

Narrative Empathy: People, Policy and Peace in Chakravarti's Narrative Non-Fiction



Abrar Farhan Zaman

191013052

Department of English and Humanities

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Narrative Empathy: People, Policy and Peace in Chakravarti's Narrative Non-Fiction

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Abrar Farhan Zaman
191013052
Thesis Supervisor: Sudeep Chakravarti

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information Incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

Date: 16 September, 2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sudeep Chakravarti", is displayed within a light gray rectangular box.

(Sudeep Chakravarti)

Associate Professor of South Asian Studies And Director,
Center for South Asian Studies (C-SAS)

DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgment of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, enclosed within a hand-drawn oval. The signature appears to read 'Abrar' followed by a stylized flourish or 'Z'.

(Abrar Farhan Zaman)

191013052

Department of English and Humanities

DEDICATION

The paper before my eyes fades yellow
With a steel pen, I chisel on it uneven black
Full of working words
Workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages...
They've trained me to become docile
Don't know how to shout or rebel
How to complain or denounce
Only how to silently suffer exhaustion
When I first set foot in this place
I hoped only for that grey pay slip on the tenth of each month
To grant me some belated solace
For this, I had to grind away my corners, grind away my words
Refuse to skip work, refuse sick leave, refuse leave for private reasons
Refuse to be late, refuse to leave early
By the assembly line, I stood straight like iron, hands like flight,
How many days, how many nights
Did I - just like that - standing fall asleep?

— Xu Lizhi, “I Fall Asleep, Just Standing Like That”

I would like to dedicate my work to the memory of my late grandfather Dr. Mohammad Moniruzzaman who showed me that Literature can help to cultivate empathy, foster understanding of social issues, raise awareness about injustices, and inspire readers to take action or seek solutions.

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guided me like an older brother and helped me grow into multiple leadership roles. Md. Abid Hasan Sohag gave me advice which propelled me into becoming the editor of the campus newspaper, and the president of AXIS MIL. Rifat Abdullah is a friend who brings erudition to every conversation we have. His tour of how his printing press operates brought me much joy as an avid reader. Shahad Muktadir is someone I remember fondly from my time at BRAC. It was excellent to reconnect with him at ULAB. Mehedi Hasan Simanto, Meher Abrar Elma, and Mahzabeen Yousuf, my teammates for UNESCO's Youth MIL Hackathon made my time at AXIS MIL memorable. Mr. Md. Aminul Islam taught me to tune out the criticisms that are not constructive and to focus on producing work that speaks for itself. Ms. Sanjana Rahman showed me the importance of active listening. Ms. Maisha Hossain, who designed the 2023 Creative Writing Certification Course at ULAB, has inspired me and helped me rediscover my love for writing, a transformative experience. Ms. Arifa Ghani Rahman translated the works of ULAB's Founder Mr. Kazi Shahid Ahmed which helped me understand the founding values and ethos of the university. Mr. Don Sumdany, ULAB's first valedictorian, showed me how to hold onto my burning desire and follow my passion with grit. Professor Salimullah Khan helped me understand and appreciate the nuances of the mind and modern South Asian history. Special mention goes to Nafiur Rahman and Fahim Ibrahim Chowdhury who studied South Asian Literature alongside me and encouraged me at every turn. I love my parents for supporting my love for reading from an early age. Most Importantly, I deeply appreciate Prof. Chakravarti for showing me that peace is always worth it.

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Abstract

This internship report examines the role of narrative empathy in fostering social awareness and advocating for policy reform through narrative nonfiction. The research focuses on Sudeep Chakravarti's works *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country*, *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur, and India's Far East*, and *Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land*, applying Suzanne Keen's framework of Narrative Empathy to assess how readers emotionally and cognitively engage with stories of conflict and socio-political unrest in South Asia. Conducted as part of an internship with the Center for Sustainable Development (C-SAS) at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), this study highlights the relevance of such narratives in the South Asian context, where similar socio-political challenges prevail. A qualitative-quantitative mixed-method approach was employed, with qualitative analysis taking precedence. An online questionnaire featuring five scale-based and five open-ended questions was distributed to gauge readers' empathy levels, social awareness, and willingness to act on the issues presented in the texts. The findings suggest that narrative nonfiction, when framed with an empathetic lens, can provoke strong emotional responses, leading to heightened social consciousness and advocacy for change. This research demonstrates the transformative power of storytelling in shaping public opinion and fostering a deeper understanding of complex socio-political dynamics in South Asia.

Keywords: Narrative Empathy, Narrative Non-Fiction, South Asia.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

To answer the question “What is Empathy?”, Suzanne Keen, a leading expert on narrative empathy and a seasoned scholar who has worked at several top liberal arts colleges such as Scripps, Hamilton, as well as Washington and Lee, in her seminal text *A Theory of Narrative Empathy* suggests it is a “vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect” which can be provoked by “witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading”. She further articulates that “empathy is associated with the moral emotion sympathy” which is alternatively known as “empathic concern”, and thus connected with “prosocial” or “altruistic action” (208).

In her review of Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel*, Tara McGann, Head of the English Department at Sage Ridge School, notes how the preface “squarely takes on the assumption that novel reading” through “stimulating emotional responsiveness”, and the “role-taking imagination”, aids readers to become “moral world citizens”. Furthermore, McGann states that Keen does not shy away from admitting that there was insufficient empirical evidence to suggest that this “comforting scenario” is true. Be that as it may, Keen designed an experiment to test her hypothesis that “fiction deactivates reader’s suspicions and opens the way to easier empathy” (qtd. in McGann). She asked her students to respond to three narrative texts, one of which was a Novel. She wished to unearth which genres and narrative techniques generated the greatest empathy among her students. McGann reports that Keen argued in her second

chapter that the field of psychology has much to learn from literary study and cross-sectional studies can be valuable (263-265).

Robert Vare, the editor at large of The Atlantic Monthly, who started a Writer-in-Residence position at the University of Chicago exclusively for non-fiction, posited that “narrative nonfiction bridges connections between events that have taken place, and imbues them with meaning and emotion.” He gave an example of how J. Anthony Lukas, a veteran journalist who made a name for himself while at the Harvard Crimson and then at Esquire embodied that spirit in his work. Be it in “books, journals or newspapers” Lukas would tell real-life stories about real people with stylistic elements akin to typically seen in fiction. Vare also points towards Esquire as an outlet that takes advantage of narrative non-fiction. Gay Talese, a notable proponent of narrative non-fiction who popularized the use of literary elements in the publication of reportage penned the now legendary profile *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold* for Esquire (18).

