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The Annual Newsletter of The Department of English, Maitreyi College

Culture: Representation or Appropriation?
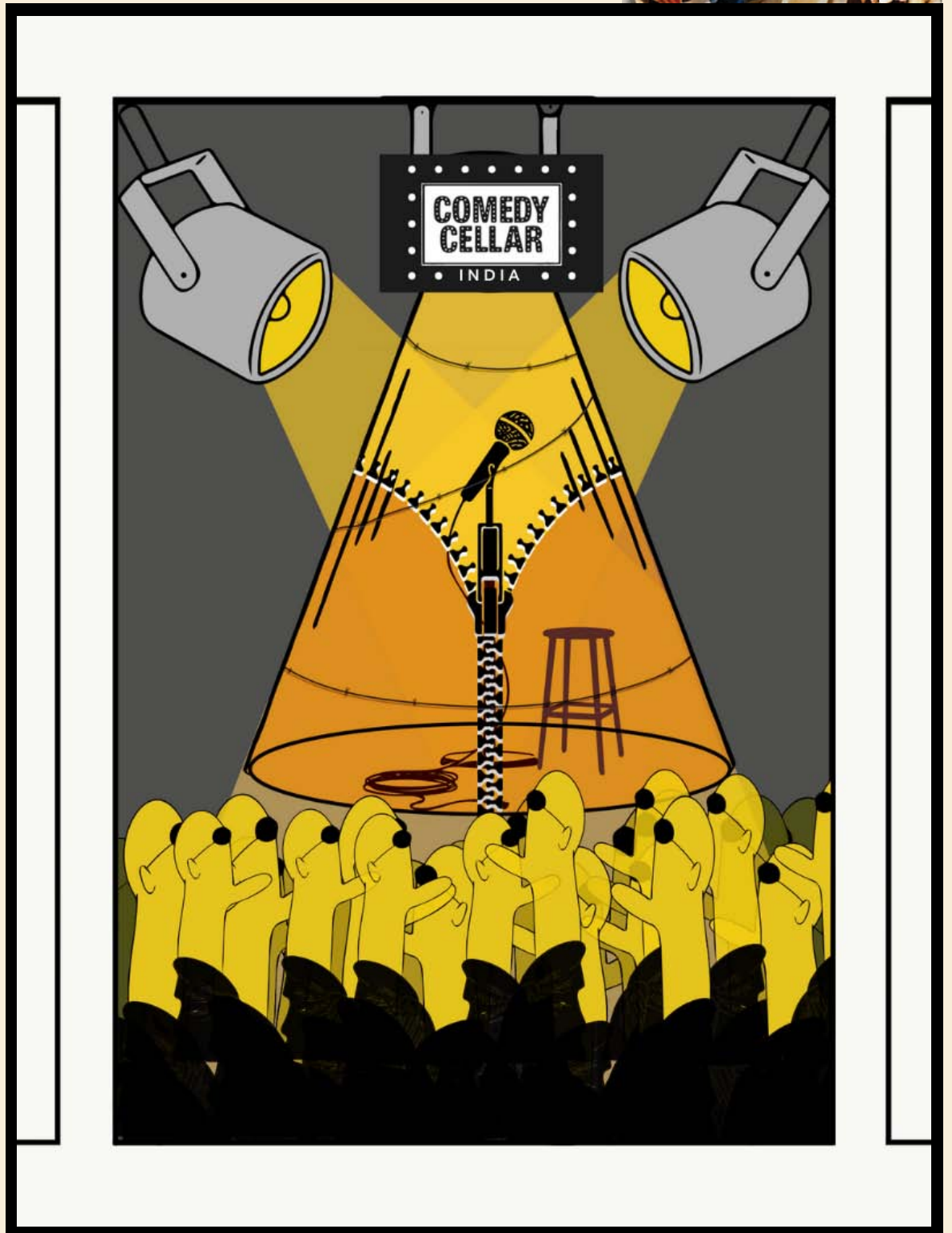
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF:

Ms. Nupur Chawla
(Assistant Professor)
Alfisha Sabri
(Year III)
Maumil Mehraj
(Year III)

DESIGNERS:

Aakriti Agarwala
(Year III)
Kritika Ghai
(Year II)
Palak Purwar
(Year III)

ARTWORK BY PALAK PURWAR

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EDITORIAL

Mis-appropriated Runway: Fetishisation of the Ethnic in Met-Galas

Alfisha Sabri   Maumil Mehraj

BY ALFISHA SABRI AND MAUMIL MEHRAJ

Although a contestable statement, one can say that representation should ideally come from within the group of the represented, or, in any case, be surrounded by a respectful and true ambassador. Individuals and communities alike tend to get emotionally attached to their cultures, especially when their historical (or present-day) experiences are those of violent subjugation and erasure. The failure by the dominant groups (in terms of access to power) to recognise entire communities as equally human/civilised, and belittling their cultural practices as "savage" formed the premise of colonialism. Appropriation is defined by a power imbalance, and when a religious, economic, or social minority group is represented in the world of high fashion, it fits the schematics of what it means to be shown distastefully as less-than. Today, in a time of booming fashion industry, we often witness the usage of elements from these very cultures to exoticise collections of clothing and hence, increase their capital and aesthetic value. For example, the keffiyeh, the Palestinian scarf that entails the brutal political history of the community's exodus, and that of their revolutionary struggle, is being worn, produced, and endorsed by giant fashion brands all over the world while being completely ignorant of their lived experiences. What this does is thoroughly counter-productive- not only does it take away from the realities of a subjugated people, but it also normalises said subjugation.

The Costume Institute Gala, more popularly known as the Met Gala or the Met Ball. The Met Gala is a fundraiser exhibition for the Metropolitan Museum of Art that is held every year on the first Monday of May. Besides being the biggest party for celebrities, it is also the platform where designers and celebrities put forward their interpretations of the year's theme, and every year it is only becoming more compulsive. In recent years, there has been a significant effort by the chairs of the event to assimilate non-Western cultural elements in their theme.

In 2015, the theme for the Met Gala was China: Through the Looking Glass, the interpretation of which by many celebrities and designers was called inappropriate by many persons of Chinese ethnicity. Fabrics that find roots in Chinese cultures were used for dresses that were not Chinese in any manner, the colour red was overused, and there were dresses with Mandarin inscriptions. The image that then came to the fore was argued by many to be an Oriental picture of the East that dominates the popular western imagination, with a few recurring symbols like dragons, fire, chopsticks, slanted-eyes, etc. (refer to images). Only Rihanna was applauded for her look – she wore her infamous yellow robe by Chinese designer Guo Pie.

