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Consuming the Feminine: A Feminist Reading of Arun Sarma's *Aahar*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Arun Sarma's play *Aahar* through a feminist theoretical framework. Drawing on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and bell hooks, the paper examines how patriarchal ideology consumes female identity and agency. The analysis focuses on the metaphor of 'aahar '(food) as a symbolic representation of women's emotional, intellectual, and bodily labor being appropriated by patriarchal structures. The study highlights how the play critiques gender hierarchies while revealing the contradictions within reformist male discourse.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, Arun Sarma, *Aahar*, gender politics.

Introduction

In Indian literature and theatre, the feminine experience is frequently portrayed through archetypes of devotion, motherhood, or victimhood—roles that often strip women of complexity and agency. In *Aahar*, a powerful and allegorical play by Arun Sarma, these portrayals are deconstructed to expose a darker truth: women are not only marginalized but consumed—emotionally, physically, and ideologically—by a patriarchal system that views them as sources of nourishment for male identity and ambition. The title itself, *Aahar*—a Hindi term meaning food, sustenance, or nourishment—is reimagined in the play as a metaphor for exploitation, turning the female body and soul into sites of depletion and erasure.

Through the central image of a dead, unnamed woman whose body is illicitly taken from a morgue to be given symbolic final rites, the play universalizes the experience of women who remain unseen and unacknowledged in both life and death. The female characters—Anima, Nilima, Hira, and the mother—span various ages, relationships, and backgrounds, yet all are ultimately devoured by the men who claim to love, protect, or reform them. In contrast, the male characters—lovers, husbands, sons, and saviors—seek emotional fulfillment, artistic inspiration, social change, and sexual gratification at the expense of the women in

their lives. What appears, on the surface, to be acts of love or revolution is revealed to be a hunger, a selfish desire to consume female energy while giving little in return.

This paper undertakes a feminist reading of *Aahar*, with a focus on how Sarma interrogates male desire and female suffering through the lens of symbolic and literal consumption. By drawing upon feminist literary theory—particularly the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, bell hooks, and Judith Butler—this analysis will examine how patriarchal structures distort the identity, agency, and autonomy of women. The absence of first-person female narratives, the symbolic imagery of prisms, caterpillars, and flames, and the persistent framing of women through male perception all serve to reinforce the play's central critique: men consume, women are consumed.

Moreover, this paper will explore how *Aahar* resists the idealization of womanhood. Sarma's female characters are flawed, complex, and painfully human—not exalted saints or perfect victims. By denying them perfection and, in many cases, names, Sarma emphasizes the collective experience of patriarchal consumption rather than individual martyrdom. Even the moments of apparent rescue or affection are revealed as acts of domination, leaving the women emotionally depleted, physically scarred, or morally condemned.

Ultimately, *Aahar* is not just a story of four women or four men. It is a narrative about the systemic erasure of women's subjectivity under patriarchy, about the endless hunger that consumes the feminine spirit while disguising itself as love, duty, or progress. Through a feminist lens, the play becomes an indictment of gendered power, a lament for forgotten women, and a call to interrogate the appetites that shape society's most intimate relationships.

II. The Politics of Consumption and the Metaphor of Aahar

At the heart of Arun Sarma's *Aahar* lies the extended metaphor of consumption, not merely in the physical or biological sense, but in its deeply gendered, symbolic, and psychological dimensions. The title *Aahar*—meaning nourishment or sustenance—functions as a conceptual lens through which the play critiques the way men draw emotional, intellectual, and physical vitality from the women around them. What emerges is a complex feminist allegory: men consume; women are consumed.

This metaphor is reflected in the way the male characters in *Aahar* engage with women. They appropriate female bodies, emotions, and energies to fulfill their own needs—whether romantic, sexual, ideological, or artistic. The women are not treated as whole subjects, but rather as resources, raw material for male transformation. As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts in The Second Sex (1949), "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him." In *Aahar*, the women are consistently seen in relation to the men—never for who they are in themselves. Their desires, identities, and voices are overwritten or made invisible in order to serve male narratives of love, revolution, or existential crisis.

