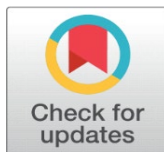
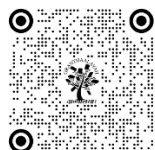


MULTIMODAL MEMORY AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN BHUKAR XAADHU: A MYTH OF HUNGER_A MYTH OF HUNGER_A MYTH OF HUNGER BY DR. MRINAL JYOTI GOSWAMI: FROM CARROLL'S WONDERLAND TO CONTEMPORARY ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger, written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, is a compelling experimental performance that fuses visual, textual, and performative media to interrogate multiple forms of hunger—biological, political, psychological, and sexual. This paper explores the play as a site of multimodal memory, where iconic images such as The Vulture and the Little Girl and Napalm Girl, alongside textual allusions from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, function as intertextual anchors that provoke ethical, emotional, and aesthetic reflection.

Using Linda Hutcheon's theory of intertextuality, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and Peggy Phelan's notion of the unmarked in performance, this study analyzes how the play constructs an affective dramaturgy that oscillates between historical trauma and poetic imagination. The sculptor figure in the play operates as both artist and witness, navigating through a fragmented landscape of visual journalism, children's rhymes, and surreal dreamscapes. The performance's layering of absurdity with real-world atrocities challenges conventional boundaries between fiction and documentary, past and present, visibility and silence. In doing so, *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* emerges as a powerful theatrical meditation on the politics of representation and the haunting persistence of memory.

Keywords: Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger, Intertextuality, Postmemory, Multimodal Theatre, Performance and Photography, Hunger, Childhood Trauma, Lewis Carroll, Visual Ethics, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, experimental Indian theatre has expanded its expressive vocabulary to engage with urgent socio-political realities through multimedia, intertextuality, and the aesthetics of disruption. Among such innovative works, *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger*, written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, stands out as a compelling example of how contemporary performance can function as both an archive of trauma and a stage for ethical reflection. Staged in a non-linear narrative form, the play dissects the layered concept of "hunger"—not merely as a physiological necessity but as a metaphor for political domination, sexual exploitation, and the commodification of human desire. These themes are dramatized through a richly multimodal structure that incorporates live performance, iconic photojournalism, and literary allusions from Western canonical texts like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

The play's dramatic structure is organized into four sequences, each drawing from iconic visual materials such as Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993) and Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972), thereby reanimating the visual

memory of global suffering through live theatrical embodiment. The inclusion of Carroll's absurdist literary world, juxtaposed with scenes of abuse and warfare, initiates a disturbing intertextual dialogue. As Linda Hutcheon (1988) argues, intertextuality allows postmodern texts to embed "both a critique and a retrieval of historical representation" (p. 125), and in Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger, this method exposes the porous boundaries between childhood fantasy and real-world horror.

The performative evocation of these images and texts engages what Marianne Hirsch terms "post-memory," defined as the transgenerational transmission of traumatic experience through mediated forms such as photographs and narratives (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). Within this framework, the play operates as a site where memory is not recalled but re-lived through embodied imagination. The sculptor protagonist, who oscillates between reality and hallucination, becomes an agent of post-memorial witnessing—translating media fragments into live enactments.

Moreover, the staging itself plays with the limits of presence and absence. Peggy Phelan's theory of performance asserts that the ontology of theatre lies in its ephemeral nature— "Performance's only life is in the present" (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger leverages this ontology by embedding moments of disappearance, silence, and invisibility to render violence that resists complete representation. The disjointed narrative, the abrupt shifts in tone, and the sculptor's frequent detours into dreamscape amplify the tension between seeing and knowing, recalling and erasing.