It is in these two different approaches to a theme that deals with the Chinese community's ethnic identity that we can locate the first part of James O Young's argument about the conundrum of cultural

appropriation and representation. Cultural appropriation becomes problematic, he observes, not merely by how certain communities feel about the act, but when individuals or corporations not belonging to a culture benefit (in terms of capital, or otherwise) from using elements of other cultures. He equates this to stealing. Rihanna's costume not only involved, but also benefited an individual of Chinese ethnicity. Guo Pie's involvement in the process and share in the credits, not only legitimises the usage of elements from Chinese culture but also gives their art a platform, making the act one of representation, instead of an exclusionary and cruel capitalist tactic. Scholars of cultural appropriation have hence rewritten "Our culture is not your aesthetic" as also "Our culture is not your paycheck."

Likewise, the recurrence of certain stereotypical images discussed above also reflect the limited knowledge, and the lazy effort put in acquiring the knowledge, and hence preferred ignorance about Chinese culture. Lady Gaga, usually known for her statement outfits, went on to wear a dress that looked like a Kimono, a traditional Japanese outfit. Similarly, all that Sarah Jessica Parker had on was a headdress which was designed as flames to represent the Chinese; this, too, was made by Irish designer Philip Treasey. Revisiting the 2015 Met Gala surely reflects a lack of empathy, but more importantly, it makes us question whether dominant narratives and their participants have the sympathy required to recognise their privilege and respect, let alone incorporate marginalised narratives and cultures. The similar can also be argued for industry titans like Victoria's Secret that employ elements from African, Asian and/or Indigenous cultures to add a touch of 'wilderness' and exoticism to their predominantly Caucasian models (Images of Sikh turbans by Gucci at Milan FW 2018, Karlie Kloss wearing native-American Headdress, Marc Jacobs's white models wearing dreadlock extensions, among many others).

Another instance when the Met Gala was accused of cultural appropriation was in 2018 when the theme was Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination, where the chant of "My religion is not your Met Gala outfit" was popularised. The main source of outrage was Rihanna dressed as a pope, who was accused of misappropriating the Catholic Church. In defence, it was argued that the chairs of the event had the Catholic Church's (Vatican) approval who even donated to the exhibition. When viewed in the context that a woman of colour (with a history of racial oppression) dressed as a Pope outraged follower of the Catholic church (an association with no history of such oppression), we witness undertones of a racist attitude in this accusation. This places us in the second part of Young's argument in his theorisation on cultural appropriation. Offence, he says, is not reason enough to call an act misappropriation of culture, citing that a Nazi is very likely to be offended at the sight of a Jew. Hence, the historical and political context is seminal in such an examinationn.

Culture Studies is proof how intricate questions of ethnicity is, and how stereotypical representations are not only reductive, but also insulting in nature; in such a case, research and sensitivity become pertinent. Fashion, being one of the foremost growing industries, then has an inherent burden of responsibility to not allow for any misappropriations, or for that matter, any lazy passings of culture to become a party to it, let alone in the most celebrated event in the industry - the Met Gala.

And It Was All Coloured: Appropriating Asia Through the Reel

BY AAKRITI AGARWALA AND PRACHURYA DAS

Aakriti Agarwala   Prachurya Das

There have always been glimpses of a parallel, mythicized representation of Asian cultures. In the western perspective, Asia is viewed as a negative mirror image of values and ideas exorcised from the 'Occident' and imposed on the 'Orient'. This is seen in many Eurocentric cultural productions, reproductions and fictional portrayals. Even as we have moved further from the Empire, manifestations of biases against Asian culture persists in the artistic exports from the West. Cinema requires closer examination, as it often appropriates as well as silences the subjectivity of the Non-Westerns and their practices.

The term "Asia", both as a geographical location and a cultural space has been used loosely in Eurocentric narratives, where "Asian" denotes the East Asian population and leaves out the South Asian demographic. The earliest modes of appropriation are yellowface and brownface- casting white actors in Asian roles with exaggerated make-up and prosthetics, such as slanted eyes and brown skin. For example, in *A Passage to India* (1984), Alec Guinness, a British actor, plays an Indian man called Narayan Godbole, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) presents a highly problematic character of Mr I. Y. Yunioshi (played by American actor, Mickey Rooney), a bucktoothed Japanese man who has been reduced to an extremely stereotyped caricature. These representations come out as severely racist, exotic and stereotyped. In recent times, we have witnessed a similar conundrum- casting non-Asian actors to play parts that are explicitly Asian. *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) cast Scarlett Johansson, an American actress as Mira/ Motoko, a Japanese woman. The presence of Asian characters in the background implies that Asian cultures and identities are akin to 'costumes', something that can be put on and taken off at will for a 'performance'. Their appropriation becomes even more painful because of their history of persecution and discrimination which begs the question- are these identities and customs only palatable when co-opted by a Euro-American narrative?

Countries such as China, Tibet, Nepal, and India are often shown as places of mysterious spiritual practices employed to enhance the Caucasian protagonists' growth. *Eat Pray Love* (2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) place India as an exotic land of alternative religious practices or a haven for 'travellers' in search of themselves.

This is unhelpful to the case of healthy representation on two counts- the portrayal is inaccurate, and it is not interested in the subjectivity of Asian spirituality. At best, Asian religious and cultural practices are commodified for consumption by a western audience, at worst, they are portrayed as savage and occult. *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* (1984) features Harrison Ford's character as the saviour of a small village in India, rescuing them from the local priest who leads a cult, engages in black magic, child slavery, and human sacrifice. The plot also highlights the pre-dominant, Occidental view of the East, where the 'white man' is the self-proclaimed master-in-charge who needs to 'save,' 'tame,' and 'civilize' the savage 'natives. *Octopussy* (1983) leads the viewers through dingy lanes of ascetics swallowing swords and dancing monkeys, while the camera lingers on the bygone idea of India as a land of rajahs, elephants, jewels and riches.

Orientalist cultural anxieties continue to manifest themselves in various tropes- the Asian woman is either a Dragon-lady, a passive victim, or the conniving. The former, an exotic seductress, ruthless, and violent woman has found space in several narratives like Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angles* (2000, 2003), and *Kill Bill* film series (2003, 2004). In the former, she plays a femme fatale Asian spy, and in the latter, she plays a deadly Yakuza gangster, O Ren Ishii. The figure of the Asian woman becomes a threat due to her implied sexuality, which is further exoticised and suggestive of violence.

The names imparted to such characters are also often unimaginative and occasionally, downright racist- Cho Chang, the only East Asian character in the *Harry Potter* films, is a prime example.

Similarly, the men are portrayed as either villainous or subservient. They are often simply turned into a caricature to induce or elevate comic relief, like Bruce Lee's impersonator in Once Upon A Time in Hollywood. This has also found space in John Hughes' *Sixteen Candles* where Japanese-American actor Gedde Watanabe plays Long Duk Dong, an Asian exchange student who is a stereotyped sex-crazed teen. The film has also received harsh criticism for its insensitive depiction of Asian characters, playing a huge role in adding the term 'Donker' to the list of 'names' given to Asian students.

Where the erstwhile colonizers looked to the rhetoric of civilization/savagery to impose their dominance, modern Eurocentricism seeks to reaffirm its hegemony by avoiding authentic portrayals of Asians, or worse, by appointing a token character to represent the vast spectrum of Asian experiences. Films often employ stock characters like the Indian cab-driver, the archaic Muslim, and the subservient nerd, hence, codifying them as 'less-than'. This only serves to dehumanize these demographics, especially when cultural appreciation and sensible portrayals of the same are already scarce.