The existing literature primarily addresses fiction's impact on readers' emotional and ethical development, leaving a void in our comprehension of how non-fiction narratives, with their basis in real-life events and factual accuracy, might similarly engage readers' empathic responses and influence their social attitudes. This gap highlights the need for further research to determine the unique contributions of narrative non-fiction to the cultivation of empathy and its implications for policy advocacy and social change.

1.2 Research Problem

Despite the recognized power of narrative fiction in fostering empathy and influencing social attitudes, there is a significant gap in understanding how narrative non-fiction can similarly evoke empathy and drive socio-political change. This study aims to address this gap by examining the works of Sudeep Chakravarti, exploring the techniques used to foster empathy, and assessing their impact on readers' perceptions of key social and policy issues in several

conflict zones in South Asia. Understanding this relationship is crucial for leveraging narrative non-fiction as a tool for effective policy advocacy and social transformation.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study offers several benefits that can make significant contributions to our society. Examining how narrative non-fiction fosters empathy enhances our understanding of the mechanisms through which literature influences human emotions and social connections. The insights derived from this research could inform more effective policy advocacy by elucidating the role of empathetic storytelling in raising awareness and motivating action on critical socio-political issues. Additionally, by demonstrating the capacity of narrative non-fiction to bridge diverse perspectives and foster mutual understanding, this study can contribute to increased social cohesion and reduced conflict in multicultural societies. The findings can also be instrumental for educators and curriculum developers in integrating narrative non-fiction into educational programs, promoting empathy and critical thinking among students.

Furthermore, this study seeks to provide valuable guidance for writers and policy advocates on crafting compelling narratives that resonate emotionally with audiences and inspire positive change. By highlighting the impact of narrative non-fiction, the research encourages greater appreciation for this genre, prompting more readers to engage with works that offer profound social and emotional insights. With a specific focus on South Asia, the study also provides critical insights into the region's socio-political landscape, offering valuable perspectives for regional development and international understanding. Ultimately, this research contributes to the empirical body of knowledge on literature and empathy, laying the groundwork for future studies and interdisciplinary collaboration among literary scholars, psychologists, and policymakers.

1.4 Research Questions

In exploring the intersection of literature and socio-political impact, it is essential to understand how narrative techniques can evoke empathy and drive change. This study focuses on the narrative non-fiction of Sudeep Chakravarti such as *Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land*, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country*, and *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur, and India's Far East*, examining how his work fosters empathy and influences readers' perceptions of social and policy issues in South Asia. By investigating the specific literary strategies Chakravarti employs, assessing the impact of these strategies on readers' attitudes, and exploring the broader implications for policy advocacy and peace promotion, this research aims to illuminate the powerful role of narrative non-fiction in shaping a more empathetic and proactive society. Therefore, this study has the following research questions:

1. How does Chakravarti's narrative non-fiction utilize specific literary techniques to evoke empathy in readers?
2. What are the measurable impacts of narrative empathy elicited by Chakravarti's works on readers' attitudes toward social and policy issues in South Asia?
3. In what ways can narrative non-fiction, exemplified by Chakravarti's works, contribute to policy advocacy and the promotion of peace in South Asia?

1.5 About the Internship and Institution

The Centre for South Asian Studies (C-SAS), at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh was selected based on its commitment to regional connectivity and equitable growth. This resonates with Chakravarti's narratives which often emphasize the interconnectedness and shared destinies of South Asian Communities. The interdisciplinary approach, and extensive interactions with academia, government, the private sector, and citizenry further enhanced the ability to draw on practical insights and contribute meaningfully to regional dialogue and advocacy to secure positive futures. Narrative empathy helps to understand the unrealized aspirations of individuals and communities, providing a profound insight into their experiences and needs. This understanding is crucial for effective policy advocacy, which allows for white papers, policy papers, and private and public interactions that help pave the way toward the resolution of conflict. By engaging with key issues such as Foreign Policy, Security, Strategic Issues, and Governance, C-SAS provides a rich context for exploring how narrative non-fiction can shape policy and promote peace. With ULAB at its core, a leading university known for its progressive mindset and results-oriented approach, C-SAS is exceptionally positioned to emerge as a top thought leader and catalyst for change in this interdisciplinary field.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Decolonizing Narratives

Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, profoundly influences discourse on cultural representation and power dynamics in academic and political spheres. Said critiques Western scholarship's construction of the "Orient" as a monolithic, exoticized other, perpetuating colonial hegemony through distorted narratives and essentialized stereotypes. By analyzing how Western intellectuals and artists historically depicted the East, Said reveals how these representations served imperialist agendas, shaping policies and public perceptions. Said's critique prompts reflection on how literature can challenge or reinforce entrenched stereotypes and power imbalances. Chakravarti's narratives, through their nuanced portrayal of South Asian experiences and identities, can be seen as countering Orientalist tropes by humanizing and contextualizing diverse perspectives within the region.

2.2 Rethinking Development and Security

The concept of human security, as introduced in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, redefines security by emphasizing the protection and well-being of individuals rather than the defense of territories and prioritizing development over military capabilities. This paradigm shift in the framework prioritizes people's needs and development in key areas such as health, education, and human rights.

2.3 Violence and Everyday Life

Veena Das, the Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, is notable for her work which represents a milestone in anthropological and interdisciplinary studies on violence, particularly in how it permeates everyday life and shapes societal structures. Her approach moves beyond traditional anthropological perspectives that view violence as an isolated event, instead focusing on its integration into the fabric of ordinary existence. Through detailed case studies, such as the Partition of India and the anti-Sikh violence in 1984, Das explores how these traumatic events become embedded in societal norms and individual experiences. She challenges the notion of violence as merely an interruption, advocating instead for an understanding of its enduring impact on gender, subjectivity, and social relations. By weaving together anthropological fieldwork with philosophical insights, Das offers a nuanced examination of violence's intersections with state power, bureaucracy, and kinship dynamics. Her work not only expands theoretical frameworks in anthropology but also provides a critical lens for interpreting violence across global contexts, particularly its implications for women's experiences and rights.

