



Of Binaries and Aporias: Rereading Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi* (1930)

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Abstract

This paper, divided into five sections, rereads Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi* through the lens of binary structures and aporetic ruptures within a deconstructive framework. While the narrative appears to follow the conventional trajectory of romance- encounter, separation, reunion, and marriage- a closer examination reveals a dense lattice of oppositions: intellect versus emotion, expression versus silence, union versus isolation, love versus distrust, revenge versus forgiveness, hope versus despair, concealment versus revelation, dependency versus autonomy, domestic continuity versus natural freedom, and personal versus impersonal love. These binaries resist resolution, generating aporias- moments of undecidability that suspend closure and destabilize synthesis. Rather than a flaw, aporia emerges as a radical mode that privileges ambiguity, oscillation, and refusal of finality. Characters and ethical choices unfold within these tensions, making the novel a site where meaning is continually deferred and enriched. The analysis draws upon the theoretical insights of Freud, Beauvoir, Gilbert and Gubar, Hawley, Irigaray, Lacan, Spivak, and others, situating *Madhabi* as a text that dramatizes the limits of human understanding while opening new possibilities for literary interpretation.

Keywords: Binary, Aporia, Autonomy, Bhakti, Universal Love, Incommensurability.

Introduction

This paper offers a rereading of Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi* (1930), the first Manipuri novel, through the twin lenses of binary structures and aporetic ruptures, situating the text within a broader deconstructive analysis of the text. At first glance, Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi* unfolds as a conventional romantic narrative tracing the familiar arc of encounter, separation, reunion, and marriage. Yet a closer reading reveals that the novel is structured by a dense network of binary oppositions and moments of uncertainty that destabilize its surface simplicity. The text juxtaposes intellect and education (Birendra, Dharendra) with unschooled heart (Shashi, Urirei,

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Madhabi); pilgrims (Urirei, Madhabi) with ruffians (Bhuban) and dwellers (Birendra, Dhirendra); tree with creeper; fire with water; home (Urirei, Shashi) with abroad (Birendra, Dhirendra, Nabinchandra); meeting with separation; word (Birendra, Dhirendra) with silence (Urirei, Madhabi); hope with despair; health with sickness; honesty with deceit; self with selflessness; worldliness with otherworldliness; creation with destruction; revenge (Nabinchandra) with forgiveness (Urirei); human sympathy (Rajendra) with cruelty (Bhubon, Dhananjoy); concealment (Madhabi, Nabinchandra) with revelation; and domestic continuity-home, marriage, family, tradition, culture (Urirei)- with the forest, sandalwood, and nature as symbols of freedom and independence (Madhabi). These oppositions do not resolve into harmony but instead generate aporias, moments of undecidability that resist closure. In inhabiting these tensions, Madhabi advances a radical narrative mode that privileges ambiguity, resistance, and the refusal of finality. Madhabi appears to promise a linear romance, yet its engine is a lattice of oppositions that never synthesize, producing a narrative of oscillation rather than resolution. The text inhabits aporia- spaces where fixed meanings are suspended- so that characters and their ethical choices are patterned by binaries and ambiguities. What follows maps these tensions across images, character, ethics, and bhakti, showing how undecidability becomes the novel's radical mode. It is this unresolved quality that makes aporia a tool for exploring the limits of human understanding and the richness of literary meaning.

I. Of the educated (Intellect) and the unschooled (Heart)

The narrative sets up a clear binary opposition between Birendra's educated intellect and the unschooled heart embodied by Shashi and Urirei. Birendra, immersed in his studies and skeptical of ritual, represents modern rationality- sharp in logic yet blind to emotional nuance. His inability to interpret Urirei's silent gestures of love, such as the garland or her shy request, reveals how intellect can alienate rather than connect. In contrast, Shashi and Urirei embody the unschooled heart, guided by faith, simplicity, and emotional intuition. Shashi's devotion to ritual and his compassionate loyalty to Urirei highlight the authenticity of feeling that education cannot replicate, while Urirei's innocence and symbolic acts of longing express emotional truth beyond words. Together, they expose the limits of intellect when divorced from empathy, showing that while education sharpens the mind, it risks dulling the heart's capacity for faith, love, and human connection. This binary does not resolve into a simple hierarchy. Instead, it reveals a narrative tension: intellect may offer clarity and progress, but it risks emotional alienation. The heart, though untrained in logic, remains attuned to human vulnerability and relational depth. Shashi's and Urirei's actions suggest that emotional intelligence and loyalty can transcend the limitations of formal education, while Birendra's detachment underscores the cost of privileging intellect over empathy.

In *the Prologue*, Birendra is immersed in his studies, preparing for an upcoming exam. His friend Shashi arrives to invite him to Baruni Hill to offer prayers to Lord Shiva. Although Shashi acknowledges the importance of Birendra's academic commitments, he insists that pleasure and devotion should not be sacrificed entirely for education. This moment introduces the first binary: Birendra represents the educated (the intellect), skeptical of religious rituals and emotionally detached, while Shashi embodies the unschooled (heart), guided by faith, simplicity, and emotional intuition. Shashi must have studied enough to write a letter, but he throws away Birendra's book because it contains no pictures. Birendra's reluctance to climb the hill and pray reflects the influence of modern education and a waning belief in traditional spirituality. In contrast, Shashi, though lacking higher education, finds joy and meaning in such rituals. During their visit to the Baruni Hill, Birendra relies on Shashi's help to rescue Urirei from Bhubon's gang. Yet despite his academic prowess, Birendra fails to grasp Urirei's emotional depth. Before leaving for Calcutta, he misinterprets her ambiguous response, reading it as emotional uncertainty. While in Calcutta, his memories of Urirei persist but lose their

emotional intensity. Meanwhile, Urirei, still emotionally tethered to Birendra, tries to catch a cuckoo- a symbolic act of longing- and falls into a tank. Shashi, loyally watching over her on Birendra's behalf, attempts to save her, nearly drowning himself, and is wrongly imprisoned for allegedly killing her. Birendra's education sharpens his intellect but dulls his emotional insight, leaving him unable to decode Urirei's feelings. Shashi, though simple and half-educated, understands her heart and acts out of loyalty and compassion, even at great personal cost.