There is a huge chasm, and simultaneously, a fine line between representation, appreciation, and appropriation. Conversely, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Big Sick* and *To All the Boys* film series are prime examples of non-problematic Asian representation. These films feature casting actors of Asian origin or bi-racial actors, for Asian characters. The films also avoid or address offensive stereotypes attached to the culture it focuses on, presenting a very appealing screenplay. Most importantly, these were stories told by the ethnic populations they sought to depict, be it via directors, actors, or production values. This indeed goes a long way in avoiding the hijacking of various Asian narratives by Caucasian agents.

While representations and appreciations are supposed to be culturally accurate and come from the right place, voice and intent, appropriation can easily turn negative. Appropriation of culture, in turn, adds to the problematic stereotypes attached to an ethnicity. Responsible and sensitive cinema is the way to go !

Delight

BY KHUSHI SHARMA

Swirl of jazz at a soirèe one even fall
Bright as Ambua the air and the hall
Señora prances with your song
'Its ours' she bay
Mastered it with her heart apiece and everyday
All eyes for her
Who's ensuing from the land of fine culture
Friedensengel they call her spelled as peace and nurture
Once in an even fall,
Buffet bestows with sticks
Couth the little one's never ammuse to play barrels nor they lick
Table of the drinks gladden with the mates talk in
They drink a toast to fellows and their belonging
In the town,
Prisming kernel through the half light
Is the only custom for townspeople
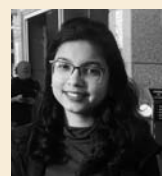For us, an utopian delight
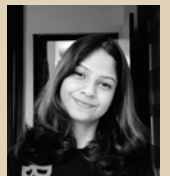
Khushi Sharma

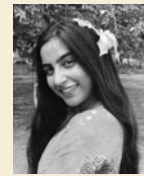# My Culture, Your Fashion?

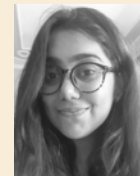BY AAKRITI AGARWALA
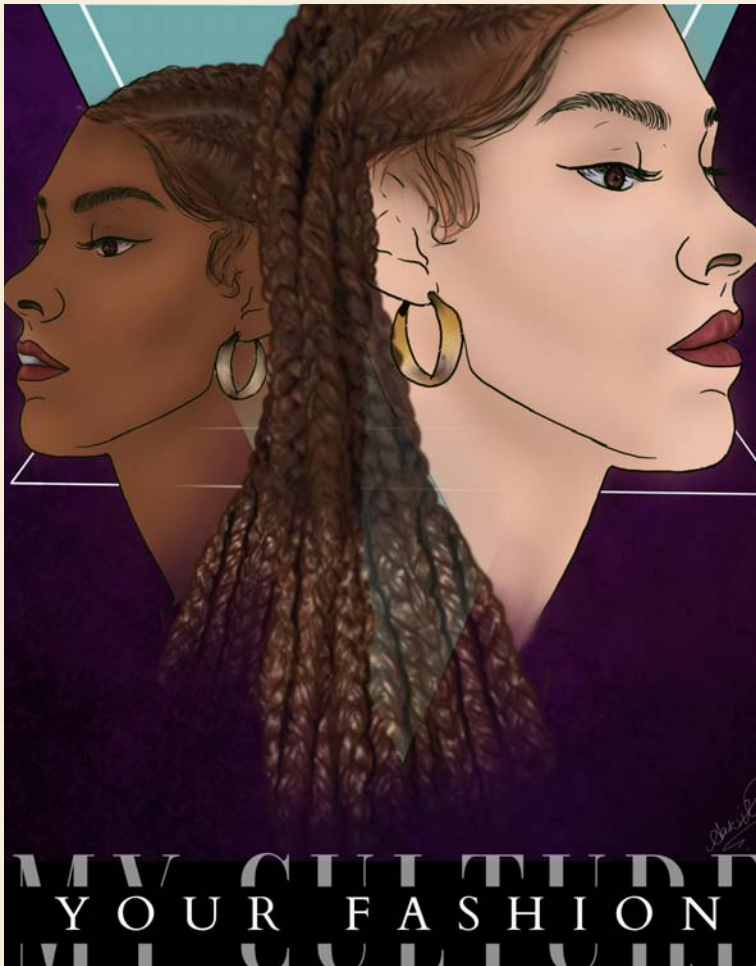
Chirp

BY AAKRITI AGARWALA

Aakriti Agarwala

Rcontextualizing the Queer: A Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's Works

BY AAKANKSHA AND KRITIKA GHAI

Aakanksha   Kritika Ghai

Queer sexuality has existed in this world for eons, yet modern India believes that it is a product of the western culture which is being adopted in India as well. Somehow, despite all the progress we have made, we as a society at times fail to accept people for who they are. Human sexuality is often associated with the idea that it represents the culture of society and has the higher implication of procreation. Society regulates the idea of being right and wrong, to create uniformity. Sexuality is a part of society, in a sense and it is clear that society regulates the behaviour of an individual in terms of sexual preference. The belief of fitting sexuality within the definition of a masculine body and its feminine counterpart has raised the difficulty of variation and inclusion in sexuality.

Culture varies in norms and there are different ideas for perceiving sexuality. Greek mythology tells the story of man preferring man, or man preferring women. Tales from ancient Indian culture have references to the transgenders who come forth express their desire or nature. Queer sexuality is perceived differently in various cultures.

In ancient India, texts like *Kamasutra* have addressed the definition of pleasure beyond heterosexuals couple and talk about homosexual relationship openly. The different ideas of sexuality in India's culture was somehow misread by the colonizers who deemed it sinful, their inherent bias apparent. The British law abolished queerness as per their beliefs and as a consequence, the view of Indians on sexuality changed. Different tales and literature across India have contributed to the writing of sexuality as a normal phenomenon. But modern India somehow failed to understand ancient Indian culture in terms of sexuality. Not merely as an action but also as an art form, the change in thoughts have turned India to question sexuality, terming it as western culture.
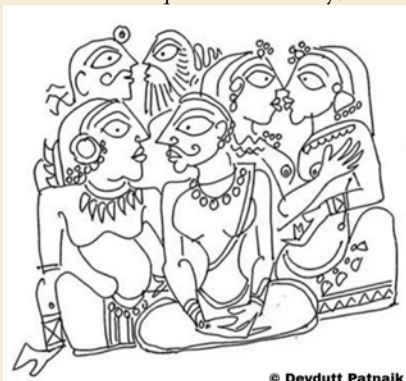
© Devdutt Patnaik

Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You (2014) and *The Pregnant King* (2004) by Devdutt Pattnaik are attempts to educate the "modern Indians" and bring forth the mythological tales of queerness. His writing is not merely storytelling but addresses the modern world issue, through mythological figures of ancient India. His style of representation is focused on the use of the mythical figure while addressing the issues. The hindu scriptures do not read life as wrong or right, instead they view current life as based upon previous life actions. According to Pattnaik, the mythological figure of the queer is a consequence of karma, which is neither right nor wrong. Indian tradition uses the term "gender" defining them one, two, and third, giving the choice to an individual to have a different preference and sexual orientation. Different Scripture in India addresses the idea of three genders, making no right or wrong. Shikhandi was a figure from *Mahabharata*, who was born female but transitioned into a male.

