

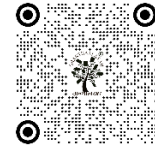
Original Article

WOMEN'S HISTORIES BEYOND REFORM: LITERATURE, CINEMA AND NARRATIVE SURVIVAL IN SHYAM SINGHA ROY (2021)

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ABSTRACT

Shyam Singha Roy (2021), directed by Rahul Sankrityan, explores the endurance of women's histories in temporalities against the historical delicacy and temporary interventions of reformism. Structurally constructed around two remarkable periods of time, the film sets out a past marked by ethical writing and social critique where women's suffering is made visible in the context of religious authority and ritualised patriarchy in which the tributes of devotion and artistic performance serve as mechanisms of constraint. Literature formulates this vulnerability and lists the injustice. However, Literature is vulnerable to erasure through violence and discontinuity not only on the written text but also to the creator in history. In the contemporary time, the cinema does not begin reform again but resumes unfinished histories, through visual remembering, replicating repetition and embodied performance. Through layered telling, embedded short films, song lyrics and mirrored identities, the film builds a Mise-en-abyme treatment along with meaning created retrospectively. By interpreting reincarnation as logic, not fantasy, but retro-narrative logic, this paper argues that Shyam Singha Roy displaces women's agency from institutional change to narrative persistence by placing Literature and cinema as narrative custodians and a continuum of cultural memory, as one vessel of cultural continuity after another.

Keywords: Shyam Singha Roy, Literature and Cinema, Narrative Custodianship, Retro, Narrative, Mise, Enabyme, Women's Histories

INTRODUCTION

Ideas never usually end where bodies do. When reform is interrupted and voices are silenced, these stories do not disappear. They go underground, crack, split and rise in different forms, waiting for a medium to fling them onto its shoulders. In such times as these, moments in which changes in mainstream society are resisted through violence or institutional inertia, narrative often becomes the withered observations we have left of experienced life. Unfolding in this fragile space between doing and remembering is *Shyam (2021)*, a tracing of women's lives constrained and co-opted by religious authority, and the patriarchal ritual form of them continues to exist not through resolution in history, but through narrative return. Structured around two temporalities, the film contrasts a past defined by reformist expression and a present time defined by cultural memory. In an earlier chronological study, women's experience under the devadasi system is chronicled through literature, as it serves to both define women's subjugation, raise issues about its sanctity, and articulate women's hunger for liberation through writing and speech. However, this intellectual resistance is precarious historically. It sparks recognition but does not attain continuity, so that women's histories can easily be erased after the reformist voice is silenced. This reform project is not aligned with the contemporary timeline. Instead, it has turned to the past through cinema, a medium less concerned with intervening than with remembrance. Through visual narration, emotion,

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and repetition, repressed histories are brought back into the public sphere without a need for closure and justice. As stories migrate from text to image, meaning is no longer produced through an immediate transformation but rather through recall, resonance, and circulation. The movement from Literature to cinema is not one of increased effectiveness, but of a changed function, from the ethical to that of memory. While it is historically associated with South India, similar practices of idealised female performances and religiously sanctioned restraints can also be identified, ranging across eastern India, such as the Mahari system prevalent in Odisha and Nachnies prevalent in Bengal and Jharkhand, where religiously sanctioned devotion, art and gender play were also elements of restraint. Within this narrative, women's experiences are not solved in history. They are perpetuated through repetition, embedded stories, performance, and memory. By bringing this process to the forefront, [Shyam \(2021\)](#) raises a central question: when reform cannot endure, i.e. who carries women's histories, and how do narratives come to assume this responsibility across time? Addressing this question contributes to ongoing discussions in film studies concerning cinema's role as a medium of cultural memory and narrative preservation in South Asian screen cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reincarnation is a common narrative trope in Indian cinema, especially in the romance and melodrama genres. Films like *Madhumati*, *Karz*, *Magadheera* and *Om Shanti Om* deploy reincarnation primarily as a means of narrative resolution: to reconcile unfinished romances, to redress moral inequities, or to deliver karmic retribution. In this latter context, reincarnation operates teleologically, in relation to narrative resolution. Shyam Singha Roy is an exception to this. The film recasts reincarnation as a narrative framework that ensures the survival of unresolved histories, especially those related to women. Current analyses of the film tend to focus on its theme's feminism, devadasi, social reform or its narrative structure as an aesthetic or emotive effect. These approaches overlook the ways in which narrative form is a mode of historical preservation. The field of narrative theory offers an alternative approach. Gerard Genette describes narrative as having meaning through retrospective organisation, in which events subsequent to the ones being described structure the earlier events [Genette \(1980\)](#). Similarly, Mark Currie argues for a recursive conception of narrative time, where return and repetition is more important than progression [Currie \(2007\)](#). Paul Ricoeur also suggests that narrative bridges memory and history, allowing for life to endure in historical ruptures [Ricoeur \(1984\)](#). In this context, reincarnation in Shyam Singha Roy can be viewed not as a metaphysical construction, but rather as a