2.4 Gradual Reform for Sustainable Peace

Roland Paris, a professor of international affairs and the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs director at the University of Ottawa, is considered an expert on peacebuilding. Paris' study critically examines the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction, arguing against hasty attempts to impose liberal democratic and capitalist frameworks in war-torn countries. Instead, Paris asserts that such abrupt interventions, without the foundational support of effective institutions, may exacerbate instability and even reignite conflict. Drawing on empirical evidence, Paris advocates for a more cautious and incremental approach to peacebuilding. By introducing political and economic reforms gradually and under

controlled conditions, he suggests that countries can better consolidate peace, strengthen governance structures, and foster sustainable development. This perspective challenges conventional strategies in international peacebuilding efforts, emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive interventions that prioritize long-term stability and resilience over immediate transformation. Paris's work contributes significantly to scholarly discourse on post-conflict reconstruction, offering insights that are crucial for policymakers and practitioners striving to navigate the delicate balance between fostering democratic governance and ensuring sustainable peace in war-affected regions.

2.5 Narrative Techniques

Mieke Bal, a Dutch cultural theorist, and Professor Emerita in Literary Theory at the University of Amsterdam, penned the book *Narratology* which has established itself as a foundational text in the study of narrative theory since its original publication in 1985. Bal's work offers a systematic framework for understanding how narratives operate, encompassing both literary and non-literary texts across diverse linguistic, temporal, and geographical contexts. Through clear and reliable concepts, Bal explores the intricacies of narrative interpretation, emphasizing the roles of language, narrative structure, point of view, and characterization in shaping reader understanding. Bal's systematic approach provides analytical tools to investigate how Chakravarti's narratives evoke empathetic responses among readers. By examining narrative techniques such as characterization and point of view, scholars can elucidate how Chakravarti constructs narratives that resonate emotionally and ethically with audiences. Bal's insights into narrative interpretation also inform discussions on how readers engage with Chakravarti's depictions of South Asian realities, enriching the study's exploration of narrative empathy's potential to foster cross-cultural understanding and social awareness.

2.6 Good Enough Governance

Merilee S. Grindle is an Edward S. Mason Professor of International Development and Emerita at the Harvard Kenney School of Public Policy and Governance. She champions the concept of good enough governance, a pragmatic approach to governance reform that prioritizes feasible and contextually appropriate improvements over idealistic or comprehensive solutions. It emphasizes achieving a functional level of governance that is adequate for economic development and social stability, rather than striving for perfection. This concept acknowledges the limitations of resources, capacities, and political will in many developing countries. Grindle challenges the prevailing emphasis on extensive institutional reforms and capacity-building efforts in development discourse. Her perspective questions the feasibility and necessity of implementing a broad array of changes without considering specific contextual needs. The argument posits that, given the constraints of resources and capacities, practitioners are justified in prioritizing contextually relevant and feasible interventions. This approach advocates for a nuanced analysis of local conditions and the potential impact of interventions, emphasizing the importance of tailored strategies for achieving improved governance outcomes in real-world settings (Grindle 2007).

2.7 Representation of Trauma in Narrative

Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in Trauma Studies who focuses on the languages of trauma and testimony, along with literary theory in her text *Unclaimed Experience* explores trauma as a profound and pervasive phenomenon that defies conventional modes of understanding and representation. Published in the late 20th-century context, Caruth's work challenges simplistic narratives of history by suggesting that trauma introduces complexities that disrupt linear interpretations of experience. Central to her argument is Freud's theory of trauma, which posits that traumatic events disrupt consciousness and evade immediate comprehension, often returning in fragmented and elusive forms. Caruth's insights offer a framework for understanding

how narratives can convey and engage with traumatic experiences. Chakravarti's narratives insightfully delve into personal and collective traumas within the socio-political contexts of South Asia. By analyzing how Chakravarti's storytelling techniques evoke empathy and understanding of trauma among readers, scholars can explore how narratives mediate complex historical and personal experiences that resist straightforward representation.

What is more, trauma theory accentuates the ethical and empathetic dimensions of narrative engagement. By examining how narratives of trauma, such as those discussed by Caruth, navigate the boundaries between memory, representation, and healing, researchers can evaluate the potential of narrative empathy to foster deeper social awareness and transformative understanding. Thus, integrating trauma theory enriches the study by providing a theoretical lens to analyze how Chakravarti's narratives navigate and convey the complexities of trauma, contributing to broader discussions on empathy, memory, and the ethics of representation in literature and non-fiction.

2.8 Narrative and Empathy

Suzanne Keen's article "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," published in *Narrative* in 2006, constitutes a foundational exploration of how narratives evoke empathetic responses from readers. Keen posits that narrative empathy involves a vicarious sharing of emotions and experiences, wherein readers emotionally engage with fictional characters or real-life narratives. She emphasizes that empathy in literature is closely linked to moral emotions and can provoke prosocial actions. Drawing on psychological theories and literary analysis, Keen's work provides a theoretical framework for understanding how narratives elicit empathetic responses.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The methodology involves a mixed methods approach that combines literary analysis with empirical data collection through a structured questionnaire. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the textual strategies employed in narrative nonfiction and the real-world impact of these strategies on readers.

3.1 Research Design

The research design of this study is qualitative-dominant mixed methods. It comprises two main components: literary analysis and a quantitative-qualitative survey. The former provides in-depth insights into the narrative techniques that elicit empathy, whereas the latter captures empirical data on the readers' responses to these narratives.

3.2 Literary Analysis

The literary analysis portion involves a close reading of three selected narrative nonfiction works by Sudeep Chakravarti, chosen for their thematic focus on social and policy issues relevant to South Asia. The analysis is guided by drawing on a robust repertoire of literary theories and frameworks such as post-colonialism, trauma studies, and narrative empathy. It is also supplemented by commentary and insights offered by international book reviewers.

3.3 Data Collection

A questionnaire was developed and distributed to complement the literary analysis and empirically measure the impact of narrative empathy on readers, which is woefully underexplored in the status quo. Participants were asked to read an excerpt from Chakravarti's *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East* and answer five quantitative scale-based questions as well as five qualitative open-ended questions to assess their emotional engagement and empathy, attitude, and perspective shifts, as well as motivation to take action.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey, with assurances of confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any time. The study adheres to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including respect for privacy and the integrity of data handling.

3.5 Participant Profile

In keeping with ethical standards participants were not required to share private information that could put their anonymity at risk. A pre-test survey was initially circulated through social media in Bangladesh-based groups and forums to reach readers, however, as a result of the ongoing anti-India sentiment, it triggered a sharply negative response along partisan lines.