The idea of transgenders, which is a term in the modern world, is an ancient practice. As per the situation or karma one is born different. As "Shikhandi" transforms into a male and "Vishnu" transfigures into "Mohini" to fulfil their purposes. "Yuvanashva" a man, gave birth to a child, Mandhata, "Bhagirath" was born of two female partners. There are multiple stories from ancient India, which clearly state the idea of being queer is either for purpose, a blessing, curse, or simply natural. The representation of queerness is not wrong, and nowhere inappropriate. Pattanaik, through his writing attempted to break myths about sexuality in the new world, characters like Shikhandi, the pair of same-sex.

That being said, we must acknowledge the fact that Devdutt Pattanaik has never claimed his works to be the absolute truth, and in fact, he has always maintained his works to be based on his understanding of Hindu mythology.

© Devdutt Patnaik

Indian society, despite its rich ancestry, ignores the ancient theories of queerness and finds comfort in calling it a western idea. The truth is the relationship between same-sex is as old as *Ramayana* or *The Vedas*. So, if one is discriminating against queerness on grounds of being against the Indian culture then one must read the ancient Indian stories and mythology in which the lines between men, women, and third gender are unblurred and the stories are guilt-free. Even words like *Hijras*, men who choose to dress as women, are used as cuss words. And few males break the stereotypical idea by being a little sensitive and showing interest in things that aren't so manly are termed as "*Meetha*" or "*Chikna*" both of them derogatory. We are a population of more than a million in which only 30% of people support the LGBTQ community. Many still think of queerness as an imported disease, forcing others to enter into marriages to hide their sexuality.It is interesting to notice that queerness has been a part of Hindu tradition rather openly, something that has been depicted boldly on the walls of varied Hindu temples across the country. If you're taking a moment to admire these structures, you'll find carvings and paintings of gods, goddesses, demons, nymphs, sages, warriors, lovers, priests, monsters, dragons, plants, and animals. You'll also find many images of erotic content starting from simple romantic glances to wild copulations, and a couple of occasional depictions of bestiality. In Khajuraho, the pictorial representations of queerness are ever-present, and act as living proof of a past obliterated. No matter what they could mean, these depictions alone are proof that same-sex relations did exist in ancient India.

Jamming to Culture: Appropriation of Sound and the Performance Aesthetic in Music

BY EISHITA AND KHUSHI SHARMA

Eishita   Khushi Sharma

Rudy Francisco explained cultural appropriation as groups of people confusing "customs for costumes, culture for couture". With the world becoming a global village boundaries cease to exist. The music industry often sees artists using music to sing the what, how, when and whys of life. Today, the pop genre is the biggest sect of music, and pop stars are some of the most influential artists. From extravagant performances to tattoos, artists have been at the juncture between appropriation and appreciation for a long time. In 2013, at the American Music Awards, musician Katy Perry performed in a Geisha attire and a sexualised Japanese Kimono. She faced criticism for the appropriation and sexualisation of a culture as diverse as Asian. There was also an amalgamation of Chinese cultural elements in her performance, without acknowledging their roots or significance.

Simultaneously, Black culture has been subject to appropriation by the heavily-American music industry. The culture and music have been recurring victims of appropriation, combined with undertones of cultural erasure. In the Rap and R&B genres, particularly between the '60s and the '90s, several non-black artists used black sounds in their successful songs. Black artists sounds were utilized by white artists, twisted to cater to a majority audience and exploited to gain success. In this journey of appropriation, no credit or monetary gain was given to the original artists. The line of drum-based communication ancestrally used by African slaves evolved into the "banshaw" or "banjow". It would later become the Banjo, a popular instrument applied to southern country music. Music by the Motown groups (including the Jackson family) was "polished" for vocal groups like Temptation, *NSYNC and Backstreet Boys. Additionally, celebrated artists like Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Benny Goodmans faced criticism for

modifying the Motown sounds. In these celebrated records, there was no acknowledgment of the cultural impact of Black representation in mainstream media.

Black hairstyles have often been copied by white artists, same is with language too. Iggy Azelea was accused of using African American Vernacular English in her music and speaking in a "blaccent". Likewise, Italian American superstar Maddona has been accused of borrowing gay, Black, Indian and Latin cultures. She was seen wearing Indian saris, bindis, and clothing in a 1998 photoshoot for Rolling Stone magazine and the following year participated in a geisha-inspired photo spread for Harper's Bazaar. Almost all the outfits were sexualised and propagated the sexualisation of Asian women in American culture. The cultural sentiment of these pieces was overlooked and taken to suit an aesthetic. This further resulted in exoticism of Indian culture, one restricted to yoga and Bollywood, and not acknowledging the diversity of the country.

Before this, Madonna borrowed from Latin American culture for her 1986 video "La Isla Bonita" and from gay, Black, and Latino culture. One of the earliest examples of queer ballroom culture going mainstream is Maddona's 1990 music video "Vogue" and its performances, in which dancers from competing houses faced off. The art of voguing comes from the New York trans-black ball scene, a safe space for people who experienced discrimination. For many queer people, excelling at vogueing was like earning a college degree. The underground queer culture of New York, where most of these elements were popularized, was a stigmatized, criminalized and brutalized space in the 80s and 90s. The terms and drag elements were crumbs of acceptance in a world that largely mocked and disowned them. In using Black-trans cultural elements and labelling their

terminology as a trend, like the terms "the house" and "shade", there is no celebration or acknowledgement of the historical roots. Yet again, Black transgender people are removed from mainstream dialogue in these acts of erasure. Culture appropriation transcends music videos, performances and attires in the industry. Music events, festivals and trends are full of instances of cultural appropriation. For example, Native American hairstyles, makeup styles, war bonnets and Hindu Bindis are commonly visible at music festivals like Coachella. Their justification is the similarity between them and the Free Love Hippie movement of the 1960s. The movement saw an emergence of long hair decorated with real flowers, similar to the Native traditional hairstyles worn by male chiefs on special ceremonial occasions amongst the Plains people. Although Coachella has remained silent, other music festivals like Tall Tree and the Bass coast electronic music festival in British Columbia have acknowledged the trend, interpreted it as offensive and acted accordingly.

Musicians often borrow from Native culture to honour it, but end up being exploitative and damaging. Gwen Stefani's usage of Harajuku girls for her Triple- platinum solo record pushed the boundaries to the extent that a song title was altered. Deputy director of the National Congress of American Indians remarked, "It is definitely offensive and continues to push the stereotypical ideas of Native dress and culture. Also, the depiction in the video was that of Hollywood, Thanksgiving or Halloween that one can clearly notice."