Urirei, embodying the innocence of the unschooled heart, entrusts herself to Birendra as she places a garland of flowers around his neck, an act that symbolically conveys the offering of her heart. Her garland around Birendra's neck is a silent act of devotion, a language of the heart that Birendra fails to fully grasp. She asks to accompany him to Baruni Hill, and though Birendra senses the meaning behind her request, he does not take her along. Still, her words linger in his mind, and he feels a pang of regret at being unable to grant the wish of a young girl. As he ascends the hill, he imagines Urirei left behind in solitude- like a bird parted from its flock, waiting for his return. Surrounded by the crowd of boys and girls climbing the Baruni slopes, he is struck by a deep emptiness. Later, before he leaves for Calcutta, he meets Urirei again. Overcome by emotion and restrained by her feminine shyness, she struggles to voice her feelings. Shyness and vulnerability: Her inability to voice her feelings reflects feminine modesty and emotional restraint, contrasting sharply with Birendra's rational detachment. Misinterpreting her silence, Biren, however, suspects that her heart leans toward Bhupon. This shows how intellect, without emotional sensitivity, distorts the truth of the heart. He tells her that if she ever remembers him, she should take the call of the cuckoo echoing through the still night from the Champaka tree by the pond as a sign of his presence. Biren appears to have let Urirei slip from his memory. It is only five years later, during a brief stay in Shillong, that thoughts of her return to him. He recalls their last encounter and reconstructs the scene in his mind. The narrative, however, remains silent about the years Birendra or Dhirendra spent in Calcutta. Although the writer notes that intimacy never feels as intense as when it is sharpened by interruption, it seems evident that over the course of five to six years, Birendra's feelings for Urirei have gradually dimmed, overshadowed by doubt and distrust. His intellectual detachment and preoccupation with modern education erode the emotional bond that once tied him to her. Biren receives a letter stating that Urirei has married Shashi, as she felt no romantic attachment to him. Convinced that the signature belongs to Shashi, he accepts the letter's contents without question. In their last meeting, Biren had already misread Urirei's silence as a sign of her affection for Bhupon. Once again, his suspicious and overly rational mind leads him astray, making him readily believe that Urirei could marry Shashi or that she might willingly accept him.

This moment highlights the flaw of Biren's educated intellect: his tendency to interpret emotional ambiguity through the lens of distrust and logic rather than empathy. Biren's education sharpens his analytical skills while simultaneously cultivating a deep-seated skepticism. Instead of probing deeper into Urirei's silence or questioning the authenticity of the letter, he defaults to suspicion and rational deduction. Failure of emotional insight: His inability to read Urirei's gestures- her garland, her shy restraint, her silence- shows how intellect alone cannot decode the language of the heart. In contrast, Shashi and Urirei, though lacking formal education, embody emotional authenticity. Shashi's loyalty and Urirei's steadfast devotion stand in stark contrast to Biren's cold rationality. The episode executes the divide: intellect breeds doubt and misinterpretation, while the unschooled heart sustains faith and emotional truth. Biren's quick acceptance of the letter reveals how intellect, when divorced from empathy, becomes a tool of alienation rather than understanding. In essence, Biren's intellect blinds him to Urirei's emotional reality, while the unschooled heart- though vulnerable- remains closer to truth and loyalty. In stark contrast, Urirei's devotion endures despite hardship. She rejects the advances of Bhupon, a wealthy suitor, and withstands

immense suffering, yet her love for Birendra remains unwavering. This contrast underscores the binary opposition between the intellect and the heart: Birendra's rational mind grows cold and skeptical, while Urirei's simple heart sustains loyalty and emotional truth even in the face of misery. Bhubon offers her his entire wealth- gold, silver, money, and servants- promising to crown her with a garland of love. Urirei, however, tells him that he should have let her drown, for if he had only taken her back to her impoverished mother after saving her, they would have prayed for his well-being even without the means to repay him materially. She resents being taken into the jungle as a ploy to win her affection. (74-75) Her steadfastness highlights the resilience of feeling over intellect, suggesting that genuine love and faith cannot be measured by education or material wealth.

Birendra, representing intellect, can observe and analyze but cannot truly know himself because he lacks the presence of heart. This absence leaves him feeling hollow whenever he is separated from Urirei. In Shillong, he reflects that love is peculiar: once it pierces the heart, the mind can no longer rest, for something always feels missing. (81) Only through the heart-embodied in Urirei- can intellect perceive itself and attain wholeness. As they climb Baruni Hill, Urirei points out the pilgrims ascending toward Lord Mahadeva, aided by vines that cling to the steep slope. The vines symbolize the woman, and Birendra, as a man, must rely on them to reach the summit where the Lord dwells- a space of unity and fulfillment, where presence and absence converge. Then, at the end of the story, Biren rescues Urirei from drowning, but their exchange reveals a deeper tension. Urirei insists that she is destined to remain a pious spinster and refuses intimacy, reminding Biren that it is improper to sit on the lap of a man who is about to marry another. Biren, despite his academic achievement (M.A.), is unable to respond meaningfully to her heartfelt declaration. This moment dramatizes the intellect-heart binary. Biren, educated, credentialed, and schooled in rational knowledge, yet his learning fails him when confronted with Urirei's emotional truth, rooted in lived experience, moral conviction, and the vulnerability of love. Urirei embodies the heart: her words are not shaped by formal education but by sincerity, ethical awareness, and emotional clarity. The scene underscores how intellectual attainment alone cannot resolve the complexities of human affection and social propriety. In this binary, the heart triumphs over intellect, exposing the limits of rational discourse when faced with the raw, unanswerable realities of love, loss, and personal destiny.

In another way, Birendra embodies logos (reason, analysis), while Urirei embodies pathos (emotion, affect). The metaphor of vines (local, organic, rooted) contrasts with intellect (abstract, detached), suggesting a critique of modern rationality divorced from indigenous relationality. The text dramatizes the insufficiency of intellect alone: knowledge without affective grounding leads to emptiness. This resonates with psychoanalytic theory, where Freud shows that unconscious desire continually destabilizes rational mastery (Freud 1900), and Lacan insists that the subject is constituted by lack, haunted by the desire of the Other (Lacan 1966). The allegory casts man as intellect and woman as heart/vine. Urirei's role as vine suggests that the woman is the medium through which man ascends toward transcendence. This view risks instrumentalizing the feminine as supportive rather than autonomous, echoing Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) critique of patriarchal narratives that confine women to symbolic functions. Yet, the text also valorizes Urirei as indispensable, without whom Birendra cannot reach fulfillment, aligning with Irigaray's (1977) insistence that feminine difference must be recognized as constitutive rather than supplementary. The climb up Baruni Hill mirrors ritual ascent toward divine unity. Pilgrims aided by vines metaphorically enact the dependence of human striving on relational bonds. Hill climbing as a pilgrimage is a journey that dissolves hierarchies, foregrounding interdependence. The Lord at the summit symbolizes the reconciliation of binaries: intellect/heart, man/woman, presence/absence. The text stages an aporia- intellect seeks completion but only through its "other," the heart. Meaning arises in the tension between lack and fulfilment. This view dramatizes the insufficiency of intellect without affect, staging love as the force that unsettles rational mastery and compels the subject toward

unity. Through gendered symbolism, ritual ascent, and the dialectic of presence/absence, the narrative suggests that fulfilment lies not in solitary intellect but in relational interdependence- with the heart as the necessary medium of self-knowledge, a point underscored by psychoanalytic critics who show that rational systems are always undermined by unconscious fantasy (Žižek 1989; Barry 1995), and feminist theorists who remind us that the feminine must be seen not as mere support but as an autonomous locus of meaning (Gilbert & Gubar 1979; Irigaray 1977).