retro-narrative trope that enables interrupted histories to be understood retroactively. Shyam Singha Roy's narrative structure also echoes the idea of *mise-en-abyme*, as formulated by Lucien Dällenbach, where embedded and self-referential narrative forms create further meanings [Dällenbach \(1989\)](#). In film studies, Robert Stam applies this concept to reflexive filmic structures to show how stories can reproduce themselves in media [Stam \(1992\)](#). This analysis accounts for how the film's embedded narratives, performance and repetition create an accumulation of women's experiences over time. Studies of cultural memory also recentres the focus from reform to preservation. Walter Benjamin defines storytelling as something different from information, and enduring through the communication of experience rather than the fixing of facts [Benjamin \(1968\)](#). Extending Benjamin's analysis, Aleida Assmann understands cultural memory to be mediated and transmitted through symbolic forms that outlive institutional arrangements [Assmann \(2011\)](#). Astrid Erll also suggests that memory circulates through media and cultural forms, rather than archival organisations [Erll \(2011\)](#). These approaches see cinema not as an agent for change, but as a vehicle for storing and sharing hidden histories. The intermedial nature of literature and cinema can also be framed within adaptation studies. Linda Hutcheon suggests adaptation is a process of recreation across media, in which meaning is transformed [Hutcheon \(2006\)](#). This echoes with Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory, in which cinema allows individuals to participate in history, they did not live [Landsberg \(2004\)](#). In this vein, the shift from the literary to the cinematic in Shyam Singha Roy is not a change in medium, but a change in how history is experienced. In the field of South Asian cinema studies, cinema has been recognised as a repository of cultural memory and affect. Rachel Dwyer notes how popular Hindi cinema is a cultural compass that mirrors and constitutes social imaginaries [Dwyer \(2014\)](#). Likewise, Ravi Vasudevan shows how melodrama provides a framework for public participation in social conflict, allowing cinema to negotiate historical tensions through affect and repetition [Vasudevan \(2011\)](#). These analyses imply that cinema does not resolve historical contradictions but re-performs them. Feminist historiography offers another line of critique. Lata Mani suggests that women have been treated as symbolic sites of conflict in the discourses of colonialism and reform [Mani \(1989\)](#). This point has been taken further in scholarship on Indian cinema, where it has been demonstrated that melodrama and performance are often used as a way to revisit unresolved social conflicts [Thomas \(1995\)](#). This paradigm supports the contention that rather than a corrective influence, cinema is a domain that promotes the persistence of marginal histories.

LITERATURE GAP

Existing scholarship and critical commentary on [Shyam \(2021\)](#) have primarily explored the film through thematic approaches such as reincarnation, feminism, the devadasi system, and the film's emotional aspect, often framing its dual narrative structure as a stylistic contrivance or a contrast of affect. Such readings privilege what the film stands in for over the way it remembers, leaving underexplored the conceptual work of its layered narration. In particular, little attention has been given to the film's negotiation of women's histories as narratives that continue beyond temporal rupture and media transition rather than social resolution. The relationship between Literature and cinema is therefore often discussed in terms of a parallel or symbolic relationship rather than

as historical modes of cultural transmission that are successively evident. By reconceptualising Literature and cinema as the successive custodians of women's historical memory and by understanding reincarnation as a retronarrative strategy that allows for retrospective meaning rather than fantasy, the present study fills this important gap. It recontextualises the film as a project on narrative Survival itself.