After recognizing the problem of the local right-wing hijacking the survey, the final version was posted on the following subreddits: /r Literature, /r Books, /r AskAcademia, and /r SampleSize. The posts gained traction and reached thousands of individuals thus having a wider international reach than the initial pre-test round. The final survey was also distributed through the popular application Discord to communities centered around reading and policy. Moreover, it was shared with the debate community to spark meaningful conversations about how stories can shape policy.

3.6 Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the relatively small sample size of the survey, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data in the survey could introduce biases in participants' responses. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach offers a robust framework for exploring the complex interplay between narrative nonfiction, empathy, and policy.

Chapter 4

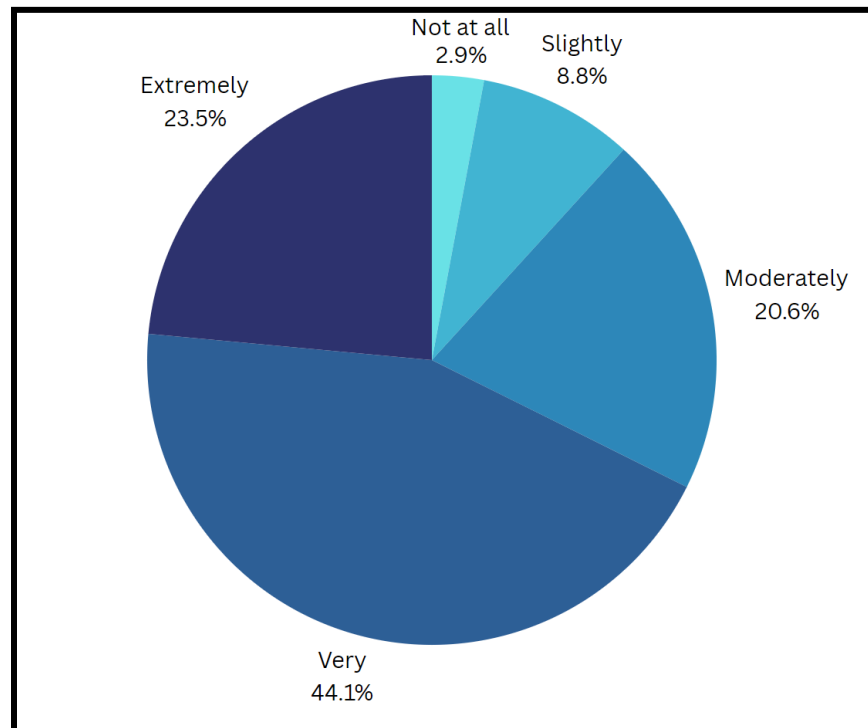
Data Analysis and Discussions

Independently the quantitative scales used to measure the reader's response and reaction to the first five questions posed to them upon reading the excerpt do not reveal the full picture. Be that as it may, when paired with the qualitative data and insights from the second half which feature open-ended questions, they reveal deeper insights as to why or why not the text connected with readers or failed to sway them to get out of their apathy and inertia.

It is typical to see NGOs and fundraisers use human stories to connect with stakeholders and persuade them to translate emotion into action. In the past, novels have successfully shed light on social and policy issues, an element Suzanne Keen explores in *Empathy and the Novel*. In light of that, the study is an earnest attempt to observe if the same is true for narrative non-fiction.

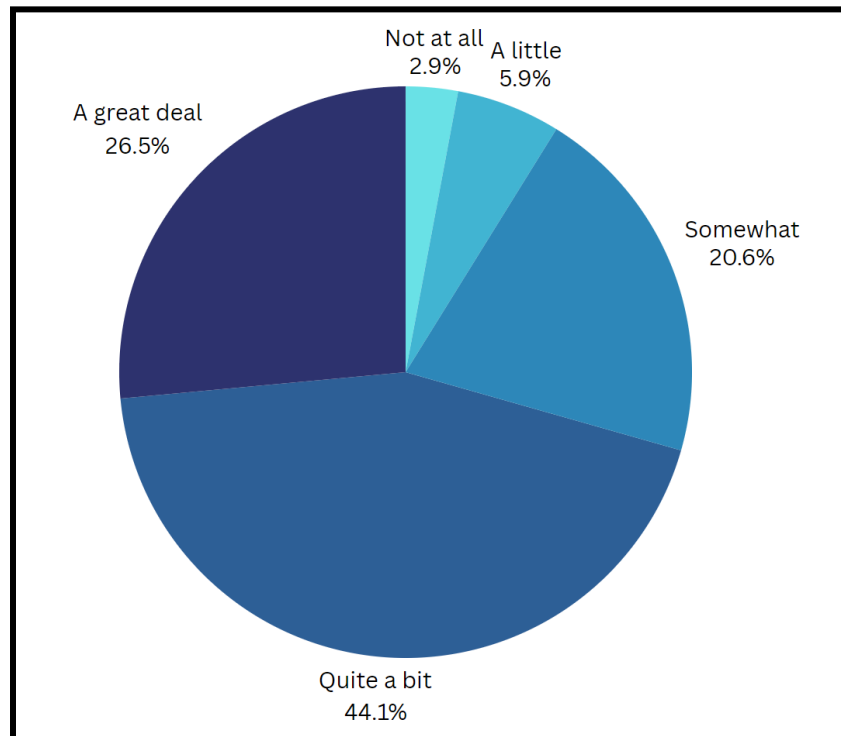
The excerpt used in the questionnaire was chosen because it demonstrated the key characteristics of the narrative non-fiction genre. Vidyarani was brought to life on the pages of the text with careful use of visual and auditory imagery, and the narrative featured a segment with a notebook style of writing which gave it some verisimilitude as journalists write in shorthand when conducting interviews.

Question 1: How strongly did you feel a connection to the characters or situations in the narrative nonfiction excerpt?