This paper seeks to analyze Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger as a site of multimodal memory, where visual, textual, and performative elements converge to construct an intertextual dramaturgy of trauma. By situating the play within the theoretical coordinates of intertextuality, post-memory and performance theory, the paper aims to understand how aesthetic reconfigurations of familiar texts and images function as mnemonic devices that challenge spectators to confront ethical questions about representation, violence, and the role of theatre in bearing witness.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the dramaturgical complexity of Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger, it is essential to draw upon intersecting theoretical models that account for the play's intertextual construction, its engagement with visual trauma, and its performative aesthetics. The key frameworks adopted in this study are intertextuality as proposed by Linda Hutcheon, post-memory as articulated by Marianne Hirsch, and the ontology of disappearance in performance theorized by Peggy Phelan. These perspectives are further unified under the broader concept of multimodal memory, which encompasses the convergence of visual, textual, and embodied forms in contemporary theatre practice.

2.1. INTERTEXTUALITY AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION (LINDA HUTCHEON)

Linda Hutcheon's theory of intertextuality, particularly within the domain of historiographic metafiction, provides a foundational lens for analyzing Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger. According to Hutcheon (1988), postmodern texts are often "intensely self-conscious of their own textuality" and engage in a "re-inscription" of historical or canonical works to interrogate dominant narratives (p. 5). This is not merely a stylistic device but a critical method to question the authority and presumed objectivity of both historical records and literary canon.

In Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger, the use of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and *The Walrus and the Carpenter* serves not only as playful allusions but also as a subversive re-contextualization. These texts, originally associated with whimsy and innocence, are juxtaposed against harrowing scenes of war trauma (Kim Phuc) and child abuse, thus transforming the original texts into vehicles of socio-political critique. As Hutcheon asserts, "the past is not something to be escaped but something to be reworked and revisited" (p. 4), and Goswami's dramaturgy exemplifies this by placing canonical texts into a volatile narrative environment.

2.2. THEATRE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF DISAPPEARANCE (PEGGY PHELAN)

Peggy Phelan's theory in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) challenges the notion of performance as something that can be fully documented or archived. For Phelan, performance's power lies precisely in its ephemerality, in its being "a representation without reproduction" (p. 146). The live presence of the actor, the transient moment on stage, and the silences between spoken words all constitute meaning in performance.

In *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger*, this ontology is dramatized through the shifting identities of the sculptor, the fragmentary appearance of characters, and the deliberate use of absence—both visual and verbal—to communicate trauma. The sculptor, at moments, appears caught between hallucination and reality, between memory and performance. The disappearance of the mother in a child's dream or the silent abuse victim standing with a placard reading "Abuse Me" embodies what Phelan (1993) calls the "unmarked" body—one that resists commodification and eludes closure (p. 163).

2.3. POST-MEMORY AND VISUAL INHERITANCE OF TRAUMA (MARIANNE HIRSCH)

Marianne Hirsch's notion of post-memory is indispensable to understanding how *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* utilizes media imagery to generate emotional resonance across generations. Post-memory refers to the second-generation experience of trauma—a relationship to the past that is not based on direct experience but mediated through representations such as photographs, texts, and oral narratives (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). The use of Kevin Carter's *The Vulture* and the *Little Girl* and Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* in the play exemplifies how iconic photographs become mnemonic triggers, producing affective reactions not through lived experience but through inherited cultural memory.

The embodiment of these photos in live theatre allows audiences to engage not only with their historical contexts but also with the psychological residue they leave behind. Hirsch explains that post-memory "is a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (p. 109), and Goswami's adaptation of these images into performance serves precisely this function—transmitting trauma beyond its original context.

2.4. MULTIMODAL MEMORY: CONVERGENCE OF IMAGE, TEXT, AND PERFORMANCE

The convergence of different media in *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* generates what may be termed multimodal memory—a performative strategy that fuses textual allusions, photographic references, soundscapes, and embodied enactments to create a layered archive of remembrance. This form of memory-making is not linear but rhizomatic, allowing for the simultaneity of multiple temporalities, genres, and affective states. As Richard Schechner (2006) notes, performance is always "restored behaviour"—a twice-behaved behaviour that both remembers and re-constructs (p. 28). The play's sequences exemplify this through their temporal disjunction, visual layering, and recurring motifs, enabling memory to circulate across corporeal, visual, and narrative registers.

3. SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY: A MNEMONIC STRUCTURE

Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger, conceived and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, is a powerful experimental play that functions as a mnemonic structure—a theatrical space where memory, trauma, and imagination intersect through a non-linear, multi-modal narrative. Structured in four distinctive sequences, the play interrogates the idea of hunger as not just a biological urge, but as a metaphor for multiple forms of violence—political, sexual, psychological, and epistemological. Each sequence in the performance incorporates visual, textual, and performative elements, contributing to a layered dramaturgy of affective memory.

The entire play is set within the studio of a sculptor, a liminal and psychological space that serves as both physical setting and metaphor. The sculptor is not a passive observer but a dramaturgical cipher who inhabits multiple identities—artist, thinker, survivor, and witness. The studio, populated with unfinished statues and scattered tools, transforms into an archive of embodied memories. It reflects what Marianne Hirsch (2008) terms "post-memory"—a haunted terrain where personal consciousness is interwoven with mediated, inherited trauma (p. 107). As the sculptor moves between presence and hallucination, the studio becomes a mnemonic engine, projecting fragments of memory and cultural imagery as though drawn from a collective unconscious.

Sequence 2 centers around the world-famous photograph *Napalm Girl* by Nick Ut, capturing nine-year-old Kim Phuc, whose body was seared by a napalm attack during the Vietnam War. In the play, this iconic image is not only reproduced on stage but is intercut with the recollection of childhood games, notably the Assamese folk rhyme-based game *Irikoti Mirikoti*. Through this juxtaposition, the play stages a powerful collision between innocence and atrocity, suggesting how wartime trauma corrupts the world of childhood. The sculptor questions: "Did she play like us in your childhood?"—a moment that brings folk culture and global history into direct confrontation (Goswami, n.d., p. 5). As the sculptor's memory slips into surreal space, Kim Phuc is imagined dancing alongside characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, including

fish and tortoises, before being overwhelmed by the sound of bombs. The sequence becomes an intertextual hallucination, invoking what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls the “re-inscription” of cultural texts for political critique (p. 125).

Sequence 3 continues this logic of intertextual layering. It draws heavily from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, and transforms its poetic absurdity into a political allegory of manipulation and consumption. Carroll's whimsical verse— “The time has come to talk of many things: of shoes and ships and sealing wax...” —is placed in ironic tension with imagery of hunger, exploitation, and objectification. As oysters are lured into a fatal feast, a contemporary allegory unfolds: a symbolic procession of victims made complicit in their own consumption. The sculptor reflects: “Yes, vulgar... yes, hunger is vulgar...” —signalling a shift from personal memory to broader social critique (Goswami, n.d., p. 7).

Throughout these sequences, the sculptor's studio evolves into a space of multi-layered consciousness. The room absorbs not only historical photographs and poetic texts, but also the sculptor's own guilt, silence, and ethical confusion. As Phelan (1993) notes, “performance marks the body with meaning through disappearance” (p. 147). The sculptor, overwhelmed by these visions, finds their reality collapsing into a performative dream-state where memory does not simply return—it is re-enacted through fragment, metaphor, and embodiment. In this way, *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* performs a ritual of remembering, wherein the act of witnessing becomes an aesthetic, ethical, and affective endeavor.

4. CARROLL'S WONDERLAND IN PERFORMANCE: INTERTEXTUAL PLAY AND ETHICAL TENSIONS

In *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger*, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami deploys the works of Lewis Carroll—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871)—not as nostalgic references, but as subversive intertextual insertions that critically disrupt the audience's perception of innocence, absurdity, and horror. These Victorian-era texts, rich in nonsense rhymes, surreal encounters, and playful logic, are woven into the narrative of a play that unflinchingly confronts war trauma, child abuse, and sexual exploitation. The resulting juxtaposition creates a palimpsestic performance, in which fantasy and atrocity co-exist in uneasy proximity.