II: Of Madhabi's Aporitic Condition

When Madhabi is read as a symbol of the heart, it becomes clear that the heart alone is insufficient. Love, if left unspoken, remains imprisoned within the lover's inner world, turning into self-inflicted torment. In the episode "*Dhirendra Singh's Puzzle*" (pp. 33–34), Dhirendra seeks a clear affirmation of Madhabi's love. Yet Madhabi refuses to give a definite answer, shaped by her distrust of men's promises- she has witnessed too many instances where men ensnare innocent women in love only to abandon them. This hesitation reflects Freud's insight that repression and silence can transform desire into psychic suffering (Freud 1900). It is the same Madhabi who, in the "*Hillside Bower*" episode (p. 10), confesses to Urirei that she has given her heart and soul to Dhirendra, binding herself to him. Still, she withholds a decisive "yes." Dhirendra argues that not all men are wicked, but Madhabi's silence is a form of self-protection. The heart, she suggests, cannot be confined to a binary of affirmation or denial. Her departure, mischievously declaring that he will never find her in this lifetime, dramatizes Lacan's notion that desire is structured by absence and lack, always deferred and never fully satisfied (Lacan, 2006/1966).

The narrative underscores that both heart and intellect must meet in love, for only in mutual recognition can they discover themselves. Yet Madhabi's refusal to display her affection is framed as "true to the nature of girls" (Kamal, 1975, p. 35), echoing Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) critique of patriarchal scripts that naturalize female silence and elusiveness as essential traits of femininity. The warning that deceiving the god of love invites vengeance further situates her silence within a moral economy of punishment, where women's guardedness is both valorized and pathologized. Though she loves Dhirendra, she appears incapable of expressing it openly. To test his devotion, she plays the role of the elusive beloved, believing that difficulty enhances value (Kamal, 1975, p. 65). But her teasing later corrodes her mind "like a poisonous snake" (Kamal, 1975, p. 64), leaving her ultimately in the isolation of her own guarded heart. This trajectory resonates with Irigaray's (1977) insistence that women's voices are often confined to relational games of absence and presence, rather than recognized as autonomous speech. Madhabi's silence thus dramatizes the paradox of love: affect without articulation becomes torment, while articulation risks betrayal. The text stages this aporia to show that fulfilment lies only in the convergence of heart and intellect, desire and recognition.

Urirei's love for Birendra is certain, yet she withholds its expression due to feminine modesty and the cultural codes that restrain her. Madhabi, by contrast, remains silent not because of shyness but because of uncertainty- she doubts both the sincerity of Dhirendra's love and the depth of her own feelings for him. This contrast highlights two distinct modes of female silence: Urirei's silence is culturally imposed, a product of gendered expectations that equate modesty with virtue, while Madhabi's silence is existential, born of mistrust and inner ambivalence. The binary between certainty vs. uncertainty and restraint vs. doubt reveals an aporia: love demands expression, yet expression is blocked either by external norms or internal

hesitation. Urirei embodies the paradox of assured love constrained by culture, whereas Madhabi dramatizes the paradox of uncertain love constrained by mistrust. Together, they expose how female subjecthood is caught between social codes and personal ambivalence, making silence both a form of resistance and a site of vulnerability.

Dhirendra's intellect seeks openness, dialogue, and trust, while Madhabi's heart resists articulation, remaining guarded and silent. This sets up a binary of rational clarity versus emotional incommunicability, yet the tension cannot be resolved: her refusal to say "yes" or "no" creates an aporia in which love exists but cannot be expressed. The heart protects itself through silence, but that very silence isolates it, dramatizing the paradox of desire that longs for union yet collapses into solitude. Freud (2010/1900) reminds us that repression transforms desire into psychic torment, as the unspoken becomes symptomatic suffering. Madhabi's silence exemplifies Lacan's notion that desire is structured by lack, always deferred and never fully satisfied (Lacan, 2006/1966). Her character dramatizes several binaries. **Love vs. Distrust:** She loves Dhirendra yet refuses to trust his words, echoing Žižek's claim that ideology and fantasy sustain mistrust even when love is present (Žižek, 1989). **Expression vs. Silence:** She confesses to Urirei but withholds affirmation from Dhirendra, resonating with Irigaray's critique that women's voices are often confined to relational absence rather than autonomous speech (Irigaray, 1977). **Union vs. Isolation:** She longs for connection but ends in solitude, dramatizing Gilbert and Gubar's observation that patriarchal scripts often cast women as isolated figures whose devotion curdles into self-destructive silence (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). **Playfulness vs. Poison:** Her teasing begins as mischief but transforms into corrosive isolation, underscoring how ambivalence destabilizes love as a category.

Each binary is destabilized- her actions refuse to settle into one side, revealing the instability of love itself. The inherent impasse of the indefinite response- her refusal to say "yes" or "no"- is an aporia: love cannot be reduced to binary affirmation. **Trust vs. Betrayal:** Her mistrust of men is both rational (based on experience) and self-defeating (leading to isolation). **Love as Both Gift and Curse:** Her devotion binds her, but her silence isolates her. The heart becomes both sanctuary and prison. **Difficulty vs. Value:** The logic that "difficulty increases value" collapses when difficulty becomes unbearable, producing loss instead of worth. Thus, Madhabi embodies the aporetic heart: a site where love is both present and absent, expressed and withheld, protective and destructive. By refusing closure, she exposes the aporia at the center of desire: love demands expression, yet expression risks betrayal. Her silence is both resistance and self-condemnation, situating her within the tragic tension of binaries that cannot be reconciled.