Cultural exchange can promote diversity and world peace. However, complexities with the emergence of commercialization, the global market, popularity charts and the hunt for aesthetics have caused unintentional disrespect. This has led to entertainment borrowing the roots of different cultures, their significance and spirituality, making people question, dislike and disrespect.

BY KRITI GUPTA AND PARIDHI TRIPATHI

Kriti Gupta   Paridhi Tripathi

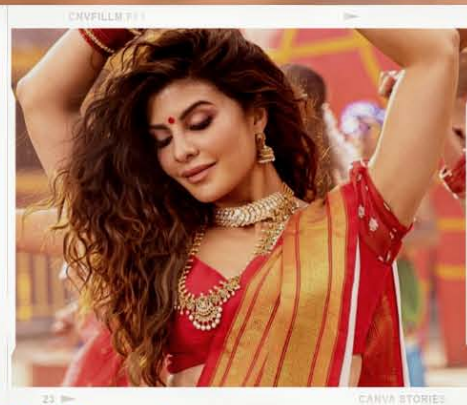# UPROOTING THE FOLK ROOTS

The modernization of folk dances and cultural elements have become a common occurrence in the entertainment industry. But is the Gen Z oriented transformation in media resulting in a promotion of our heritage or is having a reverse impact of vanishing its core values?

Dhunuchi of West Bengal

Lavani of Maharashtra

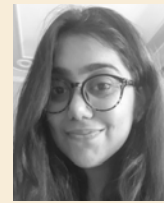**Rasa Lila of Uttar Pradesh**

By Kriti and Paridhi

Culture and Power: The Problematic of Religion in Rajkumar Hirani's *PK* (2014)

BY KRITKA GHAI AND SMRITI UMRAO

Kritika Ghai   Smriti Umrao

Where to draw a line?

It is human nature to collect a souvenir from every place we visit, for reliving our memory later in life or to show others. When visiting a religious site, we tend to buy a locket or a statue of a deity to have the blessings. India has a long history of visual culture where images of deities are printed on calendars or sold in the form of stickers. We also see grand statues of deities made of clay or carved out of stone being sold in the market. The commodification of religion in the market and media may hurt religious feelings when used outside its lifeworld. The question then arises, where do we draw the line? People sell religious products outside a religious site, or portray religion in various forms in the media; in both situations, religion is monetized, but based on its intent, the latter could be an example of religious appropriation. For instance, religion is being monetized in the vast plethora of spiritual or religion-themed self-help books available in the market that claim to give valuable insight, teaching, or instruction in some particular faith/practice. However, they are more often full of generalisations, at times plagiarism, and endless repetitions of the same material. There are also self-proclaimed "holy men" who exhibit an inexhaustible need for the monetary support of their devotees, in exchange for promises of glory days ahead. In Rajkumar Hirani's 2014 blockbuster *PK*, we see instances where religion is appropriated by the very same "holy men" for money and power.

History is proof, and we have annals of the religious battles fought for supremacy over each other. People across different eras have used religion to gain power or money in different social or political spheres of life. In the movie *PK*, the whole story revolves around an alien, PK (played by Amir Khan), who loses his locket and goes around to get it back from *Tapasvi Maharaj* (played by Saurabh Shukla). As the movie unfolds, we see instances where the naive PK who is ardently trying to find his locket (his only way back home) is told at every step to "remember God" and that "God will help you." Ironically enough, it is the self-appointed "Godmen" who prove to be the most difficult hurdles throughout. Seeing these instances on screen makes the viewers wonder why someone who is associating themselves to the holy divine would stoop to such a level. Funnily enough, there are numerous real-life examples of the same thing. Since religion is a sensitive topic for a lot of citizens, these "Godmen" are able to target their weaknesses and thrive on their problems. Therefore, these "messengers of God" who claim to impart the message of peace, are the supposed torchbearers of spirituality and promise to deliver the truth, end up rolling in wealth that they extract from their followers.

To worship God and have faith in him is called Religion but there is a huge cohort of people who remember religious pieties in only pain, agony, or fright. There have been many shows who engage with this dilemma and often portray God as an ultimate saviour. But in *PK*, this image is portrayed differently and also challenged. As children, we have heard people saying, "God helps those who help themselves," implying God is not like our parents or teachers, who grant our wishes when/if we cry. In *PK*, however, God is depicted as a parent or teacher, and in doing so, is mocked and satirised. PK loses his locket but rather than searching for it, he goes to the temple and asks God to give his locket back, and through a series of events, the movie portrays how certain "Godmen" take advantage of PK's naivete and pry on his weakness.

The film also becomes a commentary on how religion and its holy aspects are monetized for benefit by a few greedy people. It discusses how religion is perceived by common people, the association of religion with appearance, and how certain "Godmen" serve themselves under the façade of serving God. Overall, the movie is a satirical commentary on people who blindly believe everything they are told when it concerns God. All the above examples from the movie where religion is monetized and commodified by people for their greed comes under the large umbrella of cultural appropriation. The movie challenges this idea of blind faith in religion by juxtaposing PK against God initially, and then against these "Godmen." As we move forward in the story, we encounter how PK tries to steal from God and uses deities' stickers on his face to avoid being beaten up.

We always talk about cultural appropriation along the line where a dominant community takes something from a minority community. But seldom do we address what happens when people from the same community appropriate its culture for their personal gains, like the "Godmen" in PK. This is especially true in the case of religion. Some individuals or groups hold most of the power in religion and manipulate it for their welfare. It must be remembered that nobody holds the right over cultural or religious property; it is an ancestral legacy and a sacred grove of knowledge. A society that abdicates the duty to propagate a scientific temper and rational outlook, sadly becomes the breeding ground for wolves in sheep's clothing. The "Godmen" take advantage of the psychological dependence masked as spirituality, and common people who fall short of discernment are made victims. They are ready with their package of tricks, illusions and delusions to mesmerise even the educated. Perhaps it is time to realise that most of what is sold in the name of religion, is not religious, as its organic meaning would indicate. These scammers are counterparts of hunters in the wild. Every animal adapts itself to its environment. The predators, in this case, are no exception to this law of nature. They are expert in mending religion in a way that serves to deceive the prospective victims and to mask their own perverse natures. Hence, the ultimate antidote to this perversion is the education of the people and their all-round development as human beings.

Appropriating to Empower: Women and the Genre of the Graphic Novel in Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries*

BY PARIDHI TRIPATHI

Paridhi Tripathi

Literature, written or graphic, has been sidestepping rigid societal and cultural norms and helping us rethink the prevalent opinions and stereotypes. While the art of storytelling is being reconstructed, it is also leading to the issues of legitimacy and appropriation at the same time. Literary appropriation suggests using and borrowing someone else's idea, concept and format as a raw material to produce something 'original' or at least something evidently different. Graphic novelists employ images, symbols and metaphors in a sequential art form for storytelling. Pairing text and image emphasizes the juxtaposition of two media, an intimate conversation between them, and the relationship between form and content.

