchandra, a hill at Naigaon. According to legend, it was built by the Pandavas themselves. It is said that the Pandavas would move around these thick forests when in exile. They would dig some of the caves in this region to protect themselves from the wild animals. It was on a 412-foot high mountain cave on an island (‘ju’ in the local language) shaped like the crescent moon (‘chandra’) - the Juchandra - that they sculpted the idols of the goddesses Chandika, Kalika and Mahishasuramardhini. They also dug the pond near the temple (Patil Vasudev, 8-9). In 1540, the Portuguese governor Albuquerque, set fire to the area around the temple in the hope of looting it, but found no treasure. Attacked by honeybees, the Portuguese hastily retreated, leaving much of their ammunition there (Patil, 16). Today, much of the vegetation has gone due to the rapid urbanization of the area.

The last temple in focus is the Mahikavati temple at Vadrai village in Palghar. This nondescript little known temple is said to be the place where Ram and Lakshman were kept imprisoned by Ravan till Hanuman rescued them. This leads us to an interesting “telling” of the *Ramayana*,...
viz., the *Kunkna Ramayana* or the tribal *Ramayana* of the Kunknas of Gujarat. The *Kunkna Ramayana* carries a story of how Ram and Lakshman were kidnapped by Ravan one night from their tents. He is said to have dug a tunnel under the sea-bed from the Mahikaviti temple in Lanka into their tents, kidnapped them in the dead of the night and imprisoned them there. When Hanuman comes to know of this, he jumps across the sea and fights the demon, Magardhaj, who is holding them. Their fight is among equals and at one point, Hanuman asks the demon who he is and is surprised to know that Magardhaj is his son. On inquiring about the origins of his son, Hanuman comes to know that as he had swum the ocean the first time he visited Lanka as Ram’s emissary, his drops of sweat were ingested by a female crocodile, who gave birth to a son, Magardhaj, who grew up quickly because of his divine origins and was employed by Ravan as guard of the Mahikavati temple (Vadhu 72-75).

This interesting story leads to the conclusion that the area that the tribal *Ramayana* covers is that of today’s Gujarat and Maharashtra and the sea that Ram and his monkey-army crossed was at this place. Local folklore says that the rocks that formed the bridge were taken from Tandulwadi, a rock-strewn mountain in Palghar. The Mahikavati temple, thus, becomes the link between the tribal and the ‘ur’ *Ramayana*, as Paula Richman calls the *Valmiki Ramayana* (Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas* 3). The *Ramayana* stories that are narrated by these uneducated and isolated villagers reveal another telling of the ‘ur’ *Ramayana*.

A lot of research in many fields is needed to unravel the history and mysteries behind such stories. So far, only a few local scholars have written about them in books in the local language, Marathi. There does not seem to be anything in English. Though the Archaeological Survey of India has started showing interest in this region since the past few years, access to the literature of this region, which is mostly oral, is difficult. The alarming rate at which the Vasai-Palghar belt is losing its old world charm because of rapid urbanization with its scant regard for the ancient,
and the invasion of television with its glamour quotient are threatening to destroy these stories. Very few of today’s generation of even local people know or are aware of this history of their region. These stories are disappearing from the land like sand held in our hands. What William Dalrymple observes in the context of the bhopas of Rajasthan and their *Epic of Pabuji* in *Nine Lives*, is applicable here: “It was not lack of interest, but literacy itself, that was killing the oral epicy” (95).

I dedicate this paper to those who evoked my interest in this culturally rich land, by narrating these stories to me, viz., to my friend and colleague, Mrs. Beena Patil and her father-in-law, Mr. Nandan Patil and to one of our college peons, Mr. Sunil Thakur. I express my gratitude to my former students, Bhushan Bhoir of Palghar and Bhushan Patil of Naigaon, for providing some of the stories that I have mentioned here.

**Works Cited**


Projects reclaiming native and tribal literature are laudable as efforts at stemming the epidemic of cultural amnesia among colonized nations across the world. Ganesh Devy elucidates ‘nativism’ as “a language-specific way of looking at literature” (Devy 120). He discards the value of a “concept-specific method of universal criticism” and instead lauds a nativist critique of all regional literature that “understands writing as a social act, and expects of it an ethical sense of commitment to the society within which it is born” (120). He rejects the blanket application of western critical theories on Indian regional literature with the claim that: “Literature growing out of one type of underlying linguistic and metaphysical structure cannot be understood and studied by criticism growing out of another and alien type of underlying linguistic and metaphysical structure” (124).

Devy’s explication of the term ‘nativism’ is particularly relevant to the way in which tribal and indigenous literatures and oral narratives of pre-literate societies are perceived and very often “studied” and “interpreted”. There is a very clear distinction one needs to make between projects of documentation, transcription, translation and research article production in this context. Any kind of transcription, translation or transliteration stops with trying to record, document and retrieve. In the case of research, the story reads differently. Each researcher has his or her own agenda, and picks only that literature that lends itself to the perspective or literary theory that he or she wants to employ. While some try to faithfully stick as far as possible to the original work in the native language or dialect, the research article sometimes gets written arbitrarily, and attempts to force motifs, themes and intentions on a literature that never intended to be used for purposes such as these.
The work done by academicians, especially those belonging to literature as a discipline, needs to be interrogated. It cannot be disputed that research showcasing tribal and lesser known regional literature certainly provides a forum to the voices of the silenced and pre-literate societies heretofore unheard. The issue that this paper engages with is the fashion in which such literature is appropriated for “research”. It seeks to interrogate the process of sample selection and rejection, and raises certain important questions. What are the criteria for selection a researcher should ideally adopt? Should the sample selected for study necessarily be exotic as a piece of cultural trivia? Why should a plain or banal tribal song or poem or dramatic piece be rejected just because it does not have “meat” in terms of literary elements such as a metaphoric or symbolic value? These are just some of the questions thrown up by the challenges inherent in the appropriation of tribal literature and philosophies to literary studies.