Take, for instance, the character of Nilima, who is involved in an extramarital affair with Kamal. While she seeks emotional intimacy and perhaps an escape from a loveless marriage, Kamal is interested in preserving his own fantasy—one in which Nilima remains both accessible and unobligated. When Nilima expresses a desire for marital commitment, Kamal recoils, even slaps her, asserting his dominance when she breaks free from the emotional role he had carved for her. Here, Nilima's love is consumed as emotional labor; once she asserts agency, she is punished. This resonates with bell hooks' critique of romantic

patriarchy in All About Love, where she writes: "Men learn to love as a way to dominate and control. For them, love is often more about possession than care." Kamal's violent reaction is not about love lost—it is about control lost.

Similarly, Anima, the wife of the businessman Nalini, is a textbook example of emotional and domestic consumption. For over twenty years, she has provided care, stability, and routine—nurturing her children and household while Nalini chases profit and public validation. Only when he begins to feel emotionally unfulfilled does he notice her emotional withdrawal, which he then perceives as betrayal. In a desperate attempt to reignite their intimacy, Nalini deliberately creates a near-death experience, jolting Anima with fear. His logic is clear: her devotion must be restored through trauma. This echoes Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic analysis in Stabat Mater, where she notes: "The mother's suffering is appropriated by the culture but repressed from her own narrative." Anima's suffering is not acknowledged by Nalini; it is instrumentalized to meet his emotional needs.

What makes this metaphor of consumption so insidious in *Aahar* is that it is often disguised as love, rescue, or revolution. For example, Nabin's act of rescuing Hira from suicide appears heroic, but he ultimately leads her into prostitution. His good intentions are filtered through the same patriarchal logic: he decides what is best for her. When she later commits an act of incest with her own son—unknowingly—Hira is shattered not only by the act itself but by the trajectory imposed upon her by Nabin's choices. This reflects what Luce Irigaray critiques in This Sex Which Is Not One, where she writes: "Woman's desire has been submerged and forgotten beneath the logic of male desire. She exists only as an absence—a lack." Hira's entire life arc is shaped not by her choices, but by the absence of them. Even her 'rescue 'is another form of redirection—into another kind of violence.

Dhiren, the revolutionary, consumes his mother's love and labor to pursue a larger cause. His political commitments are framed as noble, yet they come at the cost of abandoning his mother in her old age. Her nurturing is taken for granted—expected, invisible. As a caregiver, she provides the emotional and moral sustenance for her son's activism, yet her emotional needs are denied validity. This speaks to Beauvoir's concept of women as "inessential beings"—those whose roles are always to support and serve the essential lives of men.

Moreover, the play does not limit consumption to emotional or domestic labor. Women are also consumed intellectually and artistically. The female body is invoked as inspiration for poetry, socialism, erotic desire, and revolutionary fervor—yet women themselves are denied the right to participate in those discourses as equal subjects. As the unnamed woman in the opening scene declares, her identity is fractured and refracted through male perception: she becomes whatever they need her to be. She is a lover, a mother, a flame, a serpent, a sky—symbols chosen by men, not by her. As Irigaray observes, "Woman has been reduced to a mirror in which man sees himself"—never as someone who sees or defines herself.

The metaphor of *aahar* thus does not merely illustrate consumption, but dramatizes the unidirectional flow of nourishment: women give, men take. Whether in love, marriage, motherhood, or memory, women are expected to sustain the emotional, social, and ideological lives of men. Their own depletion is not seen as loss but as duty.

In this framework, even the posthumous honoring of the woman's body becomes suspect. The male characters ' decision to retrieve her corpse and perform final rites, while seemingly noble, is laden with hypocrisy: these same men failed to care for or understand the women in their own lives. This

act, too, is performative—a final consumption of her memory for their moral redemption. As bell hooks writes: "Patriarchy has no interest in ending male pain if that pain enables men to exercise power over others." The pain the men feel at the death of this woman is not transformative—it is self-serving.