Marjane Satrapi is a novelist who has appropriated the genre of graphic novels and reinvented it through her works *Persepolis* and *Embroideries*. Both sit at the heart of the same world – a brutally policed society where an extraordinarily rich and rigid cultural value system prevails. Satrapi redefines the femininity of Iranian women by providing a glimpse inside the lives of the women in post-revolutionary Iran. The title *Embroideries* creates a picture of women sewing, but the only threads in the story are the ones that are sewn together to form the therapeutic power of the space, where women reveal the horrific stories they have kept interred inside, converting them into bigger narratives. Ironically, the title also refers to hymenoplasty or surgical reconstruction of the hymen. It throws light on issues related to women's bodies like the communal-familial honour attached to it and how a man's virility is dependent on taking a woman's virginity. The "women only after lunch discussions" in the story is the Iranian women's version of "*chai pe charcha*" and is described as the "ventilator of the heart." Women have much to air out and want to feel liberated from the constraints of their male-dominated culture, they want to speak freely and frankly about love, sex and relationships in the context of a defiantly traditional culture lurching into the 21st century.

Satrapi's women share stories of both pleasure and abuse at the hands of the patriarchy that they could discuss only amongst themselves. All of their stories hold equal weight, be it the girl who feared that her new husband would discover that she wasn't a virgin anymore,

or the woman who got married to an old man when she was thirteen years old.

While images, text, and format of *Persepolis* try to seize on Iranian majority culture directly, *Embroideries* creates a small space inside the larger Iranian culture with new groups and strong relationships among women who are extracted from their usual roles of being mothers, wives and daughters. It is an intimate examination of sexual politics that looks at deceptions that men and women practice on one another poised uneasily between tradition and modernity. Marjane Satrapi also appropriates the genre of graphic novels by reconstructing their traditional form. Conventionally, graphic novels follow a certain format to bring images and written words together. Different elements like panels, speech and thought bubbles, gutter and sound effects are put in a sequence. But, Embroideries tries to move away from this traditional form as it follows a narrative style that is distinct from the conventional ones. The pages are filled with text and much of the dialogues are in speech bubbles, but there is still a significant amount of text outside. The pages embody the joy of unrestrained speech as the words spill out into the page. The sheer overflow of language pushes the form of graphic-novels into doing things it normally wouldn't do. The text in the book is formatted in cursive handwriting that not only emphasizes intimacy and informality but also denotes that the narrative is unfolding outside the usual graphic narrative structure. In the graphic world, most characters are seen in a panel, a frame, or in a box. In the real world, who are the ones who really live inside the box? The answer is women. Marjane brings women out of these one-dimensional boxes to tell their stories and challenge the stereotypical and Orientalist victim-images imposed on the veiled Muslim women.

Satrapi says that she did not use panels to facilitate and mimic the fluidity of the conversation, in order to allow the narrative

to move from past to present, from a conversation to a memory that allows her characters to interrupt each other and return abruptly to the present. The creation of these images work according to the same subconscious mechanics of reading, but it is nevertheless followed by conscious decision-making in the execution. By making this choice, Marjane gives more space to the female voice. The observations of how the narrative is delivered or how each voice is denoted in the visual text draw attention to the cognitive aspects of reading graphic narratives and makes the readers reconsider how a story can be told. Satrapi could have easily depicted women as tight-laced, conservative and dry, abiding by the rules but she chooses not to do so; instead, she 'unveils' them and lets them discuss what is behind those closed doors. This is because the women might have come out explicitly among themselves but not in front of the society to voice their experiences. The intertwining of the graphic form and ideas helps Satrapi's women to construct an internal domestic matriarchy in an already existing external cultural patriarchy, a discourse which is relatable to women everywhere. It enlightens us about the experiences of three generations of women living under patriarchy, both in the external world as well as within their homes.

It is interesting to see how many different shapes literature has taken over the years and delved into issues that exist in our society. The appropriation and redefining of the graphic novels too, is enabling more writers to make a more subjective and personal story as they make the format and genre their own. This subjectivity is important considering the goal of the graphic narratives, which is to relate to an audience that may otherwise hold misconceptions. We, as readers too, should take part in this ongoing construction and reconstruction of graphic novels attentively to understand and associate from the inside rather than the outside.

The Saga of Aegyos and Apologies in Kpop

BY PRASHANTI RAI
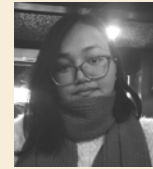
Prashanti Rai

What does your culture mean to you? How will you react if your favourite idols are appropriating it? Will you keep quiet and let your "oppas" and "unnis" not realise their mistakes and do away with it, or will you demand an answer?

As an emerging genre in popular culture, K-pop has garnered a lot of attention across the globe. The transparency between the celebrities and their fans, through the internet, has been a two edged sword-- it has led to a sense of association, while also making fans wary of the negative actions of their idols. Despite a growing diversity in the fan base, one issue that remains to be confronted is that of cultural appropriation. Recently, K-pop has been projected in a bad light, as some K-Pop groups and soloists have been found making use of props from other communities' culture and limiting it to the status of an aesthetic object for their stage performances and music videos.

While one may guess the intensity of heated debates around it, some might not even be aware of the kind of impact such cultural appropriation has. The most standardised view of cultural appropriation can be traced to the fact that it stems from the emotions that we carry. It is an undeniable fact that one takes a lot of pride in one's own culture, and are emotionally attached to it. Hence, any kind of mockery of one's culture is severely criticised and condemned. Numerous instances have been reported of artists appropriating the culture of other communities on various occasions like the statue of Lord Ganesha being placed on the floor beside the bejewelled Aladdin lamp in Blackpink's music video of *How You Like That*. This had caused a tempest among their Indian fans, which were of the opinion that Hindu religion and its deities aren't a toy or a prop. The criticism of the appearance of the statue for a few seconds in the video made YG Entertainment, the girl group's company re-edit it by clearing the image of the statue from the frame.

Another instance of cultural appropriation can be traced back to 2017, when a video of Mamamoo was played in a VCR concert, performing their own version of *Uptown Funk* by Bruno Mars where they dressed up in blackface causing a major uproar among the people of colour who thought it to be a mockery. The third instance is that of a boy group under SM Entertainment, NCT U, who had recently come under fire for resembling the design of a mosque to fit in the aesthetics of their sets. This resulted in a sharp criticism from their Muslim fans. The fourth instance was of I.M's teaser photos, where he is seen wearing a shirt with Arabic calligraphy that features the name of Allah. Another example is of G-Dragon from Bigbang wearing an Afro wig and comb in the *MichiGo* video. The list doesn't end here, for there have been various other cases of cultural appropriation taking a dig at the religious sentiments and emotions of black and brown people time and again.

