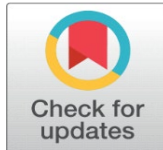
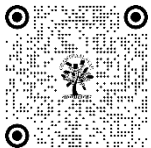


POLAR BINARIES IN SHONA PATEL'S TEATIME FOR THE FIREFLY

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ABSTRACT

Polar binaries are opposite ideas shaping a narrative. This paper seeks to examine the polar binaries found in Shona Patel's novel *Teatime for the Firefly*. Three pairs of polar binaries find place in the novel – tradition vs. modernity; authority vs. resistance; and eastern vs. western ideologies. The protagonist Layla defies superstitions and gender expectations, embracing education and independence. The central character, Dadamoshai, is an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. The tea pluckers register protests and resistance against the management. The condition of the tea plantations as one of authority and resistance is highlighted in the novel. The contrast between Eastern and Western ideologies further highlights the divide between preserving native values and embracing foreign influence, particularly in education and societal roles. Through these opposing perspectives, the novel illustrates a shifting world where people must navigate transformation while holding on to their roots.

Keywords: Polar Binaries, Binary Opposition, Tradition, Modernity, Authority, Resistance, Eastern and Western Ideologies

1. INTRODUCTION

Polar binaries refer to opposing concepts or ideas that are placed in contrast to create meaning, highlight tensions, and shape the structure of a narrative. These oppositions serve as a fundamental literary device, defining themes, conflicts, and character relationships by presenting stark contrasts between two forces. They function as a means of exploring philosophical, moral, psychological, or social dilemmas, encouraging deeper engagement with the complexities of human experience. By establishing binary oppositions, literature can emphasize contradictions, challenge perspectives, and reinforce or deconstruct ideologies. These contrasts may be conveyed through language, imagery, symbolism, or interactions between characters, operating on multiple levels from personal conflicts to broader societal or cosmic struggles. The use of such oppositions allows for nuanced interpretation, as the tension between opposing elements often introduces ambiguity, irony, or transformation within a text. Scholars suggest that binary opposition, as per a text, presents opposing ideas and does not have a single absolute meaning: "Binary opposition explains that a text has opposite sides and does not always have one absolute meaning. This concept has the goal of not seeing a thing or problem using one side only, but it can be seen from the other side which makes more sense and has more value" (Aprilia & Arianto 68). It encourages viewing issues from multiple perspectives rather than just one. While some narratives

reinforce these binaries, others blur or subvert them, questioning rigid boundaries and inviting readers to reconsider their assumptions. Many writers have explored the concept of polar binaries in their works. This paper examines how Shona Patel, an Indian English novelist uses the concept in the presentation of her characters in her novel *Teatime for the Firefly*.

Shona Patel (b. 1959) is an Indian author known for her evocative storytelling that blends history, culture, and personal narratives. She was born and raised in Assam, India, where her early experiences in the lush tea gardens deeply influenced her writing. Her background gives her novels a rich, immersive quality, capturing the beauty and complexity of life in colonial and post-colonial India. She brings to life the tensions between tradition and modernity, often portraying strong female protagonists who challenge societal norms. Her work continues to receive recognition for its unique blend of history, culture, and personal transformation.

Shona Patel's first novel, *Tea Time for the Firefly* (2013), is set in British India during the 1940s and follows the journey of Layla, a young woman who defies societal norms. Born under an inauspicious star, she is considered unlucky, yet she possesses intelligence and a strong will. She falls in love with Manik Deb, a civil servant in the tea industry, and after their marriage, she moves with him to a remote tea plantation in Assam. There, she faces cultural challenges, racial tensions, and the complexities of colonial rule. The novel explores themes of love, independence, and the struggles of women navigating societal expectations in a rapidly changing world.

In *Tea Time for the Firefly*, polar binaries emerge through contrasting ideas that shape the themes, characters and societal conflicts in the narratives. These binaries highlight tensions between tradition and modernity, authority and resistance, and the Eastern and Western ideologies. Through these opposing forces, the novel explores the struggles of individuals caught between old and new worlds, questioning rigid societal norms and emphasizing personal transformation. The interplay of these contrasts not only drives the plot but also deepens the emotional and philosophical layers of the story, allowing the characters to navigate change, resistance, and self-discovery.