The character of the sculptor, caught in hallucinatory episodes, repeatedly envisions Carrollian figures—talking fish, tortoises, and oysters—alongside historical photojournalistic images such as *Napalm Girl* and *The Vulture and the Little Girl*. In Sequence 2, for instance, the war-torn image of Kim Phuc transitions into a dreamlike underwater scene where she plays with talking animals, evoking Alice's descent into Wonderland. This performance moment reflects Linda Hutcheon's assertion that intertextuality “puts into question the authority and stability of meaning,” allowing familiar texts to be re-signified in politically charged contexts (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 128). In *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger*, Carroll's world is thus not an escape from violence, but a refracted lens through which violence is made more grotesquely visible.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Sequence 3, which incorporates Carroll's poem *The Walrus and the Carpenter* from *Through the Looking-Glass*. The poem, originally whimsical and satirical, features a pair of creatures who deceive young oysters with polite conversation, only to devour them. In Goswami's staging, this poem is recited amidst scenes depicting manipulation, political hunger, and systemic abuse. The oysters— symbolizing innocence— are metaphorically aligned with victims of sexual violence and child trafficking. This dissonant fusion of Carroll's linguistic play and the visual representation of abuse invokes a kind of intertextual irony, where “quotation is used to undermine rather than affirm” the authority of the borrowed text (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 131).

This technique generates profound ethical tensions. The playful absurdity of Carroll's verse is not merely out of place; it is purposefully disturbing when positioned alongside traumatic imagery. By embedding light-hearted literary material within a dark performance landscape, the play demands that the audience interrogate their own expectations of narrative comfort and aesthetic cohesion. As Marianne Hirsch (2008) writes in her study of post-memory, “the act of aestheticizing trauma can be both a mode of resistance and a source of ethical discomfort” (p. 112). In *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger*, this discomfort is not incidental—it is central to the play's dramaturgical strategy.

The ethical risk lies in whether the intertextual use of Alice in Wonderland trivializes or reifies the traumas being represented. Goswami, however, circumvents this danger by framing the Carrollian sequences as unstable dreams,

continually ruptured by violence and trauma. Kim Phuc is never allowed to remain in Wonderland; the whimsical world collapses with the sounds of war, stripping away the illusion. This recalls Phelan's (1993) argument that performance often traffics in what is un-representable, and it is precisely in these ruptures of sense and structure that the play generates affective meaning (p. 147). The disintegration of Carroll's fantastical world mirrors the disintegration of innocence in the face of political horror.

In this sense, Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger engages in what may be termed a critical intertextual ethics: rather than simply referencing Carroll's works for artistic resonance, it holds them up as mirrors—reflected and shattered—to expose the ideological blindness that often accompanies cultural nostalgia. The intertextual gesture becomes not decorative, but disruptive, forcing the audience to navigate the perilous terrain between comforting narrative and uncomfortable truth.

5. PERFORMING THE PHOTOGRAPH: TRAUMA AND THE GAZE

In Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami utilizes photographic afterimages as dramaturgical tools to materialize trauma on stage. The embodied re-enactments of two globally recognized photographs—Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993) and Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972)—serve as potent visual inter-texts that challenge the boundaries between documentation, imagination, and memory. By translating still images into live performative sequences, the play enables audiences to confront trauma not through mediated distance but through immediate, embodied affect.

5.1. EMBODIED PHOTOGRAPHS AS MNEMONIC DEVICES

In Sequence 1, the image of Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* is introduced through an off-voice narrative that recounts the historical context of the photograph. The sculptor, immersed in the mental act of creation, imagines the child crawling in hunger while a vulture lurks nearby—a tableau that is visually recreated on stage with theatrical precision. As the child collapses, the stage transforms into a dreamlike zone, filled with flickers of maternal memory, illusions of water, and a fading sense of life. This enactment aligns with what Marianne Hirsch (2008) terms post-memory—a mediated relationship to trauma that is “experienced with such intensity as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (p. 109). Though the spectators may not have lived the famine or the Sudanese civil war, the performance of the image transfers the affective charge of the photograph into the audience's lived emotional experience.