Celebrity figures shoulder massive responsibility for representation, and thus, lazy passes are not affordable when entire demographics and their cultural histories are at stake. Additionally, access to the internet and information at their disposal should not create any excuses for generating the above cases of cultural appropriation. They should understand the seriousness of their actions, while going public with it. As most of the fans who venerate the artists belong to Gen Z, it is imperative to note down the intensity of their roles and how a precision in conduct is expected to forgo negative consequences.

Irrespective of this, the debate continues with the question of who is liable to ask for an apology, the idols or their companies? Since the K-pop audience is a proactive and progressive fan base, they expect significant attention to be given to the right thing; for they believe that they aren't something to get cancelled on a drop of a dime as they do give room for an apology. Despite the issuing of apology letters by the idols or their companies, there are cases recorded with the same occurrences. Simply re-editing the music videos or cancelling the concerned visuals is not enough, since a larger issue runs parallel to it.

Also, in the game of whom to blame, the fans who have the actual power in deciding the success of a group or an idol, should not keep quiet when they see them appropriating someone else's culture. This not only pertains to the idols but also their companies who need to install diversity tactics in their management system, in order to tackle such cases. This is because a company's biggest asset is its consumers. One cannot disrespect its consumers and expect them to still buy their products. In addition to this, one cannot aim at global expansion at the expense of having zero knowledge about global diversity and taking the other cultures for granted.

Leaving aside this negative aspect of K-pop, it is the richness of the music and the generosity of the fandom that has made the concept trend globally. The communication between the idols and their fandom is truly a source of inspiration and a tool to make global changes, as there have been many instances of massive donation drives for social causes organised by them in different countries, in the name of their idols. Similarly, the idols have also tried to go hand-in-hand with their kind fans by participating equally, some examples being the contribution of 1 million dollars towards Black Lives Matter by BTS and the contribution of Got7 to George Floyd's memorial fund. Through this, it can be understood that music has become a major instrument in changing one's and other's lives; thus giving a sign of forewarning to the idols that they will always be under the radar of the public for both praise and criticism.

Not "Just a Trend"

BY KRITIKA GHAI
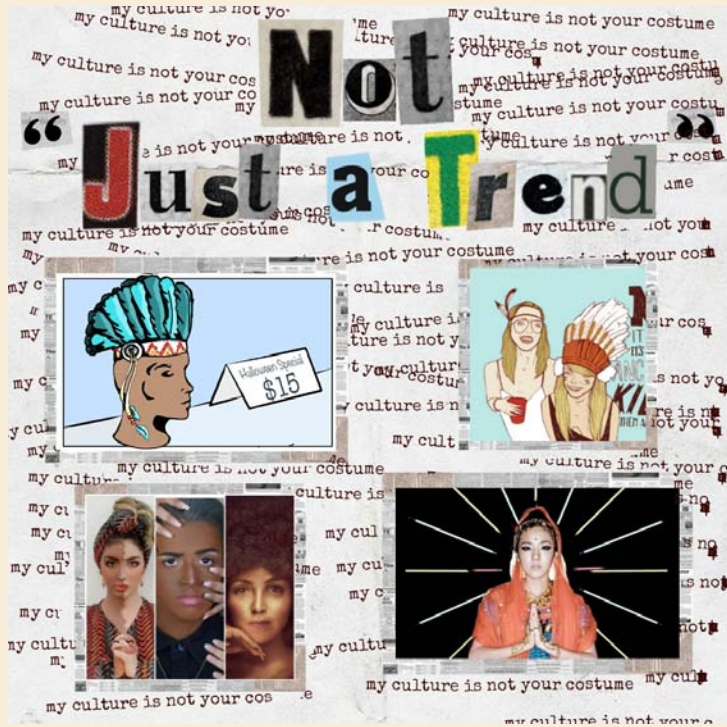
Love, Gen Z

BY KRITIKA GHAI

Kritika Ghai

BY ARTI LUGUN

Arti Lugun

Culture of Appropriation:
A Perspective on Conceptual Poetry

Khushi Grover   Maitheli Ghosh

BY KHUSHI GROVER AND MAITHELI GHOSH

Literature, more specifically, poetry, possesses in itself the potential to stir emotions through rhythm and language. Poetry is a way to express the incommunicable. On similar lines poetry also sometimes challenges the aesthetic. Conceptual poetry certainly exemplifies the latter. The idea of conceptual poetry is part of an early 21st century literary movement self-described by its practitioners as "Uncreative Writing".

Conceptual poetry appropriates an existing literary text and creates a new work from scratches of it. Hence it creates a culture where appropriation is a norm and such poetry is a product of this practice. Conceptual Poetry is also sometimes seen in association with conceptualised art. The art which outweighs the cultural and conventional aesthetic. Conceptual writers are fond of locating conceptual writing's theoretical framework with the help of foundational texts of the Conceptual Art Movement. Conceptual poetry and art in some sense challenge the audience to look for solace in the newly-formed dimensions and ushers them to explore more. Even though conceptual poetry gives an artist a free space to create and be independent in the process of the same creation, in the hierarchy of society sometimes it takes a controversial turn. Appropriation is considered to be the root reason for the same.

Culture is a defining factor of a community or a group of people. The process of conceptualising poetry becomes problematic when it is applied to texts that come from a place of pain, or from an oppressed culture. Cultural appropriation does not only confine itself to the idea of encroaching on other identities, it is also about pre-assumed ideas or literary conventions.

However, appropriation can sometimes be dismissed as "reprehensible." But it is certainly considered deeply problematic because of the question of authenticity. More often than not people react vehemently to sensitive issues like identity and culture. While they believe that even a fragment of word spoken by an artist who does not belong to their community misrepresents their culture, sometimes the same thought leads to scandalous incidents.

In 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith, an American poet created a poem by remixing the text of the autopsy of Michael Brown, a young black man shot unjustly by Ferguson police in the same year. There was a massive outrage that came as a reaction from the audience. The controversy quoted that a privileged white man (Kenneth Goldsmith) had used the body of an oppressed person of colour to create his new piece. While the poet might have seen his artwork as a way of provoking thought and bringing tragedy into a new light, the artwork created more pain and led to controversy.

It is said that "Appropriative tactics may offer new means of expressing the imitative or obeisant qualities of human nature." It is believed that the taboo stops the poets from evoking cultural references. The immediate question henceforth, surrounding the appropriateness is about an artist's independence or choice to create art. While talking about conceptualised poetry, the question of emotion rises. Poetry, in general, can act as a powerful stimulus for evoking emotions. And perhaps that is why the reactions artists face.

Viewing conceptual poetry through the lens of culture appropriation, the questions that arise are: How far is this appropriation justified? Is appropriation a tool to be used in literature? Is it fair to talk about a culture or community with just pre-assumed views? But the table turns when these questions are seen through the lens of an artist.Be it appropriation or protest, caging the independence of artists has a long history related to them. Even though in the popular canon, conceptual poetry has been deduced to be dead because of the controversy it created, the idea of conceptual poetry being a product of appropriation remains unsaid.