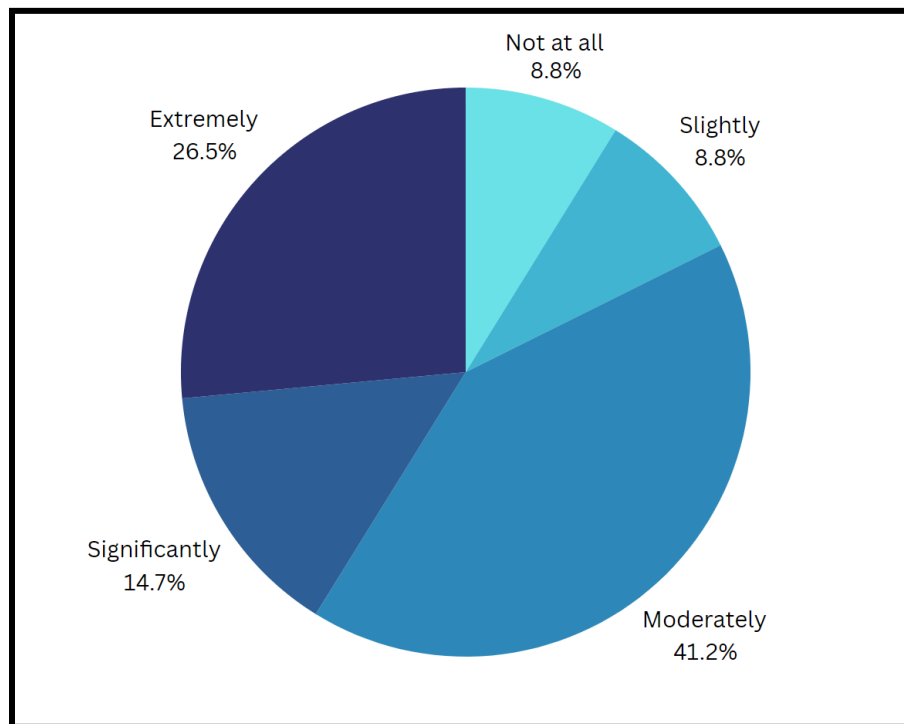
Readers from Europe reported that they struggled to connect with Vidyarani because of a limited understanding of the underlying issues behind the conflict. On the flip side, readers of South Asian origin reported a stronger connection to the girl as they could picture themselves in her shoes. Importantly, there was a trend in some answers that indicated that the number of characters in the scene diminished the connection the readers had with Vidyarani. Even so, the compelling use of imagery and the juxtaposition with the author's daughter established a strong empathic link for multiple readers.

Question 2: To what extent did the narrative nonfiction make you empathize with the individuals or communities depicted?



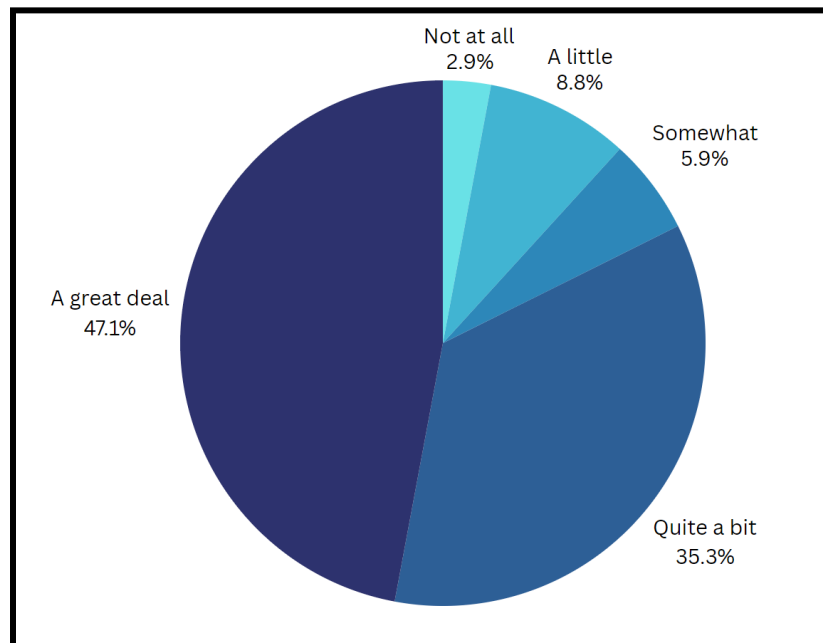
Readers reported that they could strongly identify with the plight of Vidyarani, a microcosm of the larger conflict. Many individuals could not grasp the full extent of the situation as they only had access to an excerpt instead of the full book. What is significant is that the experience made readers contemplate the injustices within their communities and they shared indignation at how Vidyarani was mistreated. Those who could not fully empathize clarified that they would require a deeper understanding of the background of the conflict which is a limitation of using an excerpt as opposed to a fault of narrative non-fiction. Interestingly, the literary elements of the narrative were one of the deciding factors for why the story connected so strongly with a portion of the respondents. Many participants stated that they prefer it as a supplement to briefs and technical reports which cannot always capture the human element completely.

Question 3: How much did the excerpt increase your awareness or understanding of the social or policy issue discussed?



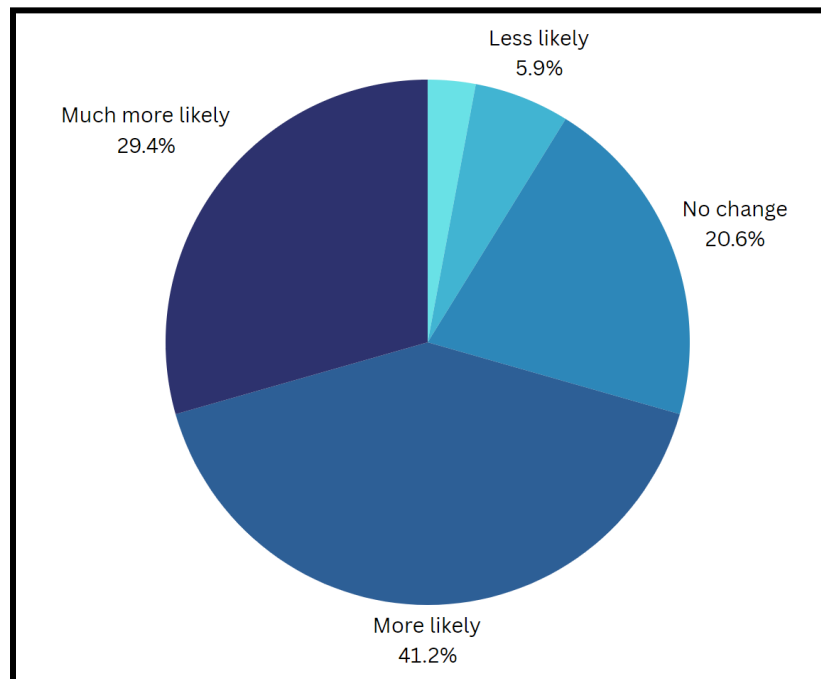
Out of the five quantitative questions, this is the one in which the narrative-nonfiction handout demonstrably faltered as excerpts are limited in how much context they can deliver within the limited space. Even with a preamble in which the author explained the relevance of Vidyarani's story, a noticeable number of participants reported that their awareness had not increased beyond a certain point. On the bright side, some answers noted that the participants were curious to learn more so it is plausible that they could become more aware of the issue through self-study or reading the full book.