Similarly, in Sequence 2, Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* is projected into theatrical space not merely as a visual reference but as a performed event. The sculptor's recollection of Kim Phuc's pain is externalized through a surreal blend of imagery—children's rhymes, Carrollian fantasy, and infernal chaos. The girl's body, naked and vulnerable, is first seen dancing in imaginary safety before being overtaken by the sounds of bombing. In this way, Goswami reanimates the photographic moment by layering temporal disjunction and performative vulnerability, creating a kind of corporeal echo that makes the trauma both seen and felt.

5.2. THE AFTERIMAGE AND HAUNTING

Both photographs function in the play as afterimages—residual impressions that linger long after the original visual encounter. Drawing upon Barthes' concept of the punctum in photography, one might argue that these images, once embodied, puncture the theatrical fabric with unresolvable pain. Marianne Hirsch expands this understanding by suggesting that post-memory is “haunted by the images and stories that preceded one's birth” and is transmitted via “the affective force of visibility” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 111). In the performance, the sculptor is haunted not only by historical events but by images that act as ghosts, revisiting the space through memory, silence, and sudden rupture.

The sequence with Kevin Carter's suicide note—“I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain...” —reinforces the notion of the image as a traumatic imprint, one that cannot be ethically un-seen or emotionally discharged. The stage thus becomes a haunted archive, where photographs are not passive references but active agents of psychological disturbance.

5.3. AFFECTIVE TRIGGERS AND PERFORMATIVE REMEMBRANCE

By embodying the child figures from these iconic photographs, Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger transforms the audience's role from distant observer to proximate witness. The girl in Napalm Girl is not a symbol; she is a living presence—breathing, running, collapsing—before our eyes. Similarly, the child in Carter's photograph becomes a site of performed starvation, a vehicle through which the audience is compelled to consider the visceral stakes of hunger and abandonment.

As Peggy Phelan (1993) argues, performance has the capacity to evoke what cannot be fully represented: "Performance honours the idea that a limited access to the real is not necessarily a lack of power but a site of potential transformation" (p. 3). The photographs, once embodied, are not re-creations but acts of remembrance that force a re-engagement with their ethical implications. The stage becomes a site of mourning and resistance, where the still image acquires movement, voice, and narrative tension.

6. THE BODY AS ARCHIVE: SILENCE, ABSENCE, AND VIOLENCE

In Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami constructs a theatrical landscape where the body becomes the primary site of memory, inscription, and resistance. Through the use of silence, minimal dialogue, and potent visual imagery, the play reveals how trauma is not always articulated in language but often embedded in gestures, gazes, absences, and wounds. This dramaturgical strategy aligns closely with Peggy Phelan's theory of the performative disappearance, where performance communicates meaning not only through presence but also through ephemeral, unspeakable, and unmarked moments.

Phelan (1993) asserts that "performance's only life is in the present" and that its disappearance is what gives it political potential—to resist commodification and fixed meaning (p. 146). In Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger, scenes such as Kim Phuc being stripped of her clothes or the abused girl bearing the placard 'Abuse Me' illustrate precisely this principle. These bodies are not over-explained or sensationalized; they exist in a state of fragile visibility, confronting the viewer with trauma that resists total representation. Their silences are louder than speech, acting as what Phelan describes as "a rupture in representation that marks the limits of the visible" (p. 19).

6.1. THE CHILD'S BODY AS TEXT

The performance continually foregrounds the child's body as a living archive, where acts of violence, hunger, and desire are written. The image of Kim Phuc, reenacted on stage as a dancing, dreaming, and then burning child, becomes a site where innocence collides with atrocity. Likewise, the figure of the girl standing passively as multiple characters symbolically "abuse" her on stage—under the burden of a cardboard sign marked Abuse Me—highlights how bodies are scripted by systems of domination. As Hirsch (2008) notes, in post-memory, the body often becomes "a surface on which trauma is transferred, repeated, and performed" (p. 111). Goswami's direction uses the viscosity of these child figures to evoke post-memorial haunting, even when explicit narrative is absent.