The novel explores the tension between tradition and modernity through characters challenging societal norms in colonial India. "'Tradition' and 'modernity' are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change... Both tradition and modernity form the bases of ideologies and movements in which the polar opposites are converted into aspirations, but traditional forms may supply support for, as well as against, change" (Gusfield 351). In *Tea Time for the Firefly*, Layla defies superstitions and gender expectations, embracing education and independence. The novel highlights the struggle between cultural heritage and progress, depicting personal and societal transformation amid changing times. The central character, Dadamoshai, who has been educated in England, does not eat with his hands but uses a fork and spoon instead. Although he is an Indian, his behaviour resembles that of a foreigner. His eating style is unfamiliar and new to Indians: "Unlike Indians who are yet wise with their fingers, Dadamoshai always used a fork and spoon, a habit he had picked up from his England days. The dexterity with which he removed minuscule bones from Bengali curried fish without ever using his fingers was a feat worth watching" (21). A binary opposition emerges between Indian tradition and Western influence through Dadamoshai's eating habits. Unlike Indians, who skilfully use their fingers, he uses a fork and spoon, a habit from his England days. His precise handling of cutlery contrasts with the natural dexterity of Indian eating customs, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity.

In literature, "authority and resistance" refers to the dynamic where a literary text explores the power structures and dominant ideologies represented by figures of authority, alongside the actions of characters who actively oppose or challenge that power, often through acts of rebellion, defiance, or subversion. "The language skills of rhetoric together with armed struggle are essential to an oppressed people's resistance to domination and oppression and to an organized liberation movement" (Harlow xv). In the novel, the struggle between authority and resistance unfolds through characters challenging colonial rule and societal norms. Layla resists patriarchal expectations by pursuing education and independence within the rigid world of British tea plantations. The novel highlights individuals who, despite existing under authoritative systems, push against boundaries to shape a more just and equitable world. "A bird that lays its egg in the nest of another. Like that, crow's nest up there... See how sturdy the nest is. Crows are really clever engineers. They pick the perfect intersections of branches and build the nest with strong twigs. They live in that same nest for years and years" (18). The passage reflects authority as an imposed force, like a bird laying its egg in another's nest. Resistance is seen in the crows' resilience, building strong, lasting nests despite external disruptions just as Layla challenges societal constraints to secure her own place in the world. During the Burmese invasion of Assam, the English believed they had complete control over the Assamese. "This accidental discovery smacked off commercial gain, so the British made a bargain with the Ahom kings: they offered protection against Burmese invaders in return for developing a tea industry

in Assam" (39). The British saw economic potential in Assam's tea and used the Burmese invasion to their advantage. They struck a deal with the Ahom kings, offering military protection in exchange for control over tea cultivation, securing both authority and profit. Layla writes a letter to Dadamoshai like this: "The new Indian owners have cut the tea pluckers' pay and want to cut down one-third of the work force. As you can imagine, the coolies have nowhere to go. They have been estranged from their old Adivasi way of life for several generations, and the tea plucking is all they know" (341). With new Indian owners in charge, tea pluckers face wage cuts and job losses, leaving them stranded. Having lost touch with their Adivasi roots over generations, they rely entirely on tea plantation work, making their situation even more precarious.

The life of a planter is also challenging. "...had nothing to live for and nowhere to go. This was not uncommon for young men of his time who came to Assam to become tea planters. Assam had a way of digging her creepers into man's soul. Many would become strangers unto themselves and be doomed to wander forever the forgotten wastelands of their minds" (326). Many young men who came to Assam as tea planters felt lost and disconnected. Assam's grip on them was deep, leaving some trapped in isolation, with no purpose or sense of belonging, lost in their own minds.

The Communist Party organizes a demonstration in Aynakhal, stirring unrest among the tea garden workers. They proclaim the end of colonial subjugation, urging labourers to assert their rights and demand fair treatment. Their message signals a growing resistance against oppression and a push for self-determination. "...the Communist party landed up in Aynakhal and staged a protest outside his office. They were mostly hoodlums, and having entered the garden, they tried to incite the Aynakhal labor. They declared India would soon be a free country, and there was no need to grovel and slave under foreign masters. Those servile days were over. Workers now had rights and could set their own demands" (376). It is no surprise that poor Indians never have access to quality Assam tea. The best tea from plantations is exported, leaving only the lowest grade, known as tea dust, for the Indian market. The police chief, Amrat Singh highlights the hardships faced by the tea planters: "Most planters have left with their families. The unnamed tea plantations have fallen into the hands of gundas. Only a few planters remain...The crowds are afraid of a white man with a gun" (404). As most planters have departed with their families, lawless groups have taken over the tea plantations. Only a handful of planters remain, including the white man with a gun who still holds power in their eyes.