Question 4: Did reading the narrative make you care more about the social or policy issue presented?



Vidyarani's trauma struck a chord with participants. Several respondents strongly condemned the treatment that she faced while being detained. Many found the act of using her as bait to be morally abhorrent. Respondents of South Asian origins who are already aware of AFSPA had strong reactions in particular, and students involved in the recent July uprising were sensitive to the matter as their spectral wounds are still fresh. It must be noted that some participants were aloof as they felt like they had no agency to change the policies in place, meanwhile, other participants had the opposite reaction and the text renewed their commitment to oppose policies and institutions that enable such events to happen.

Question 5: After reading the excerpt, how likely are you to support causes or advocate for change related to the social or policy issues presented?



Considering that the survey reached an audience beyond South Asia, it is no surprise that many participants reported no change in their advocacy since they are far removed from the conflict nexus. Despite that, based on the answers in the open-ended question segment, many participants expressed an interest in contributing to their communities or using story-telling as a catalyst for change. Those already involved in social work or as educators reaffirmed their commitment to their cause. While the full text has all the facts, and figures of the conflict, the excerpt understandably was not able to cover every detail and those who prefer factual coverage were not impressed which could be a reason behind the lower score on the scale.

Question 6: Can you describe how reading the narrative nonfiction made you feel towards the people or situations described? What specific aspects of the story affected your empathy?

The narrative brought a personal angle to a broader political issue. It's effective in showing the collateral damage of conflict, particularly on vulnerable individuals like Vidyarani.
Reading about Vidyarani's experience hit close to home because of the recent July Uprising in Bangladesh. It's heartbreaking and enraging to see how state forces can use their power to crush the voices of the innocent. This excerpt reminded me of my friends who were harassed, and some even lost their lives fighting for justice.
I feel sorry for them. I don't think children should be targeted, or arrested because of their parents' actions. But I also feel that the excerpt was subjective - I don't know the political context at all. I would prefer to have a neutral summary of the situation to decide for myself.
The detailed depiction of Vidyarani's fear and the hopelessness of her situation was gut-wrenching. It made me reflect on the vulnerability of children in conflict zones.
It felt like the wrong excerpt, at least for me. There wasn't enough context to the story, and it focused so heavily on what the narrator was experiencing in that moment, rather than Vidyarani's story. If the entire excerpt was based on the last paragraph, that would have created significant empathy - to focus solely on the one individual and her fears through this experience.

Admittedly it is not pragmatic to display all thirty-five responses in a table format. That being said, the curated selection amply demonstrates a wide range of reactions proving that the excerpt can be hit or miss. Realistically it is unlikely that participants will voluntarily spend more than ten to fifteen minutes on an online survey for free so resource and time constraints played a role in constraining the experiment to a two-page excerpt as opposed to the full text or at least several narratives instead of just one. While the curated story did suitably connect with some participants, it was not the perfect fit for other individuals responding to the survey.

Question 7: Did the narrative make the social or policy issue feel more personally relevant to you? If so, in what way?

Yes, because an 11 year old child was involved, and used as bait. The child was held responsible for the actions of adults, instead of being able to just be a child. The narrator made that even more clear by mentioning their own daughter.
Yes, it has a more personal touch of how trauma can disrupt a young life. It made me concerned.
I felt empathy for Vidyarani, though I struggled to fully immerse myself in her experience. The narrative style is effective, but I needed more context to connect deeply.
The policy issue is unclear. I had to rely most heavily on the title and my own knowledge of the PLA & Chinese-Indian conflicts to understand what this was referring to. The narrative itself certainly didn't increase the relevance of this for me.
I couldn't help but empathize deeply with Vidyarani. Her experience is similar to those of many young people here who have been detained, tortured, or even disappeared because of their activism.

The age of Vidyarani and the comparison with Chakravarti's daughter effectively created a strong empathic response among some readers. However, the excerpt was more focused on a specific story as opposed to recounting the history of the PLA so other readers reported a dissonance since they had to rely on their existing knowledge to connect the dots. It seems narrative non-fiction requires readers to commit to reading a larger sample of the source material to gain a full empathetic reaction. This is something that can be explored in future studies.

Question 8: Did the experience of reading this narrative nonfiction inspire you to think about taking any specific actions related to the issue?

It made me realize the parallels between the issues discussed and the realities in my own community. As a teacher, I see how education is a pathway to change, and the narrative reinforced my commitment to my students.
Some parts felt relevant, especially when discussing police brutality and forced disappearances which are par for the course in Dhaka.
Unlawful arrests constitute a serious violation of citizens' rights. Such actions undermine the fundamental principles of justice and due process, eroding public trust in the legal system.
No. Another piece might have sparked my curiosity, but I wasn't engaged enough to want to do further research. Again, this may be a personal clash with the choice of excerpt or the style of writing within this particular narrative non-fiction.
This excerpt reaffirmed my belief in the power of storytelling as a tool for advocacy. It's a reminder that beyond arguments and counterarguments, there are real lives at stake.

The verisimilitude of the text was not to every participant's taste. Some readers found the notebook style of writing to be fragmented or jarring without considering its literary purpose. Then again, other readers had a favorable response. Unfortunately, not every participant answered the question fully or as relevantly as one would hope. While contemplation is evident there is a notable lack of concrete steps that readers intend to take to alleviate the situation.

Question 9: Compared to other ways of learning about social or policy issues such as news articles or podcasts, how did the narrative nonfiction affect your level of care and motivation to take action?

I feel even more committed to activism and supporting movements that challenge oppressive state actions. I'll use my voice to share stories like Vidyarani's to inspire others to act.
I'm inspired to explore similar themes in my writing, focusing on how personal stories can serve as powerful tools for social justice.
I'm motivated to continue advocating for those who are silenced by state forces. It's crucial to bring these human stories to light to push for accountability and change.
In comparison to news articles or podcasts, this is just a small excerpt from a narrative nonfiction that creates and navigates through social and policy issues. It would have a bigger impact if I read the full book.
It felt more journalistic than narrative, heavily centered on the narrator's perspective, rather than from the perspective of those affected. This particular excerpt seems to be one of several narratives within a single text. I would definitely prefer a greater narrative of their lives and the events.