III. Feminine Identity and the Prism of Male Perception

One of the most striking narrative and symbolic strategies employed in Arun Sarma's Aahar is the prismatic representation of female identity—a deliberate device that both reflects and critiques the fragmented, refracted, and appropriated ways in which women are perceived in patriarchal societies. The play resists offering a unified, coherent voice to its female characters, instead filtering their subjectivities through the male gaze, with each male character constructing, manipulating, or projecting a version of the woman that serves his emotional, ideological, or existential needs. This section will explore how the prism operates as a central metaphor in *Aahar*, illustrating how women are perceived as fragmented and incomplete beings in the eyes of men, and how their authentic selves remain invisible—obscured by distortion, desire, and power.

At the beginning of the play, the unnamed woman carries a bag which she declares contains her "being", an object she likens to a multifaceted prism. She states that while men see different colors, shapes, and versions of her depending on their perspective, her essential self remains a pure, white light—untouched and unchangeable. This metaphor is powerful in its critique of male perception. It illustrates that women's identities are not inherently fragmented but are fragmented in representation—especially when that representation is shaped by the male gaze. As Luce Irigaray suggests in This Sex Which Is Not One: "Woman is the other—an absence, a mirror, a projection—not a subject in her own right but a surface onto which male desire is inscribed." The prism, then, is the surface upon which each male character inscribes his own vision of the feminine.

Each of the four central female figures in the play—Nilima, Anima, Hira, and Dhiren's mother—is introduced not through her own voice, but through the narration or memory of a male counterpart. They are thus spoken about, rather than speaking. This erasure of female narration is crucial to the play's critique of gendered power. As bell hooks argues in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, "Silencing the voice of the oppressed is a primary mechanism of domination." In *Aahar*, the male characters dominate not only the lives of the women but also the storytelling itself. The women become subjects of memory, desire, guilt, and loss—but not of autonomy.

This absence of the female voice is not merely structural but also ideological. The men perceive women not as full subjects, but through metaphorical imagery that reduces them to symbols, functions, or archetypes. For instance, Kamal envisions Nilima as an ocean—a source of depth, mystery, and emotional intensity. But this romanticized image quickly collapses when Nilima asserts her agency by refusing Kamal's fantasy of a final escapade. Once she resists, the ocean becomes stormy, and Kamal retaliates with verbal aggression and physical violence. The ocean ceases to be a poetic metaphor and becomes a threat. The moment Nilima's internal truth diverges from Kamal's projection, she is punished. In this dynamic, Nilima's identity is allowed to exist only as long as it aligns with male imagination.

Similarly, Anima, the devoted housewife, is imagined by Nalini as a serpent—a creature of deception and entrapment. His metaphor is laden with resentment and self-pity, projecting blame onto Anima for his dissatisfaction in their marriage. Nalini interprets Anima's devotion to their children

and lack of sexual enthusiasm as a personal betrayal. He resents her happiness in the domestic sphere, believing that it excludes him. Here, the serpent is not a reflection of Anima's true self but of Nalini's frustration and entitlement. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in The Second Sex, "Man is defined as the absolute human type; woman is defined by her deviation from that norm. She is always 'the other.'" Anima becomes the serpent not because she is deceitful, but because she refuses to exist solely in relation to her husband's desires.

Dhiren, the revolutionary, imagines his mother as a flame—a symbol of warmth, sacrifice, and selfless devotion. This metaphor appears reverent, but it too is problematic. Dhiren's mother is not seen as an autonomous woman with desires or political views of her own. She is idealized as a maternal figure whose primary function is to nurture and endure. Her gentle pleas for Dhiren to return to a life of peace are dismissed as emotional excesses. As Julia Kristeva writes in Powers of Horror, "The maternal function, in being idealized, is also depersonalized; the mother becomes abject precisely when she steps out of this symbolic role." Dhiren's mother is never allowed to become abject or political—she is frozen in symbolic warmth, her subjectivity consumed by her role as "mother."