III: Of Tree and Creeper: The Question of Dependency, Autonomy, and Female Selfhood

Dr. Kamal illustrates the relationship between man and woman through the metaphor of the tree as man and the creeper as woman. As pilgrims struggle up the steep hill, Biren notices a girl clutching his dhoti. Embarrassed, she lets go, but he reassures her that seeking help is a natural thing to do. Offering his hand, he is refused. Urirei tells him, 'The stationary tree has moved, while the dependent creeper remains behind. Those who rely on others do not do so indefinitely. Look! Many pilgrims are reaching the feet of Lord Mahadeva with the aid of the vines climbing the steep hill.' (14) Urirei's words expose the contradictory dynamic between the tree (man) and the creeper (woman) as symbols of support and dependence. Traditionally, the tree is imagined as strong, rooted, and self-sufficient, while the creeper is fragile, relying on the tree for support. Yet her statement destabilizes this binary. By saying "the stationary tree has moved, while the dependent creeper remains behind," she suggests that the supposedly stable male figure is not fixed, while the dependent female figure persists, clinging to her place. This reverses the expected hierarchy: the tree's movement undermines its claim to permanence, while the creeper's endurance challenges the notion of weakness. Her observation that "those

who rely on others do not do so indefinitely” further complicates the metaphor. Dependence is not eternal; it can be temporary, strategic, and even empowering. The pilgrims reaching Lord Mahadeva with the help of vines illustrate that reliance on support systems can lead to transcendence rather than subjugation. Thus, the relationship between tree and creeper is marked by aporia: dependence both affirms vulnerability and enables survival, while independence both asserts strength and risks instability. Female selfhood emerges in this paradox, showing that reliance on others does not erase agency but redefines it within a shifting social and spiritual context.

This metaphor of Tree (man) and Creeper (woman) is also a powerful way of dramatizing the tension between dependency and independence in the construction of female selfhood. The tree (Man) represents stability, rootedness, and autonomy; it stands tall, self-sufficient, and firmly grounded in social and cultural authority; it symbolizes patriarchal structures that provide support but also dominate the landscape. Creeper (Woman) represents flexibility, delicacy, and dependence. Needs the tree to climb, entwine, and survive- suggesting that female existence is imagined as parasitic or secondary. It symbolizes how women are often defined relationally, through attachment to men, rather than as independent selves. Independence vs. Dependency: Man/tree is imagined as independent, while woman/creeper is cast as dependent. Strength vs. Fragility: The tree embodies strength and permanence; the creeper embodies fragility and transience. Selfhood vs. Relational Identity: Man is seen as having selfhood in himself; woman is seen as existing through her relation to man. Contradiction/Impasse): The metaphor itself collapses under scrutiny: The creeper may depend on the tree, but it also transforms the tree, covering it, beautifying it, sometimes even suffocating it. Dependency is not passive- it reshapes the host. The tree without the creeper is bare; the creeper without the tree is rootless. Both are incomplete without the other, revealing the aporia: independence and dependency are mutually entangled. Female selfhood emerges in this paradox: she is imagined as dependent, yet her very presence alters and defines the male figure. The metaphor exposes how patriarchal discourse positions women as secondary, but also how women resist by redefining dependency as agency. Female selfhood is not annihilated by dependence; rather, it is negotiated within and against structures of male authority. The creeper’s entwining becomes a metaphor for female survival and subtle power- a relational selfhood that destabilizes the binary of weakness vs. strength. In short: The tree–creeper metaphor dramatizes the patriarchal binary of male independence versus female dependency, but it also reveals an aporia: the two cannot exist meaningfully without each other. Female selfhood emerges precisely in this paradox, as both dependent and transformative, fragile yet powerful.

In the later part of the story, even after learning of her parents’ death and hearing that her beloved is to wed another woman, Urirei endures in solitude within Kochin, the thick forest of Kanchi. The author emphasizes that Urirei does not belong to the noble lineage of figures like Shakuntala, Savitri, or Victoria. Instead, she is portrayed as “the unfortunate among the unfortunate,” likened to langmei, the solitary bird left behind by its flock, a creeper torn away from its tree, a ketuki flower blooming in isolation, and the weather-beaten leipaklei. Yet, despite this marginal and fragile existence, Urirei embodies remarkable virtues: she is as forgiving as a tree, as patient as the earth, and as steadfast as a river- qualities that mark her as an extraordinary woman. Urirei’s characterization rests on a paradox. On one hand, she is depicted as vulnerable, isolated, and socially disadvantaged, symbolized through images of abandonment and fragility. On the other hand, she is endowed with resilience, moral strength, and extraordinary patience- traits that elevate her beyond ordinary expectations. This contradiction reveals the aporia of female subjecthood: she is simultaneously marginalized and exalted, dependent yet self-sustaining, fragile in circumstance but powerful in virtue. As Spivak (1988) argues, women in marginalized positions often embody both vulnerability and symbolic strength, becoming “figures of difference” whose voices are silenced yet whose presence is

indispensable. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) note that patriarchal narratives frequently cast women as both victims and saints, confined to roles of suffering yet exalted through moral endurance. Urirei thus embodies the tension between social precarity and inner strength, exposing how women are often defined through both vulnerability and transcendence. Her solitude in Kochin dramatizes the paradox of female subjecthood: she is at once abandoned and elevated, fragile yet resilient, silenced yet symbolically powerful.

This perspective on Urirei risks reducing the feminine to a merely supportive role rather than recognizing her autonomy; however, with *Madhabi*, the central issue shifts decisively toward independence and radical female selfhood. In the section "Change in *Madhabi's* Mind", after years apart from Dharendra, the weight of love overwhelms her. Years of separation from Dharendra leave *Madhabi* overwhelmed by longing and anxiety. Convinced she cannot endure without him, she resolves to retreat into solitude, choosing the gorge of Heibok Hill as a place of prayer. Donning the saffron robes of a nun, she withdraws into the forest, where her renunciation symbolizes both her attempt to quiet the torment of love and her embrace of radical independence through spiritual isolation. The forest functions as a layered symbol of both radical feminine independence and the incomprehensible nature of the heart. Forest as radical feminine independence means space beyond patriarchy: The forest lies outside the ordered, cultivated world of society. It resists domestication, mirroring how feminine selfhood resists being confined to patriarchal structures. Autonomy and survival: dwelling in the forest signifies a woman's ability to endure without male protection, asserting independence in a space that is wild, self-sustaining, and free. Urirei experiences this while living in Kochin, the dense forest of Kanchi; yet, unlike *Madhabi*, she eventually returns to society and marries Biren, embodying the ideal of mutual interdependence. Ambivalence: The forest shelters and nurtures, but it also isolates and confuses. Similarly, the heart harbors love yet withholds expression, embodying contradiction. Aporia of love: The forest-heart metaphor dramatizes the impossibility of fully knowing or possessing feminine desire- it remains hidden, enigmatic, and beyond binary resolution. The forest symbolizes a paradox: it is both a sanctuary of radical independence and a labyrinth of incomprehensibility. As a metaphor for womanhood, it resists patriarchal domestication while simultaneously dramatizing the aporia of the heart- love that is present yet unreadable, protective yet isolating.