A common comment among participants was that they wished to read a wider sample of the stories within the source text. Regrettably, since the excerpt had to be read within a short period it was not feasible to include a wider selection of narratives within the scope of the experiment in the study. Although that was the case, some participants did note that the excerpt prompted them to explore similar themes in their writing. Individuals who were already involved with advocacy expressed that it reinvigorated their resolve.

Question 10: How did the narrative nonfiction style influence your feelings toward the issue? Please describe any specific literary elements that stood out to you.

As it is a narrative nonfiction, the exact words that were being uttered by the victim during that time, is what gripped me. It has been a keen feeling that I was hearing the victim speak. This the narrative nonfiction evoked auditory images and I felt more close to the character and joined in with her shades of despair.
Compared to news articles, the narrative nonfiction felt more personal and less detached. It's easier to ignore statistics, but personal stories stick with you.
The description of Vidyarani's body language was very effective at conveying her distress. I was a little bit conflicted about the author mentioning her own daughter as a narrative tool. I can see why it was important to mention as it assists the reader in understanding the author's perspective and how it highlighted their own compassion, however, it irked me somewhat that they were using that as a comparative tool. Maybe it would have been better to just leave it as "I have a daughter the same age" and <insert feelings here>
What stood out for me was that a child was abducted and held responsible for her parents' actions, and that it's an experience that children shouldn't be subjected to, which was highlighted by the narrator referring to their own child of that age, and how different their worlds are.
Description, analogues (the narrator's daughter), the urgency of the language, the specifics "she was preparing to cook"

Participants reported that the use of the exact utterances made by Vidyarani helped them feel closer to her. The visual imagery and kinaesthetic imagery also embodied the distress and trauma she was experiencing. Surprisingly a few participants automatically assumed that the author was female. From this, it can be inferred that there is an expectation that women tend to be more empathetic in their writing. The detailed descriptions were also a source of strength as they grounded the narrative in realism and helped readers connect with the scenario.

Close Reading

Rana Mitter a British historian and political scientist of Indian descent who is the ST Lee Chair in US-Asia Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School, in his review of Chakravarti's book *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur, and India's Far East* noted that "the book does what geostrategists rarely do: treat the people of India's 'far east' as if they were not an afterthought to the rest of India, but actors with their own aspirations and ideas on how they fit into the national identity". He further remarked that the book is "given life" by "a series of notes drawn from thoughts written down on the spot". (Mitter 1)

In Chapter 42 'Do You Think the Movement Will End with Mr. Muivah?' of *The Eastern Gate*, Chakravarti recounts his meeting with Muivah. Details such as Muivah declining a photo with "a smile and an apologetic 'another time'" because of a cheek surgery humanize him to the reader. Chakravarti describes Muivah's voice as "rasping but forceful" which adds a layer of auditory imagery that hints at the interviewee's age while also driving home the point despite being in his autumn years his voice remained powerful. Moreover, mentioning that Muivah maintained his composure and "remained calm" for an entire hour before finally losing his "temper" makes the outburst even more palpable. Notably when Chakravarti stated the Indian government appeared to "just want to play a waiting game" Muivah agreed and "immediately sat straighter" after exclaiming "Yes!". Noting the change in posture communicates the body language to the reader and helps them pick up on signals that would otherwise be lost in the reading experience. Including such details elevates the writing and helps readers feel like they are right in the room with Chakravarti and Muivah. Having access to Chakravarti's inner thoughts and reasoning also adds an extra dimension of immersion. His ability to build rapport and broach sensitive topics tactfully so he does not "display bad form" is a demonstration of his decades of journalistic experience. When Muivah "figured the tack" as soon as Chakravarti began and there was a

“change” in his eyes and a “firmness” on his face, the non-verbal cues indicate to the reader that a “raw nerve” had been “touched”. The internal dialogue Chakravarti has when he writes “For heaven’s sake, stop fighting and start living” is a heartfelt plea that readers can resonate with but for pragmatic reasons, it is not said out loud. Importantly Muivah speaks slowly and deliberately while “his face had begun to flush, darken in anger” when he shared that he thought India did not have the best interests of his people at heart. Then he asks the rhetorical question of whether or not the movement will die with him and asks “*Who am I?*” raising his voice “nearly to a shout” his feelings can be felt through the page and in a way transcend time and space as Chakravarti has chronicled the meeting, preserving it for posterity. Muivah’s faith in his people and his successors, that “Nagas will become stronger all the time.” while he defiantly challenges, “Let us see how strong the Indians will be.” is compelling. The chapter closes with Chakravarti sharing that Muivah had gifted him a “Tangkhul jacket” as he departed and that he still had the jacket just like he had preserved all of his “notes and recordings”. This personal element is endearing. He briefly ponders a “wishful thought” for a headline that he would “dearly love to see” for Nagaland, Manipur, and for all of far-eastern India, that “Peace Breaks Out”. By ending the narrative in such a manner he ignites hope in the hearts of readers who can share in his wishful thinking. (Chakravarti 363-366)

Shubhanshu Choudhary an ICFJ Knight Fellow and veteran journalist who trained more than 100 citizen journalists to produce audio news reports reviewed *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* and noted that the book does an “Excellent job” of drawing the attention of the upper class of India to “the perils of living inside walled mansions”. He commends Chakravarti for writing an “excellent primer” for people who know “practically nothing” about Bharat where Naxalites live “side by side” with the poor. He remarks that Chakravarti refrains from being “preachy”. Choudhary states that the narrative is “engaging” and creates a “very sympathetic” presentation of “the other India”. However, he also points out that the book is filled with “long

paragraphs”, and “entire pages” from Naxal documents which can make the reading “cumbersome” at times but he admits that it is also what makes the text a “prized possession” for those who wish to work on the subject. (Choudhary 1)

In book 2 section 14, Chakravarti recounts how there was a leitmotif of “urban versus rural, big business versus small people, development versus displacement struggle”. By sharing the incident of “caste atrocity” in Khairlanji village which occurred on September 29 2006 when four members of a Dalit family known as the “Bhotmanges” were killed by upper-caste farmers for refusing to vacate their farm just so their neighbors could construct a track to reduce commute time, Chakravarti reveals the gruesome fate that awaits many “untouchables” in rural India.