Perhaps the most devastating example of refracted identity is found in Hira, the sex worker. Nabin, who believes he saved Hira from suicide, imagines her as the sky—vast, open, and giving. But this openness, instead of signaling agency, becomes a repository for male desire. The sky is not seen for itself but for what it provides. Hira is reduced to a figure of service—someone whose pain and body exist to accommodate men. In her final moments, when she commits an act of incest unknowingly, she is shattered—not just by the act itself but by the realization that her identity was never her own. Hira's self-perception is so damaged by social stigma and male projection that she is left speechless, self-condemned, and morally erased.

The absence of names for the women throughout much of the play further reinforces this critique. It is only through male narratives—memories, labels, metaphors—that the audience comes to "know" the women. This is not knowledge but distortion. The use of symbolic names (Nilima, Anima, Hira, Maa) serves to underscore how each woman is typed: the illicit lover, the housewife, the prostitute, the mother. These are roles, not persons. As Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble, "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does." In Aahar, gendered roles are imposed on the women not through action but through perception—they are "acted upon" rather than acting.

By the end of the play, the woman carrying the bag—the symbolic 'being'—strips off her adornments. This act, interpreted symbolically, represents a rejection of the imposed identities that men have projected onto her through the prism. The ornaments—like the metaphors and memories—are not hers. She removes them not to reveal a new identity, but to assert the existence of an identity that was always hers, concealed beneath layers of symbolic appropriation. In this moment, the white light of her being—the essence the prism distorted—is briefly glimpsed. It is not dazzling or dramatic; it is weary. As she says, the chill of death is more comforting than the suffocating coldness of living a life under constant male surveillance and consumption.

While *Aahar* critiques how women's identities are fractured through male perception, it also situates these personal stories within broader socio-political systems of power and patriarchy, where roles like motherhood, sex work, or revolution are weaponized to reinforce gender hierarchies. The next section explores how these roles are performed, distorted, and subverted in the context of institutional and social control.

IV. Case Studies of Consumption: Four Narratives

A. Nilima and Kamal – Desire and Power

Nilima's narrative with Kamal epitomizes the complex interplay of desire, power, and patriarchal control masquerading as love. Kamal's relationship with Nilima is steeped in emotional manipulation, revealing the paradoxical nature of romantic freedom under patriarchy. Kamal pursues an extramarital affair with Nilima, a married philosophy student, ostensibly offering a promise of love and companionship outside the bounds of her traditional marriage. However, his professed love is shallow, a facade that conceals an insatiable desire for control and possession.

Kamal's hypocrisy is starkly revealed when he dismisses Nilima's proposal for marriage despite her earnest desire for legitimacy and security. The refusal is not grounded in love's frailty but in his reluctance to relinquish dominance or fully commit within societal structures. This dynamic aligns with feminist theorist bell hooks 'assertion that patriarchy "binds men and women into relationships that are structured by power, control, and domination rather than mutuality" (hooks, 2000). Kamal exercises his power not only by denying Nilima's demands but also through violence—slapping her when she challenges his authority, a grim reminder of how "love" can become an instrument of oppression rather than liberation.

This tension exposes the paradox of romantic freedom in patriarchal contexts. While Nilima seeks autonomy and an alternative to her unhappy marriage, Kamal's behavior underscores how men often co-opt notions of freedom to justify exploitative desires. The play reveals the illusion of choice offered to women like Nilima: their agency is curtailed by the threat of violence and emotional coercion, reflecting Judith Butler's critique that "freedom" in patriarchal societies often entails "performative acts within restrictive norms" (Butler, 1990). Nilima's eventual withdrawal from Kamal, fearing the violent expressions of his "love," illustrates the tragic cost of navigating such constrained freedoms.

Moreover, Kamal's final wish—that Nilima keep him as a cherished memory while moving on with her life—symbolizes the lingering male desire to own women's past and shape their identities, even in absence. This controlling impulse mirrors the broader patriarchal appetite the play critiques: men consume women's dreams, desires, and even memories as part of an insatiable need to nourish their selfhood. Nilima, as an embodiment of the female 'being', is fractured and defined through Kamal's prism, her true self distorted by his desires and actions.