Radical freedom: unlike the tree-creeper metaphor, which binds woman to man, the forest symbolizes a realm where woman is not dependent but sovereign, rooted in her own strength. So, the forest also appears as the incomprehensible heart. mystery and depth: Just as the forest is dense, layered, and difficult to navigate, the feminine heart is portrayed as elusive, resistant to rational mapping. In *the Epilogue*, *Madhabi*, dressed in saffron robes, sat weeping in the Kanchi bower as she wove a garland of Malika flowers. Dhiren, unaware it was her, asked if she was a goddess mourning separation. She concealed her identity, saying she was a nun free of desire, though her tears betrayed otherwise. When questioned, she explained the garland was meant for someone she could never honor in this lifetime, hoping instead to offer it in a world without separation. After confessing that silence had burdened her heart, she departed swiftly and was never seen again- like a hidden flower fading unnoticed in the depths of the soul. *Madhabi's* act of weaving the Malika garland is deeply symbolic: it dramatizes her yearning to return to the social order of love and marriage, to reinsert herself into a community of mutual bonds. Yet the futility of her gesture- knowing she cannot place the garland upon the neck of the man she loves- marks the impossibility of that reintegration. Her departure, never to be seen again, suggests a radical finality that can be read as symbolic suicide: a severance not only from her beloved but from the very structures of society that denied her fulfillment. This gesture embodies a paradox. On one hand, it enacts the ultimate independence, a refusal to remain bound by patriarchal expectations or social compromise. On the other, it underscores the incomprehensibility of the feminine heart, which resists being fully explained or contained within social categories. The garland, left unoffered, becomes a metaphor for unexpressed

desire and unfulfilled love, while her disappearance signifies both loss and liberation. In this way, Madhabi's exit dramatizes the aporia of female subjecthood- caught between longing for social belonging and asserting radical autonomy through withdrawal. It is problematic to speak of female subjecthood in texts authored by men, since such works inevitably reflect male constructions of women as "the other," shaped by both idealization and realism. Women resist being confined within these male-generated ideas.

Yet these texts cannot be wholly dismissed, because they also contain partial truths about women, arising from the shared social and historical contexts in which men and women coexist. **Authenticity vs. Construction:** Female subjecthood (Urirei and Madhabi) is questioned because it is mediated through male authorship. As Beauvoir (2011/1949) argued, woman has historically been defined as "the Other," her identity constructed through male discourse rather than autonomous selfhood. **Resistance vs. Recognition:** Women resist being trapped in male ideas (Madhabi), yet those ideas still reflect lived social realities (Urirei and Biren's marriage). **Ideal vs. Real:** Male depictions oscillate between idealized femininity (Madhabi's radicality) and realistic portrayals (Urirei's shyness as a feminine quality), neither fully authentic. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) note that such oscillations are typical of patriarchal narratives, which both exalt and constrain women, producing figures who are simultaneously angelic and imprisoned. The text thus produces an impasse: it both undermines and sustains female subjecthood. It cannot be trusted as authentic, yet it cannot be ignored as false. Women's identity emerges in the paradox of being represented by men while simultaneously resisting that representation. The aporia lies in the impossibility of separating male discourse from historical truth- female selfhood is both distorted and revealed within it. Female subjecthood in male-authored texts is caught in a paradox: compromised by patriarchal constructions, yet still a valuable record of gendered experience within a specific historical moment. As Spivak (1988) reminds us, even when women's voices are mediated through male or colonial discourse, they remain crucial sites of historical truth and resistance.

IV: Of Self as Offering: Bhakti's Radical Tension Between Autonomy and Selflessness

The relationships between Birendra and Urirei, Dharendra and Madhabi, Shasi and Thambalsana, and even Bhubon's twisted desire for Urirei, reveal a spectrum of love that moves from the most selfless and sacrificial to the most debased and possessive. By presenting these varied bonds, the writer demonstrates how human emotions- whether noble or flawed- are deeply interwoven with the philosophy of bhakti, which treats love as both a personal attachment and a spiritual path. In bhakti, devotion transforms longing and desire into surrender, elevating even imperfect emotions toward the divine. Thus, the narrative uses these relationships not only to portray the complexities of human love but also to suggest that love itself, in all its forms, can become a medium of spiritual realization, where the devotee's passion mirrors the journey from worldly attachment to transcendent union. Bhakti, as both personal love and divine love, is a spiritual practice that thrives on the tension between intimacy and transcendence, turning human emotions into a sacred language of devotion. On one hand, bhakti expresses itself through deeply personal forms of love- longing, friendship, parental affection, or romantic desire- where the devotee relates to God as a beloved, child, or companion, allowing the divine to enter the most intimate spaces of human feeling. On the other hand, bhakti insists that this love is not merely human passion but a higher, transformative bond that purifies desire and dissolves ego into surrender. This duality creates impasses: the risk of attachment versus the call to transcendence, the anthropomorphic portrayal of God versus the ineffable absoluteness of divinity, and the ecstatic breaking of social norms versus the weight of orthodoxy. Yet bhakti resolves these tensions by reframing longing as a path to union, sanctifying diverse emotional modes of love, and channeling individual passion into collective expressions of song, poetry, and ritual. Thinkers and saints across traditions- from Ramanuja's theological framing to Mirabai's radical defiance- show how personal love

becomes a gateway to divine bliss, where the pain of separation (*viraha*) intensifies devotion and the joy of union (*samyoga*) reveals the infinite. In this way, bhakti does not erase the contradictions between personal and divine love but transforms them into a dynamic energy, making the devotee's heart both a site of human vulnerability and a vessel of eternal, transcendent love. As Hawley (1988) observes, *viraha* is not a deficiency but the very condition that deepens devotion, turning longing into spiritual strength. Similarly, Pechilis (1999) emphasizes that bhakti's defining quality lies in its "personal, affective, and non-instrumental" nature, where love itself becomes fulfillment rather than a means to worldly ends.