The culture of appropriation is the major element in conceptual poetry. But because of the unique attachment of people towards their culture, this kind of poetry becomes controversial. Not only is the meaning of the poetry considered controversial, but the form, structure, and even the language of conceptual poetry is vehemently criticised and considered controversial. There are a lot of other poets who wrote such conceptual poetries like Rasmuss Graff's *Patchwork (2008)*, Ricardo Bogloine's *Ritmo D (2009)*, Alberto Pimenta's *al Face-book (2012)*. Appropriation has a long history in poetics and conceptual poetry is a by-product of the same. However not all conceptual poems can be considered appropriative in nature, as mentioned previously some of these poems do really voice the unheard. But most of the time, it triggers the emotions of people because of the uncanny references and usage of original text in the mixed up new version. And hence giving birth to the normative application of appropriation is such poetries.

"The best thing about conceptual poetry is that it doesn't need to be read. You don't have to read it. As a matter of fact, you can write books, and you don't even have to read them. My books, for example, are unreadable. All you need to know is the concept behind them. Here's every word I spoke for a week. Here's a year's worth of weather reports... and without ever having to read these things, you understand them."

~KENNETH GOLDSMITH

Department Activities 2020-21

- 5th October 2020- **General Body Meeting** was held. Seven students were selected for the respective positions of responsibility in the Department Student Council- **Alfisha Sabri** (President), **Aakriti Agarwala** (Vice-President), **Maumil Mehraj** (Cultural Secretary), **Palak Purwar** (Treasurer), **Eishita**, **Khushi Grover** and **Kritika** (Council Members).
- 12th October 2020- Dhiti's **Annual Lecture** was delivered by **Prof Sambuddha Sen** on **'Literature and Medicine: A Methodological Consideration'**. The audience included students and scholars from national as well as international universities. The recording of this lecture was posted to inaugurate Dhiti's YouTube channel.
- 19th November 2020- The Department conducted an **Orientation Program** to welcome new students. It was an interactive session that introduced the new students to the department- its features, other students and faculty members.
- 21st November 2020- **The Dead Poets Society** of our Department organized a poetry meet. Students from various colleges participated and recited poems on the theme **'Memory'**.
- 31st January 2021- **Fresher's Party** was organized to welcome First Year students. The event was attended by students from all three years and faculty members. **Vaishnavi Singh** was selected as the Miss Freshers.
- 20th February 2021- The Department **Annual Lecture. Dr Anjana Niera Dev**, Associate Professor at Gargi College (University of Delhi), was invited to deliver a lecture on **'Research: Methodologies and Processes'**. Students and scholars from universities all over the country attended the lecture.
- 24th February 2021- The English Department actively participated in **Avgaahan**, an international interdisciplinary academic fest. Several students from the Department presented their papers in the E-conference organised under it.
- 27th February 2021- A Student Seminar on the topic **'Dystopian Fiction'** was organised where eight students from the English Department presented their papers.
- 6th March 2021- **Ekphrasis**, the annual department fest was organized. It comprised several competitions that had entries from students across various colleges and universities.

# Achievements of Students from the English Department

- **Aakriti Agarwala** (Third year Student) stood second in the paper presentation of the Summer Internship Program 2020, held on 9th October 2020. **Ms Manisha Saluja** from the English Department mentored **Aakriti** as a part of the Summer Research Project 2020. The paper was titled, "Mental Health in Times of COVID-19: An Analysis of the Impact of a Pandemic on One's Mental Health and the Role Literature and Art Plays Around It."
- **Alfisha Sabri** and **Palak Purwar** (Third Year Students) co-authored a research article "Back Inside The Lakshman Rekha: Impact of Covid-19 Lockdown on Middle-Class Working Women In Delhi-NCR,". It was published in Maitreyi College's bi-annual research journal- Vantage, in the October 2020 issue. The research was conducted under the mentorship of **Dr Richa Chilana** from the English Department as a part of the Summer Research Project 2021.
- **Khushi Grover** (Second year Student) authored an article, "Women in Literature" that was published in the 'Writrix' anthology in October 2020.
- **Kritika Ghai** (Second year Student) wrote a paper titled, "Looking past the Morals of The Mahābhārata". She presented this paper at a student seminar ("Text, Interpretation and Representation: Re-reading the Mahābhārata,")organised by the Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College on 9th November 2020.
- **Bhawna Chauhan** (First year Student) secured first position in an online article writing competition organised by the NSS Unit of Vivekananda College on 7th January 2021. The article was titled, "They Alone Live, who Live for Others."
- **Prachurya Das** and **Aakriti Agarwala** bagged the third position in a paper presentation competition on "Childhood and Literature" at St. Stephen's College on 16th February 2020. The event was organised under Logos'21, the literary fest of the English Department of St. Stephen's College. The paper was titled, "Growing Pains: Reading and Historicising Childhood in Grimm's Fairy Tales."
- Several students from the second year presented their respective papers at Avgaahan's international E-conference on the topic "Sustainable Future for Humanity: The New Learning Curve".
- The E-conference was held on 24th February 2021. The students and their paper titles are as follows:
- **Aashima Prasad** and **Eishita**, Mentored by: **Ms Rachna Sirohi**, Paper Title: "The Epidemic Of Loneliness."
- **Khushi Grover** and **Maitheli Ghosh**, Mentored by: **Ms Nupur Chawla,** Paper Title: "Cultural Sustainability and Literature: A Study of Robin Ngangom's Select Poems."
- **Bhruvi Bhatia** Mentored by: **Ms Khushboo Soni**, Paper Title: "Reconfiguring Space and Gender: A study of Cinematic Representation of Urban Indian Women during Pandemic Covid 19."
- **Kritika Ghai** Mentored by: **Ms Amrita Ajay,** Paper Title: "Gharelu Gourmet: Consumer Culture and the Food Industry during the Pandemic."
- **Prachurya Das** (Third Year Student), was adjudged one of the top-two paper presenters at Delhi College of Arts and Commerce (DCAC) on 25th February 2020. She presented a paper titled, "Gendering the Grotesque: Decoding 'Othered' Femaleness in Gothic Narratives," as a part of paper presentation competition on "Goth and Otherness". The event was organised under Pantheon' 21, the literary fest of the English Department of DCAC.
- **Maumil Mehraj** (Third year student) got accepted for Master's at SOAS, Durham, and Sussex Universities. She is a Member Participant, Human Rights Law in Kashmir, Oxford Kashmir Forum, Oxford University. Also wrote Summer Research Paper 2020, and published articles in FirstPost.

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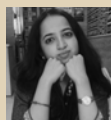
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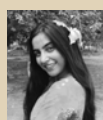
Designers

Aakriti Agarwala   Kritika Ghai   Palak Purwar

Contributors

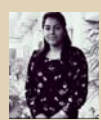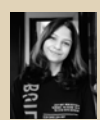Aakanksha   Aakriti Agarwala   Arti Lugun   Eishita   Khushi Grover   Khushi Sharma   Kriti Gupta
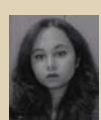
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