On page 152 Chakravarti shares a poem by Murari Mukhopadhyay which has the line “In this darkness/ The last battle is yet to be fought/ What we need now is/ The fire in our hovel”. The imagery and the mood of the revolutionary poem as well as its romantic inclination sparks a sense of empathy within the reader. Following that, shortly after, on page 160, Chakravarti writes about how 22-year-old student Prabir Roy Choudhury nicknamed “Pakhi” along with 4 other Naxalite prisoners were killed by police in Howrah Jail. His comrades using a stone, inscribed on the wall:

Silence!
Here sleeps my brother.
Don't stand by him
With a pale face and a sad heart.
For, he is laughter!
Don't cover his body with flowers.
What's the use of adding flowers to a flower?
If you can,
Bury him in your heart.
You will find
At the twitterings of the bird of the heart
Your sleeping soul has woken up.
If you can,
Shed some tears,
And -
All the blood of your body

Chakravarti shared this poem with his South Asian Literature class in Fall 2023. In the class discussion, students noted that revolutionary poetry made use of the symbolism of “blood” and “flowers”. The text in particular resonated with students who came from the families of freedom fighters. Cathay Caruth notes that the “traumatized” carry an “impossible history within them”. In this instance, the prisoners upon learning of the death of their comrade were able to transform their trauma and tragedy into an emblem of martyrdom.

Captain D P Ramachandran observes on his Amazon India review of *Highway 39: Journeys Through A Fractured Land* that he found it to be a “moving narrative of a people caught in the trauma of insurgency between murderous freebooters posing as rebels and trigger-happy security personnel”. He gave Chakravarti kudos for his “brilliant language”. Pradipta Sen in his review summed it up as “Researched reasoning”, while Mandira Shah states that the “personal stories” that Chakravarti can bring out are what helps “give names” to the statistics.

Chapter 7 of Highway 39 was discussed in ULAB’s English 408 ‘South Asian Literature’ class in Fall 2023. To be specific, the story of Luingamla a “chubby-faced” teenager was shared with the students. She formed the introduction to the program Chakravarti attended titled ‘Woven Tales from the North East’. Zasha Colah, curator of the Nicholson Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art explained that Luingamla was only fourteen when she was “shot dead” by Mandhir Singh, a captain of the Madras Regiment who abused the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act). Chakravarti showed the socio-economic class of the family through visual imagery by stating that Luingamla did not possess adequate footwear to appear before god. She was alone at home when Mandir Singh murdered her for resisting rape. Zamthingla Ruivah who was a teenage neighbour at the time of the tragic event and nearby but helpless to act became a master weaver in time. The memory of Luingamla “wouldn’t leave her” and she remarked about how the girl’s “spirit was strong” for resisting two grown men by herself. Zamthingla decided to capture that spirit through “weave and geometry”. Through that process Luingamla Kashan was born, a sarong and a strip of shawl that symbolized so much more than would be apparent at first glance. The Kashan was “90% red in colour” to symbolize the innocent blood which was “shed for the cause of women’s dignity and honour” and also “the valor and unflinching courage of women”. On 24 January, the death anniversary of the girl, the Kashan is worn to show protest and solidarity. Later in the chapter, Chakravarti travels to the grave of Luingamla. He discovers that it is at a “mount at the edge of the drop” that is about “a

foot and a half high, three feet wide and about five feet long, of broken stone and mud". There were "space yellow wildflowers" growing over it showing that it was not being maintained. He could not spot any name nor marker, just a jumble of "stones and plastic rose". Chakravarti felt an "unaccountable" and perhaps "irrational" grief when he took in the sad sight "made sadder" when juxtaposed with the relative pomp of the Naga Army's martyrs. The grief turned to anger and in a scene that ignites empathy he mulls over how the Naga Army builds "grand memorials" to their soldiers whereas this girl who "fought off a bullying officer" is overlooked.



Chakravarti's righteous anger is something that strongly resonated with the class. Those present in the classroom were relieved to learn that a memorial had been constructed to honour and remember the valiant resistance of Luingamla. Arguably out of all the narratives discussed so far this one is the most potent.

Chapter Five

Findings

Narrative Non-fiction has the potential to transform empathy into understanding, awareness, and action, however, when measuring the success of an excerpt special care must be taken in selecting it and introducing it to the respondents. An online survey is inadequate in that regard and it would have been preferable to run this experiment in a book club or a literary society that has access to participants who enjoy reading in English and would have the proper patience to do so. Unfortunately, due to the chaos of the last few months and not being able to organize a session with organizations such as Paper Canoe or the English Zone in person with an audience, online became the de-facto data collection method. The excerpt chosen for the experiment may not have been the best fit as not everyone who encountered the survey was prepared for a dispatch style of writing. In hindsight, the story of Luigamla Kashan would have been a better fit for the excerpt if there were fewer limitations on time. That being said, Chakravarti's texts can play a constructive role in the classroom to introduce the people, policy, and potential for peace in a manner that is empathetic and properly respects the aspirations of the individuals in the narrative as attested by book reviewers, students, and respondents spanning across the globe.

5.1 Recommendations

In the future, once things are more stable in the country, it would be prudent to repeat the experiment in a more carefully curated setting, preferably in person, and in a classroom. Suzanne Keene herself only tested her theory primarily with fiction and by using three test surveys in her classroom, so there is still room to add data in this field of study and address the research gap to a larger extent. Another benefit of conducting the experiment in person is being able to use methods such as Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in a structured manner which will be more interactive and allow participants to gain clarifications directly from the moderator. Deeper insights can be drawn from that.

5.2 Conclusion

The core crux of the concept is that Chakravarti's narrative non-fiction can promote peace by fostering empathy in people and making them more aware of social injustices. Using carefully curated visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, gustatory, and olfactory imagery Chakravarti creates a compelling and strong emotional bond with readers. He also shares his inner thoughts when he is in the scene which adds a stronger connection with the people he writes about such as Vidyarani, Luingamla, and Muivah. It is crystal clear that he uses literary techniques in his narrative non-fiction effectively to foster empathy. Regrettably, the empirical part of the study was not as conclusive as initially hoped but as with all experiments each iteration adds valuable data in its way and lessons can be learned even from partial successes. Ultimately, the three texts chosen for the study can be used as effective tools to discuss People, Policy, and Peace, in the literature classroom as evinced in the English 408 'South Asian Literature' course of ULAB.

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