B. Anima and Nalini – Marriage and Domesticity

The relationship between Anima and Nalini foregrounds the entanglement of domestic labor, emotional neglect, and male entitlement within marriage. Anima's life revolves around her roles as a mother and wife, where she invests significant emotional and physical labor in sustaining the household and nurturing her children. The play exposes this labor as invisible and unappreciated, echoing feminist critiques by scholars like Arlie Hochschild, who describes women's "second shift" of unpaid domestic work as foundational yet overlooked in patriarchal systems (Hochschild, 1989).

Nalini, on the other hand, embodies the restless male subject dissatisfied with domestic stability. His pursuit of wealth and business success prioritizes external achievements over intimate relationships. His desire to "revive" their marriage by orchestrating a frightening car ride reflects a desperate attempt to regain control and assert relevance in Anima's life. This act—using fear to force emotional engagement—reveals the power dynamics at play: Nalini believes he can manufacture love

through dominance and emotional manipulation.

His discontent stems from a sense of entitlement to Anima's attention and affection, irrespective of her emotional state or desires. This entitlement is a common patriarchal theme where men expect women to fulfill emotional needs without reciprocal understanding (hooks, 2000). Anima's rejection of the dress he gave her and her preference for the comfort of her children demonstrate her prioritization of stable, nurturing relationships over performative displays of romance, highlighting differing gendered values around love and belonging.

Nalini's characterization also underscores the eroding impact of patriarchal capitalism on family life—his business success comes at the cost of intimacy and genuine connection. The near-accident during their car ride symbolizes the fragility of their marriage and the dangers of treating love as a transactional or performative act rather than mutual care.

In sum, Anima is "consumed" by the emotional and domestic labor she provides, while Nalini consumes this labor with little reciprocal care. Their marriage reflects a broader societal pattern where women's identities and worth are tied to their service roles, and men's dissatisfaction often leads to neglect or control masked as romantic pursuit.

C. Dhiren and His Mother – Ideals vs. Duty

Dhiren's narrative highlights how revolutionary ideals and ideological consumption can eclipse intimate emotional responsibilities, particularly within mother-son dynamics. Dhiren is deeply committed to radical social change, leading a covert group intent on dismantling oppressive systems. His fervor, while noble in intent, consumes his time, energy, and presence, leaving little room for filial duty or personal intimacy.

His mother's role symbolizes the unpaid, unacknowledged labor foundational to the family and by extension, society. She offers warmth, compassion, and sacrificial care, embodying the "flame" that sustains her son's fiery ambitions. This maternal sacrifice aligns with theorist Nancy Chodorow's view that mothering is an emotionally exhaustive labor that "reproduces the social order by sustaining the future generation" but is rarely reciprocated or visible (Chodorow, 1978).

Despite understanding her son's lofty goals, the mother laments his absence and fears the consequences of his dangerous lifestyle. Her repeated appeals for him to abandon violence in favor of familial peace reveal the emotional toll borne by women when men pursue public or political ambitions at the expense of private bonds. Dhiren's ideological consumption paradoxically depletes the emotional sustenance his mother offers, reflecting how patriarchy valorizes male heroism while marginalizing women's caregiving labor.

The play exposes how Dhiren's revolutionary zeal, while ostensibly aimed at societal betterment, replicates patriarchal patterns of consumption by neglecting intimate relationships. His mother's silent suffering and resigned acceptance echo feminist critiques of the "emotional labor" women perform in holding families and communities together amid male absences (Hochschild, 1989).

Thus, Dhiren's story illustrates a less overt but profound form of consumption—how ideals and causes, often framed as male domains, subsume emotional responsibility, leaving women to bear the brunt of relational loss.

D. Hira and Nabin – Red-light Realities

Hira's story in *Aahar* starkly portrays the sexual exploitation veiled as "rescue" and the cruel cycles of patriarchal violence that trap women in spaces of social stigma and emotional torment. Nabin's intervention, rescuing Hira

from a suicide attempt, initially appears as an act of heroism. Yet, this "rescue" is deeply ironic, as he leads her into the brothel—a space emblematic of systemic oppression and male control over female bodies.