Richard Dorson believes that folk lore is not something far away and long ago but real and living among us, for here the past has something to say to the present (cited by Shah in a review: 2005). The researcher’s choice of the literature he takes up as a sample to illustrate a perspective is often not arbitrary but very carefully made. It depends on how exotic or symbolic the sample is, and how neatly it slips into the desired slot as exemplification for the chosen point of view. I would like to take up a tribal song to illustrate the point. Legend has it that this song was sung by a particular African tribe whenever a member committed an aberrant act, and also during important moments in that person’s life such as marriage or death. Each individual has his own song that was arrived at by divination by the mother when she was pregnant. The song thus becomes a leitmotif that binds you to your roots, your values and to the path of righteousness.

All the above information about the so-called “African birth song” seems highly credible and fascinating till one reads up on the African poet Tolba Phanem who is apparently credited with the retrieval of this song from an oral tradition. My searches threw up an interesting blog that served as
an eye-opener. The write up of a bilingual consultant, educator, speaker and budding therapist, named Aida Manduley was illuminating. Manduley is a frequent blogger and spends a lot of her time browsing through Tumblr, a microblogging platform and social networking website, and found the following post about an African birth song:

[T]here is a tribe in Africa where the birth date of a child is counted not from when they were born, nor from when they are conceived but from the day that the child was a thought in its mother’s mind. And when a woman decides that she will have a child, she goes off and sits under a tree, by herself, and she listens until she can hear the song of the child that wants to come. And after she’s heard the song of this child, she comes back to the man who will be the child’s father, and teaches it to him. And then, when they make love to physically conceive the child, some of that time they sing the song of the child, as a way to invite it. And then, when the mother is pregnant, the mother teaches that child’s song to the midwives and the old women of the village, so that when the child is born, the old women and the people around her sing the child’s song to welcome it. And then, as the child grows up, the other villagers are taught the child’s song. If the child falls, or hurts its knee, someone picks it up and sings its song to it. Or perhaps the child does something wonderful, or goes through the rites of puberty, then as a way of honoring this person, the people of the village sing his or her song.

In the African tribe there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime or aberrant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them. The tribe recognizes that the correction
for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another. And it goes this way through their life. In marriage, the songs are sung, together. And finally, when this child is lying in bed, ready to die, all the villagers know his or her song, and they sing—for the last time—the song to that person.

You may not have grown up in an African tribe that sings your song to you at crucial life transitions, but life is always reminding you when you are in tune with yourself and when you are not. When you feel good, what you are doing matches your song, and when you feel awful, it doesn’t. In the end, we shall all recognize our song and sing it well. You may feel a little warbly at the moment, but so have all the great singers. Just keep singing and you’ll find your way home.

Manduley busts the “authencity” of this blog. On reading Manduley’s piece it became clear that this so-called “African birth song” was nothing but a half-baked invention by the White man that essentializes the “African experience”. It does not even attempt to give any real details but relies on collective ignorance about Africa that centres the world on a White axis. The text does not provide any sources or even name this African tribe. Certain other sources do but then they name it as an Ubuntu tribe, which, interestingly does not even exist. What exists is an Ubuntu philosophy. “Ubuntu”, incidentally, is a Nguni Bantu term meaning “human kindness”, and has inspired a whole movement that believes in a communitarian and relational approach towards life.

The story thus uses “exotification”, according to Aida Manduley, in the manner of the Noble Savage Myth and the ignorance of those who read it, makes them feel warm and fuzzy. Stories such as these become viral and end up being used by students on their power point presentations and academic assignments. The song has even been translated into
Spanish and Portuguese. Pieces such as this African song get reblogged, and also use the image of a random, unnamed indigenous woman from the Himba tribe. The problems are compounded because in the eyes of many non-African people, Africa is perceived as just one huge jungle where everyone looks and acts the same, with women roaming around topless, feeling connected to Mother Earth, and giving birth in very spiritual ways replete with superstitious beliefs and practices.

The picture of the poet in question, called Tolba Phanem, on the website, is actually that of Aminata Traore, the Ex-Minister of Culture from Mali and not Tolba Phanem, a women’s rights activist and poet as certain websites claim. There is no such person as Tolba Phanem who apparently, is a figment of Alan Cohen’s imagination. He mentions her in issue no. 33 of a digital magazine called “Pathways to Family Wellness”.

Something even more disturbing emerged on further reading. The Birth Psychology website cites the apparent “source” of the “African birth song” as a book by Sobonfu Some titled, “Welcoming Spirit Home: Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community” but
when Manduley consulted the book, she found to her surprise that though the book does describe other ritual birth practices, it does not actually make any mention of this particular song. The example is only being used here in order to reiterate that a lot depends on a researcher’s value systems and ethical orientation. The task of the researcher thus entails a huge responsibility, one that demands an acute self-reflexivity to ensure credibility. Nila Shah in her review of *The Tribal Literature of Gujarat* by Bhagvandas Patel and Hasu Yajnik appreciates such honest initiatives: It is heartening to observe that the study of folklore ... has ceased to be an amateur’s pursuit and has begun to take its place as a scientific discipline (Shah).

Conferences such as this one are rare, and therefore laudable initiatives that seek to explore indigenous literature from tribal and aboriginal cultures around the world and are certainly the need of the hour.

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