The term "reformist failure" used in this paper will not refer to a lack of social impact, but rather to a literal violent break in reformist continuity. Shyam's written work exists as both a source of recognition and a means of distribution among large numbers of people, but this is all undermined by the fact that Shyam's commitment to not diluting or changing his critique of religious authority ultimately leads to his assassination. In this way, not only does Shyam's death serve to disrupt his messages through the physical act of killing, but it also acts as a metaphor for the systematic annihilation of ideologies that disrupt existing power dynamics held by caste and patriarchal societal systems. Therefore, reform can be viewed as having not failed due to ineffectiveness; rather, it has failed through its violent interruption of reformist continuity. While previous studies address the film's themes of reincarnation, feminism and social reform, the narrative architecture through which the film conceptualises the survival of women's histories across media remains largely unexplored.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore how [Shyam \(2021\)](#) conceptualises women's history when it is not reflected in the portraits of reformist interventions, thereby creating long-term institutional continuity.
- 2) To analyse the changing function of Literature and cinema as successive cultural bearers of women's historical memory across the rupture of the times.
- 3) To interpret the use of reincarnation in the film as an attempt at retro-narrative in the sense of being a strategy for delaying recognition rather than a fantasy or a metaphysical mechanism.
- 4) To explore how mechanisms of layered narration, repetition, and embedded storytelling work as means to save women's experiences from historical disappearance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Who or what takes on the role of bearing the weight of women's history upon which the reformed expression cannot ensure continuity through time?
- 2) How does [Shyam \(2021\)](#) negotiate between Literature and cinema as forms of conveying women's historical memory?
- 3) How does the movie use retro-narrative logic to give women's experiences meaning retroactively?
- 4) How does the storyteller's repetition of narrative within literary and cinematic forms work to perpetuate women's history beyond resolution or reform?

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to interpret the film *Shyam Singha Roy* using a qualitative research approach based on text and narrative. The film is analysed as a cultural document whose meaning is constructed within the narrative structure, the visual form and the symbolic representation. Therefore, the study is concerned with constructing and transmitting women's histories through the narrative development, intermedial relationships and visual motifs of the film. A qualitative reading of the film involves examining the film's dialogue, song lyrics (translated), narrative sequences, visual representations, and story structures. The movement of the film's narrative from literature to film, as well as the function of narrative repetition and intermedial as mechanisms for preserving historical memory, receive particular attention. The objective of the analysis is not to evaluate the film's realism/reception but rather to interpret the narrative logic through which women's histories are represented and maintained within the structure of the film.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on narrative theory and cultural memory studies, offering a theoretical approach to understanding how cinematic temporal arrangements create meaning beyond chronological order. Narrative theory shows that meaning is not determined at the time of the event, but is constructed retrospectively through its organisation. Gérard Genette views narrative time as a system in which the past is reconstituted by the future. Likewise, Mark Currie underscores the retrospective nature of narrative time, where interpretation occurs via return and reinterpretation, rather than advancement. Paul Ricoeur also proposes narrative as an intermediary between everyday and historical time, allowing for continuity across a rupture. Here, narrative serves as a means to reorganise and interpret broken histories after their event. The term *mise-en-abyme*, as developed by Lucien Dällenbach and

applied to film by Robert Stam, offers another resource. It is a concept of nested narrative structures in which the narrative repeats itself, producing increased meaning through repetition and reflexivity across different media. Cultural memory studies build on this concept by refocusing on storage and transmission, rather than resolution, in historical contexts. Aleida Assmann defines cultural memory as mediated through symbolic and cultural forms rather than institutional preservation, while Astrid Erll stresses that memory is transmitted through media and cultural forms rather than archival processes. Building on these insights, this study conceives cinema not as a medium of resolution but of narrative continuity, in which the recursions of narrative and intermediality allow women's stories to persist beyond the interruption of reformist discourse.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a qualitative method of analysis that examines three interrelated aspects of the film:

1) Temporal Framework and Retro-Narrative It considers the film's two-layered temporal structure and the relation between past and present. It focuses on the role of reincarnation as a retro-narrative structure, rather than a metaphysical one, through which events in the past are retrospectively narrated.