After Birendra and Urirei survive the wildfire on their trip to the Baruni Hill, Urirei says to him, "There is no use in going back to this self-seeking world. From today onwards, let me be your follower. Let us roam about in the lonely jungle. Let singing the praise of God be the purpose of our lives, and let us discard our dress in favour of the simple one of the Sadhus. I have no use for this body, which you have saved from destruction by fire. I am offering it at your feet right now." (21) Urirei's declaration after surviving the wildfire can be read as a profound moment of bhakti transformation, where worldly existence is renounced in favor of a life of devotion and surrender. In Bhakti philosophy, the devotee's journey often begins with a crisis or confrontation with mortality, which awakens the desire to transcend the "self-seeking world" of ego, desire, and social entanglements. Urirei's words echo this trajectory: she rejects material identity and bodily attachment, offering herself instead in complete surrender (*śaraṇāgati*) to Birendra, who here functions as both savior and spiritual guide. Her wish to roam in the jungle, clad in the simple garb of sadhus, and to dedicate life to singing God's praises reflects the bhakti ideal that devotion is not confined to ritual or temple but can be lived through simplicity, song, and constant remembrance of the divine. Theologically, her offering of the body "saved from destruction by fire" resonates with the bhakti notion that the body is not for self-indulgence but for service- an instrument to enact devotion. The act of placing it "at your feet" recalls the symbolic gesture of surrendering the self to God or guru, a central motif in Vaishnava and other bhakti traditions. At the same time, the passage dramatizes the tension between personal love and divine love: Urirei's devotion to Birendra is framed in terms of discipleship and spiritual following, yet it is also charged with personal intimacy. Bhakti thought resolves this tension by allowing human love to become a metaphor and vehicle for divine devotion, where the beloved or guru embodies the presence of God. Thus, Urirei's speech exemplifies the bhakti philosophy of transforming crisis into surrender, worldly love into spiritual devotion, and the fragile body into a vessel of eternal praise.

Birendra, guided by intellect, fails to grasp the depth of Urirei's words and insists that it was Baruni Mahadeva who saved them, urging her to pray to the deity. Urirei responds that she does not wish to pray for favors or material gain, nor to flatter God for personal advantage. She declares that her prayer is not about asking for boons but about devotion itself- praying for the sake of prayer. Quietly to herself, she admits that the true desire she carries is lodged deep within her heart, and even if it slips beyond her grasp, it will remain indelibly inscribed there. This exchange highlights a central tension in bhakti thought: the difference between intellectual religiosity and heartfelt devotion. Birendra represents the rational, external approach- seeing prayer as a petition to a deity for protection or reward. Urirei, however, echoes the bhakti ideal of *niṣkāma bhakti* (desireless devotion), where prayer is not transactional but an act of pure surrender and love. Her insistence that she prays "for the sake of prayer" reflects the bhakti philosophy that devotion itself is the goal, not the means to worldly ends. Scholars of bhakti have emphasized this distinction. Pechilis (1999) notes that bhakti is defined by its "personal, affective, and non-instrumental quality," where devotion itself is the fulfillment rather than a means to gain. Similarly, Hawley (1988) argues that the essence of bhakti lies in *viraha*- the pain of separation- which intensifies devotion and transforms longing into spiritual strength. The "boon entrenched in her heart" suggests a deeply personal yearning- perhaps for union, love, or spiritual fulfillment- that transcends material requests. In bhakti traditions, such inner

yearning is itself devotion, dramatizing the movement from external ritual to inward surrender. Eventually, it is through the selfless love of Urirei that she receives Birendra's love, which remains deeply personal. Urirei's selfless love becomes the axis around which the narrative turns, for it is through her unreserved devotion that Birendra's affection is awakened and returned. Her sacrifice is not merely personal but emblematic of a ritualized offering, where vulnerability transforms into strength and recognition. In giving without expectation, she destabilizes the binary of transaction and reward, showing that love, when rooted in care and endurance, can transcend precarity and become a form of social validation. Birendra's reciprocation, then, is not simply romantic but an acknowledgment of her humanity, a gesture that affirms her resilience and reconfigures the moral economy of intimacy.

The motif of love as Bhakti takes a different turn in Madhabi's story. When she meets Dhirendra, her teasing remark- "You cannot find her; not in this life"- creates ambiguity, foreshadowing the turmoil to come. The narrative suggests that deceiving the god of love invites retribution, and Madhabi becomes its victim. In the section "Change in Madhabi's Mind," she undergoes a profound inner crisis. Unlike Urirei, who remains steadfast in her devotion to Birendra, Madhabi is consumed by anxiety after years of separation from Dhirendra, convinced she cannot survive without his return. Her conception of love shifts dramatically: she realizes that once immersed in the world of love, worldly pleasures lose their value, and confining love to a single person feels suffocating, like being trapped in a closed box. (66) Seeking liberation, she resolves to expand her love beyond the personal, embracing a universal compassion. This leads her to retreat into the forest, living like a nun and dedicating herself to aiding weary travelers. Love as Bhakti is destabilized in Madhabi's journey as it reframes Bhakti not as unwavering devotion to one beloved, but as a spiritual practice that must transcend the personal. Her anxiety and disillusionment mark a rupture in the traditional model of selfless love embodied by Urirei. Urirei represents constancy and fulfillment through personal devotion, while Madhabi embodies doubt and expansion. The tension between confinement (love for one) and liberation (love for all) dramatizes the aporia of Bhakti- whether it should be singular or universal. Madhabi's retreat to the forest signals a transformation of eros into agape, or worldly love into spiritual compassion. Her shift echoes ascetic traditions where personal desire is sublimated into service, suggesting that Bhakti can evolve into a broader ethic of care. Madhabi's crisis also reflects the vulnerability of women whose identities are tethered to absent male figures. Her move toward universal love is both a survival strategy and a critique of the suffocating limits imposed by personal devotion.

Her choice comes out of impulse, not thoughtfulness. She does not know what she has gotten into. When the writer describes Madhabi as "a simple and wayward girl" who has never seen the world outside Manipur, the emphasis is on her limited exposure and sheltered upbringing. Her simplicity suggests innocence and a lack of worldly sophistication, while "wayward" conveys her impulsiveness and tendency to act outside conventional expectations. Having never ventured beyond Manipur, Madhabi's worldview is narrow, shaped entirely by local customs and experiences. This lack of broader perspective intensifies her vulnerability in love: she invests deeply in Dhirendra without the resilience or detachment that wider experience might have given her. The description situates her as both naïve and precarious- caught between innocence and restlessness- making her eventual crisis in love not just personal but emblematic of the constraints placed on women whose lives remain confined to domestic and regional boundaries. For this reason, Madhabi's weaving of the Malika garland in the Epilogue symbolizes her longing to rejoin the bonds of love and marriage, yet its futility- knowing she cannot place it on her beloved- reveals the impossibility of that return. She cries and embraces the garland tightly in her bosom. Her suffering in that moment is profound.