This scenario echoes feminist critiques of "male saviorism," where men's acts of intervention often perpetuate rather than dismantle women's subjugation (Mohanty, 2003). Nabin's decision on Hira's behalf reinforces the patriarchal pattern wherein men dictate women's futures, stripping them of agency under the guise of protection. The play critiques this dynamic, showing how "help" can become another form of consumption—women's lives are managed and shaped by male will rather than self-determination.

Hira's descent into prostitution, forced by economic desperation and social marginalization, reflects the intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and patriarchy. Her eventual tragic involvement in incest with her estranged son Rahul, a product of Nabin's own actions, marks a devastating culmination of patriarchal cruelty. This incestuous encounter symbolizes ultimate loss of identity and moral agency, reinforcing how patriarchal neglect punishes women doubly: first through social stigmatization, then through internalized guilt and self-blame.

The play's stark portrayal of Hira's fate critiques a society that not only commodifies women's bodies but also obscures their humanity. Hira's blaming of Nabin for her fall highlights how patriarchal structures often pit women against themselves while obscuring male responsibility.

In this narrative, consumption takes the literal form of sexual exploitation and the symbolic form of emotional and moral devastation. Hira's story serves as a painful indictment of a society that simultaneously condemns and controls women, using "rescue" as a euphemism for perpetuating cycles of suffering.

Together, these four narratives in *Aahar* reveal multifaceted modes of consumption—emotional, physical, ideological—through which male characters appropriate and diminish the lives of women. The women's experiences reflect larger patriarchal mechanisms where desires, ideals, and societal roles become vehicles for consuming female agency and identity. Through Kamal, Nalini, Dhiren, and Nabin, the play exposes how different forms of male appetites—romantic, domestic, revolutionary, and sexual—operate as insatiable forces eroding the inner worlds and dreams of women. The play's symbolism, particularly the prism and the 'aahar 'metaphor, enrich this critique by illustrating the fragmentation and distortion of female identity under male consumption.

V. Symbolism and Metaphors: Reclaiming the Feminine Narrative

The symbolic fabric of *Aahar* intricately weaves together images and metaphors that both expose and resist patriarchal consumption of female identity. Through the use of evocative symbols like caterpillars, dinosaurs, and elemental representations of women as ocean, flame, sky, and serpent, the play constructs a powerful language for reclaiming the feminine narrative. These symbols underscore the gradual erasure of women's presence in male memory, the demonization of their roles, and the collective resilience of feminine suffering and strength.

Caterpillars and Dinosaurs: The Erosion of Female Memory

One of the most striking metaphors in *Aahar* is the depiction of female memory as caterpillars shrinking over time in the consciousness of men, evolving into extinct dinosaurs. This imagery poignantly captures how women's emotional lives and histories are marginalized, diminished, or outright forgotten within patriarchal structures. The caterpillars, delicate yet persistent, represent women's lived experiences and memories—vibrant, numerous,

and intimate. Over time, as male narratives dominate, these memories are "consumed," leaving behind only the skeletal, fossilized remnants—dinosaurs—that no longer live or breathe within male remembrance.

This metaphor resonates strongly with feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal history as a "death of the feminine" (Irigaray, 1985), where women's voices are relegated to silence or mythologized as extinct relics. The caterpillars 'gradual disappearance signifies the erasure of women's emotional subjectivity from social memory, an act that renders women's pain and love invisible or irrelevant.

The "gnawing" pain that resurfaces late—when memories "bite" or "gnaw"—embodies the delayed reckoning with this erasure. It is a metaphor for the internalized trauma women carry, which patriarchal amnesia temporarily conceals but cannot erase. This echoes trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma often remains unprocessed until it "returns" in unexpected ways, haunting survivors and compelling society to confront suppressed histories (Caruth, 1996). In Aahar, this gnawing memory symbolizes the inevitable resurgence of feminine pain and history, demanding acknowledgment despite male attempts to silence it.