2) Intermedial Narrative Transmission This work examines the transition from literature to dance to painting to cinema as narrative media. These forms are analysed as facilitating the articulation, recording and transmission of women's experiences in time.

3) Recursive Narrative Form The study examines recursive devices such as *mise-en-abyme*, embedded narratives and repetition. These structures are understood as a means of perpetuating and sustaining narrative rather than resolving it.

The three dimensions examined in this study understand reincarnation as a narrative device for continuity rather than a spiritual belief. This means that narrative form is a way of re-establishing continuity to the disrupted experiences, and making them live on through repetition, re-enchantment and intermediality.

ANALYSIS

LITERATURE AS FIRST CUSTODIAN

"One bullet can kill one person, but a written word can mobilise millions" the apparently political slogan is a statement of narrative ethics. The protagonist's renunciation of armed struggle reorientates Literature as a medium, favouring duration rather than immediacy. Violence creates the illusion of instantaneous erasure, thereby annihilating bodies in the present moment. In contrast, writing aims at preserving meaning that transcends the duration of both corporeal existence and historical event. Within the film's chronology of history, Literature becomes the first space in which the lives of women, confined and governed under the overseeing authority of religion, are articulated as histories rather than ritual functions. Shyam's belief that "only literature can instigate social change" doesn't come off as blind optimism concerning reform; it is an acknowledgment that writing has the potential to preserve and promote women's experiences beyond just what formal institutions can do. In this discussion about time, Literature is defined much more broadly than solely by print works; it includes all spoken forms of the Arts (including poetry, oratory, or lyrics), by which women's experience is expressed verbally, prior to being expressed visually. These verbal forms express vulnerability, devotion, desire and confinement and therefore enable the insertion of women's inner life into cultural memory, yet help make women's bodies susceptible to institutional constraints. Consequently, Literature becomes the first custodian of women's histories in the film, all that is done in words before cinema assumes the responsibility for Survival. This custodial function comes to lead in Shyam's interaction with the devadasi system. Women inside the temple are publicly celebrated as a kind of incarnate artist and godly being, but are embroiled in the privacy of autonomy and mobility.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Film still from Pranavalaya Sequence featuring Sai Pallavi. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Film still from *Institutional Contradiction* featuring Sai Pallavi. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

The duality between aesthetic reverence and lived confinement is brought forward through the Pranavalaya sequence [Figure 1](#). The lyrical invocation of the care of the divine—"The protector of life... aren't you the protector of those who are vulnerable?" occurs at the same time as the imagery of segregation of space. The prayer itself poses a question, which the institution refuses to answer [Figure 2](#). Literature destroys ritual not so much directly as indirectly, by revealing its internal contradictions. Shyam's repeated question about whether a devadasi ever crosses the temple threshold is a spatial captivity of devotion. Expanding the understanding of the divine with the revelation that the world itself is divine inverts the narrative enclosure of sanctity, which governs women's bodies under the guise of protection. The ethical role of Literature is further stated in Shyam's reformist speeches, specifically in the conference when he proclaims that "women are not a commodity". This statement takes the conversation from moral compassion for women and shifts it instead to a diagnosis of society's systems. Instead of showing that it is an inevitable tragedy that women suffer, it explains this suffering comes from many cultural representations of sacrifice based upon religion. Shyam's new understanding of writing as ethical labour (e.g. a letter is born of through the womb of a piece of paper and on each individual falling page his blood falls as ink) are metaphors that express the embodied sacrifices of writing. Further to that, all of the lyrics foreground women and contain expressions of the "why" behind this suffering connected to the power behind womanhood (e.g. in temples and private homes, why are they suffering?) Literature allows for expression of women's pain and sorrow; however, the film does not show that literary contribution has only sentimental value. In fact, Shyam's developing understanding of the plight of women goes beyond individual rescue; Rosie comments on how she has escaped but there are so many others who are still imprisoned as a reminder of what reformist fiction accomplishes. Although literature can be used as an awakening to change; it does not have the capacity to bring about systemic change overnight. The dissemination of Shyam's writings and the creation of SR Publications reference more the notion of increased visibility than the idea of resolution. Women's history is enriched by literary expression; however, literary expression alone cannot guarantee women's survival or protection within the institutions that house literature.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Film still of *Unpublished Short Story* featuring Nani and Rahul Ravindran. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