Nevertheless, Madhabi's turn toward universal love, even though it does not bring her immediate peace or happiness, is significant because it represents both a critique and a

symbolic act of resistance. Her choice underscores the paradox of Bhakti: devotion can liberate, but when confined to a single person, it can also imprison. By expanding her love beyond Dharendra, she challenges the suffocating limits of personal attachment and exposes the fragility of a system that ties a woman's identity to one absent male figure. The lack of peace in her decision highlights that survival strategies are not always consoling- they are often about endurance rather than fulfillment. Madhabi's ascetic withdrawal becomes a way of reclaiming agency: she refuses to be destroyed by longing and instead reorients her love into service, even if that service does not soothe her own wounds. In this sense, the significance of her choice lies less in personal happiness and more in its ethical and symbolic dimensions. It critiques the narrowness of personal devotion, dramatizes the cost of confinement, and gestures toward a broader, though uneasy, vision of love as universal compassion. Her path shows that sometimes choices are meaningful not because they resolve suffering, but because they reframe suffering into critique and transformation. Additionally, Urirei's reflection on Madhabi reveals the transformative power of virtue, elevating human qualities into the realm of the divine. Madhabi's nobility and selflessness seem so extraordinary that Urirei struggles to accept her as merely mortal, instead perceiving her as the living embodiment of the goddess of Heibok. (105) This perception underscores how acts of sacrifice and moral purity can blur the boundary between human and divine, allowing individuals to become vessels of sacred ideals. In Madhabi's case, her character radiates a spiritual aura that inspires reverence, suggesting that divinity is not distant but can be glimpsed in human compassion and selfless action.

V: The Aporia of Conclusion

The text's aporias- moments of paradox and conflict- keep the narrative fluid, continually shifting perspectives and allowing themes to overlap and complicate one another. As a result, the work resists a single, fixed meaning and instead invites multiple interpretations. One more example is the recurring play between concealment and revelation: Birendra's sister is disguised as a boy; Madhabi conceals her love for Dharendra; Madhabi hides in the forest and later saves Urirei while appearing as Bhairabi with a sword; false reports circulate about Nobin's death outside Manipur; Nobin himself lives in disguise as a sadhu; Bhubon's letter to Birendra is masked under Shashi's name; and Urirei's marriage to Birendra is hidden by presenting her as Rajendra's daughter. These layers of disguise and misdirection show how truth is repeatedly obscured and only gradually uncovered, making concealment a vital structural device in the narrative. Concealment protects vulnerability and agency but breeds suspicion; revelation promises catharsis yet risks social sanction. The narrative also contrasts the wealthy's privileges with the poor's struggles. 'It seems that the world is for the rich and the well-to-do.' (64) While boys like Birendra and Dharendra, supported by their families' resources, pursue higher education in Calcutta, others, such as Shashi, Urirei, and Madhabi, are denied such opportunities. The powerful Dhananjay and his son Bhubon exploit their status, retaliating against Urirei's rejection of Bhubon by burning her house, attacking her father, and abducting her. Yet wealth is not portrayed as uniformly oppressive: Rajendra Singh emerges as a just and compassionate figure, protecting Urirei's mother and offering shelter. His belief that love cannot be controlled by wealth, beauty, or education reflects the bhakti tradition's rejection of social divisions, affirming love's unpredictable and transcendent nature. This realization leads him to entrust his daughter's marriage to Bhubon, underscoring the text's exploration of power, vulnerability, and the elusive force of love.

Sympathy materializes in relational acts while cruelty ruptures communal bonds, pushing the narrative toward unset moral thresholds. Nabinchandra, Urirei's father, kills Dhananjay in response to the cruelty and injustice inflicted upon his family, yet the authorities pardon him. Police do nothing to criminals like Dhananjay. In contrast, Shashi is imprisoned under the false charge of murdering Urirei. The narrative emphasizes that forgiveness springs from the heart: Urirei's mother, having endured suffering at the hands of Bhubon's father, urges

her husband to abandon vengeance, reminding him that divine justice surpasses human retaliation and that true virtue lies in pardon. (78) Vengeance stabilizes identity via injury, while forgiveness destabilizes it through generosity, intensifying undecidability rather than resolving harm. Similarly, Urirei forgives Biren, despite his decision to marry Rajendra's daughter. Biren, though educated, is clouded by anger and ignorance, and only realizes his error- that Shasi is neither married to Urirei nor guilty of wrongdoing- after others reveal the truth to him. This contrast highlights the moral weight of forgiveness against the limitations of intellect when blinded by pride. Yet, after Biren and Dhiren return home with their M.A. degrees, the affluent Rajen offers his daughters in marriage to them, privileging intellectual achievement over matters of the heart. Interestingly, the same author who portrays his female characters as embodying the bhakti ethos also remarks that it is only natural for parents to seek educated men as husbands for their daughters. (90)

The play of fire and water appears at different points of the narrative. A wildfire in the hills nearly claims the lives of Birendra and Urirei, yet it also draws them closer as they escape by plunging into a ditch. When Urirei becomes thirsty, Birendra goes in search of water, and the two are separated. The flames later consume her home, and her mother narrowly escapes death on the funeral pyre, saved only by sudden rainfall. At the end of the story, Urirei, in despair, attempts to drown herself in a pond full of blooming lotuses. Urirei sings that the wildfire raging in the hills will eventually burn itself out, but the blaze within her heart grows stronger as the night deepens. She wonders whether a lotus could ever bloom again in the barren pond of her soul.

The novelist observes that Manipuris are often seen as lacking a spirit of sacrifice. In contrast, he describes how, beyond Manipur, there are countless great trees with wide branches that provide shelter to the poor and the sick. These trees not only nourish the hungry with their fruits but also offer shade and protection. Some even allow the weak to climb upon them, giving them a vantage point to see the wider world. (67-68) This metaphor of the "big trees" symbolizes generosity, selflessness, and social responsibility. The trees embody sacrifice by giving of themselves- fruit, shade, and support- without expecting anything in return. The comparison suggests that true greatness lies in nurturing others, especially the vulnerable, and enabling them to rise above their limitations. By highlighting this contrast, the writer critiques Manipuri society for its perceived lack of communal sacrifice, while holding up the image of the trees as an ideal of compassion and service. The tree-metaphor merging into the forest also suggests a shift from individual identity to collective existence. While the tree often symbolizes man- strong, singular, and rooted- the forest represents a larger community, a multiplicity of trees bound together. In this sense, the forest dissolves the tree's individuality into a collective whole, complicating the binary of independence versus dependence. The man/tree, once imagined as autonomous, becomes part of a network where strength lies not in isolation but in interconnection. For the woman/creeper, this merging destabilizes the hierarchy: if the tree itself is absorbed into the forest, its claim to singular authority weakens, and dependence becomes redefined as mutual belonging. Thus, the forest embodies both radical independence and relationality, a paradoxical space where individuality and collectivity coexist. Urirei endures the harshness of the people of Kanchi and finds restoration and solace within the Kochin Forest. Madhabi's disappearance into the forest and her untraceability hint at the incommensurability of culture and nature.