Women as Symbols: Ocean, Flame, Sky, Serpent

The women in *Aahar* are not only characters but also elemental symbols representing distinct facets of feminine existence, resisting patriarchal definitions by reclaiming their narrative through metaphor.

Nilima as Ocean: Nilima's portrayal as the ocean evokes vastness, depth, and mystery. The ocean symbolizes the profound reservoir of female love, creativity, and inspiration, embodying an emotional expanse that defies containment. Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir noted that women's interiority is often likened to nature—deep and unknowable by male rationality (de Beauvoir, 1949). Nilima's oceanic metaphor thus reclaims feminine subjectivity as powerful and life-giving, contrasting Kamal's attempts to dominate and control her. The ocean's tides suggest the rhythmic, enduring nature of feminine love and pain, which can neither be silenced nor fully possessed.

Anima as Serpent: The serpent is a complex symbol, traditionally associated in patriarchal discourse with danger, deceit, and femininity's "otherness." By associating Anima with the serpent, the play highlights how domestic women are demonized within patriarchal societies. Anima's serpent symbolizes both her marginalized status and the latent power she holds. The serpent's duality—wise and feared, nurturing and dangerous—reflects the contradictory attitudes toward women's domestic roles. As feminist theorist Adrienne Rich explains, women's labor, particularly in the home, is often rendered invisible or pathologized, creating an ambivalent space where women are both needed and blamed (Rich, 1986). The serpent thus embodies this tension, signifying Anima's resilience beneath societal scorn.

Mother as Flame: The mother's flame symbolizes warmth, nurturing, sacrifice, and transience. The flame's flickering quality captures the fleeting nature of maternal presence, consumed as it burns to provide light and warmth for others. This image echoes Nancy Chodorow's assertion that motherhood is an emotionally exhausting labor often undervalued by society (Chodorow, 1978). The mother's flame, while sustaining Dhiren and others, is slowly consumed, highlighting the invisibility of maternal sacrifice. The flame's eventual extinguishing signifies the inevitable toll exacted on women who sustain family and social structures through unpaid emotional labor.

Hira as Sky: Hira's identification with the sky conveys vastness, openness, and erasure. The sky's boundless expanse reflects Hira's service to others and her pervasive sadness, embodying women whose lives are shaped by social marginalization and sacrifice. The sky is omnipresent yet often overlooked—just as Hira's struggles in the red-light district remain invisible to the larger society. This metaphor also signals the erasure of her individual identity in the face of systemic exploitation. Feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" who cannot speak echoes here, as Hira's voice is swallowed by the societal forces controlling her (Spivak, 1988). The sky's vastness, therefore, is both a space of endurance and symbolic disappearance.

Shared Suffering and Collectivization of Pain

Aahar culminates in a symbolic unification of the female characters 'suffering, transforming individual pain into a collective narrative. Through shared imagery and intersecting stories, the play resists the patriarchal tendency to isolate women's experiences as personal failures or tragedies. Instead, it foregrounds the communal nature of women's oppression and resilience.

This collectivization aligns with feminist theorist Audre Lorde's idea that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984). By emphasizing communal struggle rather than individual salvation, *Aahar* critiques the false promise of personal liberation under patriarchal conditions. The women's intertwined stories, symbolized through overlapping metaphors—the ocean merging with the sky, the serpent coiling around the flame—reflect how their fates are interconnected in a shared system of consumption and resistance.

Moreover, the play's resistance to singular redemption narratives challenges neoliberal feminist frameworks that prioritize individual achievement over systemic change. Instead, it demands recognition of structural violence and collective healing. This is evident in the characters 'shared silence, a form of quiet solidarity that both signifies trauma and nurtures resilience.

The symbolic language of *Aahar* thus acts as a form of feminist reclamation—transforming metaphors of consumption and erasure into affirmations of feminine depth, strength, and communal endurance. The play re-centers women's voices, emotions, and histories in ways that confront patriarchal invisibility and offer new spaces for narrative agency.