The ephemeral nature of literary survival is enhanced by the use of an unpublished short story entitled "Varnam" to illustrate this limitation. [Figure 3](#) The short story derives from a picture of a young girl drawing a butterfly. The butterfly acts as a symbol of transformation while existing as an invisible text exemplifying the impermanence of literary survival for women. Women's

experiences create literary forms, but women's experiences will remain in print only if those forms endure. The relationship between Shyam and Maitreyi creates additional ambiguity associated with Literature's custodial agency. Their relationship grows as a result of the mutual use of verbal expression and attention rather than possession. "Sirivennela" Song uses the notion of love based on recognition rather than conquest: "The light in her eyes.... The dream I've never seen." This line expresses the concepts of gaze and expression, while ignoring the greater significance of her identity in the reality of the text. When Shyam asks how he will tell the world about her, his poetic description brings her emotional interiority to the fore instead of her ritual role. Literature here preserves not the woman as a subject of worship, but as an object of feeling. Shyam's assassination is the breaking point of literary custodianship. His death does not destroy the value of writing, but reveals its weakness. The promise that he gives to Rosie goes unfulfilled within a lifetime. Writing becomes not a tool of investigations but a precarious archive. "Varnam" will not be published; Rosie's wish will not be realised. The speaking of women's history is not secure. This failure is not one of narrative collapse but of narrative transition. By ending the arc of history with an unpublished story and an unfulfilled promise, the film opens the way for another medium to take up the mantle of custodianship. Literature does the first ethical labour of giving names to women's suffering, love and resistance. It is not the limitation that makes it so important, but rather the need to account for narrative Survival beyond the text. Literature comes to be the first, and most certainly the first, custodian of women lived experience.

CINEMA AS NARRATIVE SURVIVAL AND ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

In the field of feminist narrative analysis, Literature is assumed to be the first ethical agent tasked with naming women's histories, while cinema functions as the medium through which narratives persist after the disruption of reformist trajectories. The shift from Shyam in textual production to Vasudev Ghanta in cinematic endeavour is not an ideological dogma but a transfer of narrative duty.

Cinema does not propagate reformist agendas: it carries the residue of the unfinished works.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Film still from Narrative motion of Cinema featuring Krithi Shetty. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

The inherited material does not consist of a deterministic certainty, but of the construct of memory. Accordingly, Vasu's association with cinema is defined in terms of the ethical rather than the commercial motivation. In his audition monologue, the description of a woman as "a beautiful person draped in a saree of revolution" represents resistance before Vasu knew the antecedent of Shyam. Within the film's internal logic, cinema functioned without the need to await historical artefacts, but rather as a place where repressed stories emerged. Here, meaning temporally is prior to authorship. Cinema, under these conditions, does not function as the occurrence of women's histories then, but rather as the place which registers these histories. This mnemonic role is made explicit through self-referential songs which reflect upon cinema as such. In Figure 4, The lyric "On the screen, a picture moves, the story begins" on an empty canvas, situates cinema in terms of narrative motion that captures expression. This statement means that the light emitted by cinema allows for things that have been left out of traditional historical accounts to be given visibility. The short film Varnam represents the survival function of cinema in its specific appearance. The story of a woman looking for colour and expressing herself is paralleled in Shyam's unpublished story, but the story of Varnam occurs without any explicit sharing. This does not mean that Varnam is adapted from Shyam's story, it is simply an instance of a return. The repeated saying of "A dream never dies" identifies survival as opposed to completion when looked at in return. Just like women's history, dreams have retreated, only to come back again in different forms.