6.2. SILENCE AND THE PERFORMATIVE SPACE OF ABSENCE

Silence in Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger is not a void but a choreographed presence. When the abused child is subjected to symbolic acts of violence, she says nothing—but her stillness, lack of defence, and refusal to scream become performative statements. Similarly, Kim Phuc's dreamscape is fragmented by the sudden loss of sound, the disorientation of light, and the evaporation of comforting figures like the mother. These absences produce a ghostly aura, reflecting what Phelan calls "the performative space of disappearance," where trauma is embodied not in expression but in erasure and muteness (Phelan, 1993, p. 148).

The aesthetic restraint in Goswami's staging—limiting verbal exposition and relying on movement, spatial design, and symbolic object use—allows the corporeal image to speak for itself. This minimalist dramaturgy resonates with Schechner's notion that performance "restores behaviour" (2006, p. 28), re-enacting gestures and traumas that do not

depend on verbal clarity but on empathic resonance. The performer's body thus functions as both text and texture, an unstable repository of suffering that invites, but does not demand, interpretation.

6.3. AFFECT WITHOUT LANGUAGE

The efficacy of Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger lies in its ability to communicate affect without excessive narration. While iconic photographs and intertextual references guide the viewer's associations, it is the non-verbal grammar of the body—its movement, vulnerability, resistance—that delivers the play's emotional charge. The result is what Phelan refers to as a "double economy of disappearance and appearance" (1993, p. 150): the audience is forced to engage with what is visible on stage, while simultaneously reckoning with what remains unseen or unspeakable.

The abused child, whose presence is both central and elusive, epitomizes this paradox. She is not given a backstory, a name, or lines of defence. Instead, her body bears the weight of collective violence, rendering her not as an individual character, but as a symbol of the silenced many—children commodified, violated, and forgotten.

7. MULTIMODAL DRAMATURGY AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

In Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger: A Myth of Hunger, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami orchestrates a multimodal dramaturgy that blends disparate materials—canonical poetry, photojournalism, children's rhymes, and political theatre—into a layered and unsettling aesthetic experience. This formal collage not only deepens the thematic density of the play but also raises critical ethical questions about the representation of violence, suffering, and historical trauma in performative contexts. The challenge lies in balancing aesthetic innovation with ethical accountability, particularly when representing vulnerable bodies and traumatic histories on stage.

The performance fluidly transitions between sources: Lewis Carroll's *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl*, Vietnamese folk horror, and Assamese children's rhymes like *Irikoti Mirikoti*. These elements do not cohere in a harmonious narrative but rather collide and contradict, producing what Linda Hutcheon (1988) describes as "historiographic metafiction"—an intertextual practice that reconfigures inherited texts to interrogate dominant cultural narratives (p. 125). Goswami's use of this technique unsettles any singular reading of hunger or violence, instead compelling the audience to engage with the ambiguity of meaning.

7.1. FUSION OF FORMS: PERFORMANCE AS POLYPHONY

This dramaturgical fusion results in a kind of polyphonic performance, where diverse voices and visual codes—documentary and fictional, poetic and political—are held in tension. On one level, the children's game *Irikoti Mirikoti* functions as a nostalgic cultural insertion, reflecting regional identity and oral tradition. Yet, when it is juxtaposed with the figure of Kim Phuc, running naked and burning from napalm, it evokes a jarring cognitive dissonance. The seemingly innocent rhyme becomes a frame through which loss and trauma are experienced, transforming childhood play into a symbolic language of devastation.

This dramaturgical method aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, where cultural texts and images transmitted across generations retain emotional intensity and "puncture the present with the pain of the past" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). By enacting trauma through familiar, even playful, forms, Goswami ensures that the performance disorients aesthetic expectation, pushing the audience into an affective engagement that resists passive consumption.

7.2. ETHICS OF AESTHETICIZING SUFFERING

Yet, this very mode of aesthetic juxtaposition raises serious ethical concerns. Is it possible to stage pain and trauma without converting it into spectacle? Can the audience witness suffering without voyeurism? As Elaine Scarry (1985) posits in *The Body in Pain*, the very act of representing pain risks reducing its authenticity to form, thereby dulling its reality (p. 12). Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger walks this fine line, staging images of sexual violence, starvation, and abuse with visual beauty and performative grace—scenes that could, if misread, be aestheticized beyond recognition.