Additionally, Madhabi's retreat into the forest is a desperate attempt to escape the torment of her personal love for Dhirendra by seeking refuge in a higher, impersonal form of universal love, yet her gestures in this new realm remain fragmentary and superficial- offering water to weary travelers, saving Urirei from Bhupon, or frightening villagers by posing as a wandering spirit- acts that lack the depth and continuity of genuine compassion. The final scene, in which she places a garland, reveals that her devotion to Dhirendra persists, exposing

her universal love as a fragile pretense rather than an authentic transformation. When she realizes that she can never possess Dhirendra, she disappears, never to be seen again, a vanishing that suggests death and underscores the existential void she faces when deprived of personal love. Her life, in this reading, becomes meaningless without the possibility of union with the man she loves. Yet another interpretive framework emphasizes the dialectic of presence and absence: the absence of personal love does not automatically entail the presence of universal love, nor does the lack of universal love guarantee the persistence of personal love. If both forms of love are absent, the self itself collapses into nonexistence, and Madhabi's disappearance dramatizes precisely this dissolution of subjectivity when neither personal nor universal love can sustain her being. In this way, her trajectory embodies the precariousness of identity caught between desire and transcendence, and her final vanishing becomes the logical conclusion of a failed dialectic in which the self cannot survive without the grounding force of love in either form.

Madhabi's desire and the instability of her subjectivity also follow a paradoxical structure. Presence and Refusal: When Dhiren is physically present, Madhabi resists him, refusing entry and attempting escape. This suggests that the immediacy of his presence overwhelms her, threatening her fragile autonomy. His proximity forces her into defensive withdrawal. Absence and Obsession: When Dhiren is absent, he dominates her inner world. His absence intensifies her longing, showing that distance does not erase desire but magnifies it. He becomes more powerful as an internal image than as a physical presence. Return and Concealment: When he reappears, she conceals her identity, refusing recognition. This act dramatizes her ambivalence: she cannot embrace him openly, yet she cannot erase him internally. Concealment becomes a strategy of survival, a way to manage the contradiction between desire and impossibility. Madhabi's behavior embodies a dialectic of presence vs. absence and revelation vs. concealment. She oscillates between the fear of possession and the fear of loss, unable to integrate Dhiren into her life either as a partner or as a memory. This oscillation reveals her fractured selfhood: she is caught between the impossibility of union and the impossibility of forgetting. Her refusal, obsession, and concealment dramatize the impossibility of resolution. Dhiren becomes both the figure she cannot embrace and the figure she cannot expel. Madhabi's disappearance at the end can thus be read as the only way to escape this irresolvable tension- erasure of the self when neither presence nor absence can be endured. Her contradictory responses to Dhiren show that her love is structured by paradox: she flees when he is near, longs when he is far, and hides when he returns. This cycle of refusal, obsession, and concealment underscores the impossibility of reconciling personal desire with lived reality, leading ultimately to her vanishing.

Again, Madhabi's disappearance dramatizes the annihilation of the self when neither personal nor universal love sustains her existence. The forest, as a liminal space outside social order, becomes the site where she experiments with new identities- ascetic, spirit, savior- marking a transition without resolution. The garland, as a ritual object symbolizing memory and devotion, signifies that personal love remains irreducible and continues to haunt her even in attempted renunciation. Whether literal death or symbolic vanishing, Madhabi's erasure signifies the impossibility of sustaining life without love- personal or universal- and thus becomes the dissolution of subjectivity itself. Madhabi, embodying the existential crisis of a life unanchored in love, enacts her refusal of meaninglessness through disappearance, a gesture that dissolves existence itself in the face of a life devoid of purpose. Her agency is constrained by patriarchal structures- she cannot "own" Dhirendra. Her attempt at universal love is a rebellion, but it collapses because society offers no space for female subjectivity beyond relational identity. The narrative suggests that love is not interchangeable- personal and universal are not substitutes but distinct modes. The absence of both is not neutrality but a void. Madhabi's trajectory dramatizes the precariousness of identity when love- personal or universal-fails. Her disappearance is not merely romantic despair but a philosophical statement:

Without personal love, she cannot live. Without universal love, she cannot transcend. Without either, she cannot exist. Her vanishing is thus the logical conclusion of a failed dialectic between desire and transcendence.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the sandal tree and the hidden flower in the last verse speaks to beauty, value, and tenderness that remain unrecognized and wasted. In connection with Madhabi's situation, it reflects the precarious position of women whose potential, desires, and inner worth are overlooked by society, simply because she does not play by the rules of male values. Just as the sandal tree perishes unseen in the wilderness and the flower withers without anyone noticing, Madhabi's life embodies the quiet suffering of a woman denied education, opportunity, and recognition. Her emotional and intellectual capacities-planted with care in her heart-are left to dry up in obscurity because patriarchal structures do not allow them to flourish. The image captures the tragedy of female vulnerability: the silencing of women's voices and the wasting of their inner richness, which remains invisible to the world despite their inherent value. As Beauvoir (2011/1949) argued, woman has historically been defined as "the Other," her subjectivity suppressed and her potential wasted within patriarchal frameworks. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) note that patriarchal narratives often confine women to symbolic roles of sacrifice, leaving their creativity and vitality unrecognized.

Madhabi embodies the tragic impossibility of reconciling binaries while Urirei opens a space for imagining resistance and vitality. Together, they dramatize the aporia of female subjectivity in Manipuri literature-Madhabi as sacrifice, Urirei as possibility. The episode of Shashi climbing the Champaka tree to collect rare, unseasonal blossoms, which Urirei refuses by saying they belong to the "mental variety" and should be cherished in the mind rather than stored in a basket, can be read symbolically through Urirei's character. Urirei herself embodies this rare flower of the mind: she is not outwardly celebrated or materially privileged, yet her inner strength, compassion, and concealed presence in the narrative mark her as extraordinary. Like the Sajibu blossoms, Urirei's value lies not in external display, but in the quiet resilience and spiritual depth she carries within. Urirei's worth is subtle, mental, and moral rather than social or material. Thus, Urirei parallels the rare flower-precious, elusive, and meant to be treasured in thought and memory-underscoring the text's theme that true beauty and strength often remain hidden, flourishing in the mind rather than in public recognition. As Spivak reminds us, even when women's voices are mediated through male discourse, they remain indispensable sites of historical truth and resistance (Spivak, 1988).

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