Cinema establishes itself as a place where the stories that have been put off are made visible again.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Film still from Bleeding in ear featuring Nani. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

Vasu's creative disintegration at the end of his story mirrors the ethical responsibilities of filmmaking. In [Figure 5](#), The representation of blood from the ear as well as subsequent loss of the use of one's hand, represents the access of one's narrative memory to their authorship of story. The comment made by his peer, "If the director becomes the protagonist, this will occur," is a meta-textual observation of creativity's precariousness when a filmmaker attempts to create history without the consent of the actors. As such, authorship gets reduced to a caretaker's role. The plagiarism trial underscores cinema's role as a carrier rather than an originator. Existing constructs of the legality of originality are inadequate when dealing with narratives of original information mediated solely through unconscious modes. The revelation that Varnam only existed as an unpublished manuscript confirms cinema's capacity as an archive. Film recovers that which literary expression stated but could not arrest. Within this conceptualisation, reincarnation is a retro-narrative mechanism rather than a fanciful construct that retroactively creates meaning. Hypnosis, rather than opening the doors to truth, reveals continuity. When Shyam identifies himself and his time, cinema performs its ethical function by making silenced histories resurface. Lyrics announcing "stories yet to be written" position cinema as a medium of continuation rather than closure. Rosie's last meeting at the end of the movie fulfils the ethical role of cinema. Rosie's Survival is not about justice/reform but about continuing the practice. The dance school does not amend any past wrongs, but it does allow for the extension of the past into future practice.

MISE-EN-ABYME, RECURSIVE EXPRESSION AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE NARRATIVE

Rosie's path represents the film's logic of Survival at its purest. Her identity is never restored through public record and institutional adjudication. Instead, it lingers through performance, promise, and embodied memory. She exists not as a historical subject but as a narrative presence that is perpetuated by repetition. Survival is assured not through recognition but through circulation. This logic goes to the epitaph at death and rebirth.

Figure 6



Figure 6 Film still from Rosie's dying wish featuring Nani and Sai Pallavi. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.

Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.

Figure 7



**Figure 7 Film still from Fulfilment of Rosie's featuring Nani and Sai Pallavi. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.
Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.**

In [Figure 6](#), Rosie's wish to die on a new moon day in Shyam's lap is a recursive promise beyond a lifetime and gets fulfilled by Vasu in the end [Figure 7](#). The film's narrative obligation remains even if Shyam's murder obstructs reform. Vasu, Shyam's reincarnation, demonstrates that what connects these two characters is not their spiritual reward, but rather an ethical residue and an unfinished promise which demands to be fulfilled. Both Shyam and Vasu's reincarnations symbolise "mise-en-abyme" at the ontological level. The film continues this "mise-en-abyme" through its use of multiple modes of expression (i.e., writing, dance, painting and film), each of which acts as a compensatory linguistic system for women to tell their stories. In Varnam (short film), the blank canvases indicate deferred expression. The most important Recursive narrative mirroring is the transition of Varnam Literature to the short film version as shown in [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#). Within the historical timeline, Maitreyi's dance represents interiority in constraints.