Peggy Phelan (1993) argues that performance, when it privileges disappearance and incompleteness, can avoid the trap of commodifying trauma. She writes, "To perform the un-representable, to stage its failure, is itself a political gesture" (p. 3). In Goswami's production, this refusal to over-explain—through silence, stillness, and unresolved

imagery—allows for an ethical distance. For instance, the abused girl holding a placard marked Abuse Me is not dramatized in detail; rather, her presence itself becomes a performative accusation, unsettling the viewer's gaze and resisting narrative closure.

7.3. THE RISK OF REPRESENTING THE IRREPRESENTABLE

Goswami's work compels us to confront essential questions: Can pain be staged without being consumed? What does it mean to re-contextualize children's songs and nonsense rhymes within a theatre of trauma? The use of Carroll's poetry, traditionally associated with innocence and whimsy, within scenes of war and exploitation invokes a radical ethical dissonance. As Hutcheon (1988) notes, intertextual performance that foregrounds irony and contradiction "resists closure, and insists on the reader's [or viewer's] active participation" (p. 133). In *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger*, the audience becomes ethically implicated—not merely watching a play, but witnessing a ritual of remembrance and reckoning.

Ultimately, the play exemplifies a form of resistant theatre—one that avoids catharsis and instead fosters critical discomfort. Its multimodal strategy invites a deeper exploration of how stories of suffering are told, how images of violence are circulated, and how theatrical form itself can be a mode of ethical inquiry rather than aesthetic pleasure.

8. CONCLUSION

Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami presents a powerful theatrical investigation into the interwoven dimensions of intertextual memory, visual trauma, and embodied performance. Drawing upon a rich tapestry of global and local references—including the literary worlds of Lewis Carroll, the harrowing photographic archives of war and famine, Assamese children's rhymes, and symbolic representations of sexual and political violence—the play transcends traditional narrative conventions, offering instead a multimodal mnemonic ritual. It is through this non-linear, layered structure that the play mobilizes what Marianne Hirsch (2008) terms post-memory—a mechanism by which inherited trauma is re-experienced through mediated forms such as photographs, texts, and performance (p. 109).

At its core, the play challenges the audience to witness trauma ethically, without indulging in voyeuristic consumption. The juxtaposition of playful absurdity from *Alice in Wonderland* with the visceral embodiment of Kim Phuc or the silent presence of an abused girl bearing a placard, is not a mere aesthetic choice, but a deliberate ethical provocation. As Peggy Phelan (1993) asserts, "representation's power is never only in its presence, but also in its evanescence, its disappearance" (p. 148). Goswami's performance uses silence, absence, and fragmentary images to stage what cannot be fully represented, reminding the audience that trauma often resists complete articulation.

Moreover, *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* refuses to be confined within regional boundaries. Although deeply rooted in Assamese cultural motifs, the play engages in transcultural dialogue by staging globally recognizable crises of famine, war, and abuse. Through its performative re-inscription of Kevin Carter's *The Vulture* and the Little Girl and Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl*, Goswami contributes to what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls "historiographic metafiction"—a practice of engaging with history through fragmented, intertextual, and self-reflexive modes (p. 127). The result is a global dramaturgy of trauma and resistance, wherein *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* becomes a contemporary ritual of remembering—not simply to depict suffering, but to ask how we choose to see, remember, and respond to it.

In an era increasingly defined by mediated violence and collective forgetting, *Bhukar Xaadhu: A Myth of Hunger* reminds us that theatre remains a potent medium to resist numbness, to disrupt complacency, and to engage audiences in the ethics of attention. It does not offer closure or consolation; rather, it holds space for the fragmented, the silent, and the spectral—affirming the power of performance to act as both an aesthetic and ethical encounter with memory.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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