This militant group is focused on targeting all British-related establishments. Living in a commune, they illegally smuggle weapons across the Burmese border. Their ultimate goal is to stage an armed rebellion and forcibly overthrow British rule. Throughout the novel, the tea pluckers suffer greatly: "Every day the tea pluckers were harassed on their way to the plantation and forced factory workers threatened. The union leaders hijacked the tractor bringing in the leaves from the plantation. They beat up the driver and overturned the trailer throwing the leaves on the road. Despite everything, Aynakhal was still managing to function" (418). Tea pluckers are harassed daily on their way to work, and factory workers face threats. Union leaders intensify the conflict by seizing a tractor carrying tea leaves, assaulting the driver, and scattering the load on the road. Despite the turmoil, Aynakhal remains operational.

In her short story "The Journey", Jean Arasanayagam depicts the harsh conditions of Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka. The narrator recalls hearing about their suffering and tragic survival, as well as stories passed down by the elders of her community: "I am reminded of the stories about the plantation workers who were brought to our island two hundred years or more ago. Brought from South India in their hundreds in ships. Disembarking at Talaimannar, they made the long trek from the north through thick animal-infested jungles to the central highlands to work on the tea estates" (4). The narrator recalls stories of Tamil workers brought from South India over two centuries ago. Hundreds arrived by ship at Talaimannar and trekked through treacherous, animal-filled jungles to reach the central highlands, where they toiled on tea estates.

Two major cultural spheres that stand out for their unique characteristics are Eastern and Western cultures. While both share a rich heritage and have made significant contributions to human civilization, they exhibit distinct approaches to various aspects of life. "In the West, the concepts of equality and human rights have fostered individualism: Individual interest is more important than the collective interest" (Vandermeersch 3). In the novel, Konica, a young girl, suffers greatly because she does not know English. "Konica will live there after they are married. Her father is worried she won't be able to mix in her husband's social circle, if she cannot speak English" (30). Konica's father's concern reflects the tension between Eastern and Western ideologies. In traditional Eastern values, family, culture, and native language hold primary importance, while Western ideals often emphasize social mobility, individualism, and English proficiency as a marker of status. Konica's struggle to integrate into her husband's English-speaking social circles highlights the

pressure to conform to Western norms for acceptance and success, illustrating the broader conflict between preserving cultural identity and adapting to modern, Westernized expectations.

Manik engages in a discussion with Dadamoshai about the education system, reflecting on its structure and impact. Their conversation highlights the limitations of the colonial education model and its role in shaping society. Manik's perspective sheds light on the need for reform and the importance of education in empowering individuals and bringing about social change. Manik says, "I don't think men have much of a choice, either. We are pigeonholed by social expectation, but society is more forgiving toward men. Think- of it, an unmarried man is a bachelor and he is eligible till his dying day, but an unmarried woman...well, she becomes a seed pumpkin" (49). This line reflects his views on gender roles. In traditional Eastern societies, women face strict marital expectations, while men retain social status regardless of marriage. Western ideologies, though not without gender norms, offer more flexibility and personal choice.

At the same time, tea plantation jobs are highly prestigious. It is rare for an Indian to be employed by a British company, as they primarily hire Europeans. The discovery of Assam tea in India comes at a crucial time when tea drinking is highly popular in Victorian England. The demand for fine teas spreads across Europe, fuelled by the Duchess of Bedford, who introduced afternoon tea to combat afternoon fatigue. Manik's hunting partner Alasdair says, "We, British, want to shape everything in the world to fit us, don't we? Aye, but only a fool tries to tame Assam. The harder we try to change the land, the more it will change us. Assam has untamed the white man and made *jungles* out of us". (92-93). This passage reflects the British tendency to mould everything to their standards. However, Assam proves resistant to their influence. Instead of bending to British rule, the land exerts its own power, altering those who attempt to dominate it. Rather than civilizing Assam, the British themselves become rougher, adapting to its untamed wilderness.

To conclude, Shona Patel's novel, *Tea Time for the Firefly* explores deep ideological conflicts shaped by polar binaries that define society. The tension between tradition and modernity is evident as characters struggle to balance cultural heritage with progress. Authority versus resistance emerges through colonial rule and social hierarchies, where individuals challenge oppression and fight for change. The contrast between Eastern and Western ideologies further highlights the divide between preserving native values and embracing foreign influence, particularly in education and societal roles. Characters face the challenge of upholding long-standing traditions while adapting to changing times. Colonial rule and societal structures create divisions, pushing individuals to either conform or push back against oppression. The role of education and cultural identity becomes central, as Western ideals challenge local beliefs. Through these opposing perspectives, the novel illustrates a shifting world where people must navigate transformation while holding on to their roots. These opposing forces create a complex narrative, where personal and collective struggles reflect a world caught between the past and the future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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