Figure 8



**Figure 8 Film still from Short Story of Varnam. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.
Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.**

Figure 9



**Figure 9 Film still from Short Film Varnam featuring Krithi Shetty. Directed by Rahul Sankrityan.
Source: Still from Shyam Singha Roy, 2021. India. © Niharika Entertainment.**

In the modern context, Rosie's dance school transforms embodied art from a confinement into a continuity and in remembrance of Shyam who loved her dance and she continued it. The use of each form reduces the limitations placed by the one before us. The recursive movement is also reinforced by *mise-en-abyme*. The bleeding ear, broken tripod, and focus on ocular and expressive features visualise the instability of authorship that arises when custodianship subverts individual agency. Memory claims its possession of the bodily form. Dialogues about "purity," "expression" and "seeing clearly through the lens" function as a kind of operating meta-commentary on cinema's ability to capture affective truth through and in the face of conscious articulation's collapse. Songs make this reflexivity stronger. The final gesture of placing Shyam's beads next to Rosie's dance bells - completes the *mise-en-abyme*. Similar to narratives, objects carry memory through time. The film forgoes any redemptive or historical rectification and proposes instead an ethics of remembrance based on repetition. Women's histories survive not because transformations occur at the structural level, but because a narrative re-emerges, reflects, and reappears in different forms. In Shyam Singha Roy, *Survival* is not a victory but a narrative process sustained by refusing to forget.

VARNAM AND THE CRISIS OF REFORM: CHILDHOOD, THE RETAINING NARRATIVE

This choice of Varnam anchored around a child is part of a radical ethical break in the reformist vision of the film. After engaging with established religious power, caste violence and patriarchal enclosure, Shyam's journey towards childhood is an implicit reform, as direct confrontation with institutions has gone as far as it will go. The child functions here not as innocence, but as a narrative reset - a Figure who has not yet been fully claimed by ideology, ritual, or historical sedimentation. The desire of the girl to paint is not cast in terms of resistance, protest, and emancipation, but in terms of becoming. This transition is significant. Shyam's earlier writing calls for recognition of injustice while Varnam retreats from calling for change and instead emphasises the slow temporality of transformation. This Literature carries itself in presenting a short film about freedom emotions with a colour metaphorically symbolising A butterfly as a symbol both liberation and the delayed process of emergence. Its stages of immobility, enclosure and waiting correspond to the state of women whose lives cannot be immediately changed by reformist discourse. In this sense, Varnam is therefore not an affirming story but a critical one: it accepts that there may be no better than a survival of freedom in the historical time of struggle, and that in that case, the story has to imagine something that will be out there on the horizon of reform it dares not change.

TRANSITION OF MAITREYI TO ROSIE

The metamorphosis of Maitreyi to Rosie is one of the beautiful claims the film makes, but regarding the histories of women, *Survival* does not require justice. Maitreyi's suffering is named and witnessed and loved, but it is never corrected in her historical moment. Her transformation as Rosie does not reverse the devadasi system, reverse the stolen years of life, or provide legal recognition. Instead, it moves the *Survival* into recognition and identity. As Rosie, she is one who exists through life and the nature of living - loved, being loved, teaching dance, passing on memory. The absence of recognition of women by the history of the film highlights the ethical nihilism of the film: The progression of women through history occurs not because of history, but through narrative progression. The continuous connection between Maitreyi and Rosie parallels the life cycle of the butterfly represented in Varnam: transformation occurs, but only following enclosure and loss. From a critical perspective, reincarnation (unlike the metaphysical consolation) serves as a requirement of the narrative. It allows the film to admit that women's lives can only make sense retrospectively, after the original context in which they lived has failed them. Rosie's dance school is not freedom but guardianship - a space where memory is kept alive without being resolved. In placing Shyam's beads next to her dance bells, the film crystallises its most important proposition, that when reform breaks and institutions abdicate responsibility, women's histories only survive in the form of narratives that have been placed in the hands of the repetition, embodiment and care of women.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

[Shyam Singha Roy \(2021\)](#) ultimately reframes the inquiry into women's histories away from concerns of representation, reform, or the resolution of moral questions, to a much more foundational ethical question: the *Survival* of narratives. Rather than investigating representations of women or the achievements of reforms, the film continually explores what remains after reforms begin to unravel, after political opposition is disrupted, and after justice is no longer sustained. This study argues that the film places the *Survival* of women's histories not within institutional or individual characters, but rather within changing processes of narrative custodianship that traverse various media and multiple horizons.

Literature is the first custodian in the historical narrative. Shyam Singha Roy 's reformist writing outlines the susceptibility of women under religious authority and patriarchal subjects of control; ritualised suffering is transformed into articulated history. Writing is a subversion of dedicated silences maintained through devotion and custom. Shyam's belief that the written word can act as an awakener to millions confirms that narrative is a non-lethal force based on duration as opposed to destruction. The projectile ends a body; the textual utterance relates itself as transcendental to the corporeal. Crucially, this principle repeats itself in the timeline of today. Vasu's obsessive revisiting of scripting, rewriting, and choosing dialogue shows Shyam's faith in the pen. Cinema,

therefore, does not desert Literature; it internalises it. The script becomes the site in which memory insistently strives for articulation. Such structural repetition of writing within media represents a *mise-en-abyme*: the ethical power once located in Literature is brought back to cinema, which confirms that narrative and not violence is the film's powerful and lasting means of Survival. However, this impulse, support of reformism, is something the film consistently avoids idealising. The murder of Shyam, the banning of his work, and the fact that "Varnam" will never be completed underscore that Literature has an inherent weakness when it comes to being used for long-lasting change. It can reveal that there is injustice, but it cannot stop itself from being destroyed. The lack of success in Literary reform should not be viewed as an ideological defeat but rather as the limits of history. Cinema inherits the responsibility for this unanswered question. Today, filmmaking does not carry out Shyam's political project, but rather carries the cost of remembrance that he left us with. By the use of Vasudev Ghanta, cinema has become one way in which forgotten histories could be resurrected and told without the individual having to contribute towards the telling of that history. Reflexive songs, involuntary creativity, the circulation of Varnam - this places cinema as an afterlife of Literature, not its replacement. Meaning is not created through linear progression and narrative closure, but through backward return.

Reincarnation works here not as a means of fantasy and spiritual reassurance, but of retronarrative logic, making it possible for women's histories to gain coherence only when their historical moment has been violently interrupted. The most important intervention of this film is the recursive narrative architecture. Through *mise-en-abyme*, stories nest within stories, lives reflect lives, and forms of expression echo throughout the writing, dance, painting and cinema. The problem is that Survival is not secure through resolution; it is secure through circulation. Rosie is staying through performance rather than being legally recognised; Maitreyi's existence through narrative inscription rather than biography; the conjunction of beads and dance bells posits a central ethical proposition: when institutions fail, narratives take over. Memory is travelled through repetition, through embodiment, through retelling, not through official validation. This reading has more general implications for the field of film studies and for studies of cultural memory. Critical treatments of [Shyam Singha Roy \(2021\)](#) have often addressed its dual narrative structure as a stylistic imbalance or its feminist concerns as thematic commentary.

By contrast, this study situates the film within a sustained interrogation of how narratives function as repositories of women's histories. The shift in focus towards childhood in the film, in the scenes at Varnam and the reversal of causal order in the narrative, all further sharpen the ethical logic implicit in the film's attention to the problematics and possibilities of reformist expression in the past, the deferral of change in its protagonists, and the postponement of cinematic representation in its origin in Literature. Literature and cinema are not competing representational forms here, but they function as successive ethical mechanisms, each of which makes up for the limits of the other. The film, in this way, speaks to conventional expectations for political cinema by rejecting redemption, resolution, or corrective justice. Rather than this, [Shyam \(2021\)](#) gives us the history of Ethics of Remembrance through narrative persistence. There is no way for women's histories to survive other than through the metamorphic structure of being vectors and turning into networking, but the stories keep circulating through media, through bodies, through time. So in this way of viewing, survival is not achieved through movement; it is a process of continual narration. Now, in posing the question, just who is taking with them women's histories when change does not work, the film provides a sobering, yet resolute answer: Narratives persist, which in repetition, hold memory but also responsibility. In this way, the film ultimately proposes narrative persistence itself as the primary ethical mechanism through which women's histories endure beyond the limits of reform.

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