The rich symbolism in *Aahar*—from caterpillars gnawing away male forgetfulness to elemental metaphors representing women's diverse experiences—serves as a vital tool for reclaiming the feminine narrative. It challenges the patriarchal structures that consume female identity by rendering it invisible, fragmented, or demonized. Instead, these metaphors invite audiences to witness women's profound emotional lives and collective suffering, emphasizing shared resilience over individual salvation. Through this symbolic reclamation, *Aahar* articulates a powerful feminist vision: one that acknowledges pain and erasure but insists on the enduring presence, depth, and agency of women.

VI. The Absence of Ideal Womanhood and the Burden of Expectation

In *Aahar*, Sarma purposefully subverts the traditional mythologies and archetypes of womanhood that have long permeated both literature and society. Unlike idealized or mythological female figures—often portrayed as paragons of purity, sacrifice, and unconditional love—Sarma's women are distinctly flawed, complex, and deeply human. This intentional refusal to present "perfect" women challenges dominant patriarchal narratives that demand women conform to unrealistic standards of virtue and emotional labor.

No Perfect Woman: A Rejection of Mythological Idealism

The characters of *Aahar*—Nilima, Anima, the Mother, Hira—are crafted as real women who endure pain, make mistakes, experience anger, and sometimes resist or fail in their roles. This realism starkly contrasts with the archetypal "ideal woman" that feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir critiques as a patriarchal construct designed to limit women's autonomy and complexity (de Beauvoir, 1949). Sarma's women are neither saints nor victims, but rather individuals navigating oppressive systems with varying degrees of agency and compromise.

For example, Nilima's oscillation between love and suffering, Kamal's violence despite professing love, or Anima's struggle within domestic confines—these portrayals expose the contradictions and failures embedded within patriarchal expectations. They reveal how the myth of perfect womanhood—selfless, devoted, and eternally nurturing—is both a burden and a weapon used to control women. As feminist scholar bell hooks explains, the cultural demand for women's "perfection" serves to police their behavior and justify their subjugation (hooks, 2000). *Aahar* dismantles this myth by illustrating the messiness and pain beneath the veneer of idealized femininity.

The Burden of Expectation: Perfection Despite Pain

Despite their suffering and flaws, Sarma's women are still expected to fulfill the roles of perfect mothers, lovers, and wives. This expectation exemplifies the double bind feminist theorists have long identified—the demand for women to perform emotional labor and caretaking even while being emotionally marginalized themselves (Hochschild, 1983). Nalini's discontent and her husband's attempt to "revive" love through fear vividly demonstrate this dynamic: women are tasked with sustaining relationships regardless of neglect or violence.

The pressure to maintain the façade of ideal womanhood, regardless of internal turmoil, mirrors Adrienne Rich's concept of the "compulsory heterosexuality" and "institutionalized motherhood" that confines women within patriarchal domesticity (Rich, 1986). Women in *Aahar* labor not only physically but also emotionally, suppressing their own needs to meet societal expectations. This emotional suppression becomes a form of violence, intensifying their alienation and suffering.

Moreover, this relentless expectation often renders women invisible as subjects with desires and autonomy. They become vessels for male desire and social order rather than recognized as whole persons. The paradox of romantic freedom versus patriarchal control, exemplified in Nilima's relationship with Kamal, underscores how these expectations limit women's choices and reinforce patriarchal dominance.

Death as Liberation: A Radical Feminist Statement

The play's portrayal of female characters who consider or choose death as a form of escape from patriarchal violence and erasure is a powerful and radical feminist statement. Hira's trajectory into prostitution and ultimate loss of self, or the implied death of the mother figure consumed by sacrifice, suggest that for some women, life under patriarchal oppression is experienced as a form of death in itself.

This theme resonates with feminist existentialist thought that recognizes the oppressive conditions in which women's subjectivity is negated, and death can appear as a reclaiming of agency or a final refusal to be consumed by patriarchal structures (Irigaray, 1985). In *Aahar*, death is not merely an end but a symbolic rejection of a world that refuses women full humanity.

However, this liberation through death is deeply ambivalent—it simultaneously indicts the system that drives women to such extremes and mourns the loss of potential and life. The radicalism lies in exposing how patriarchal society fails women so profoundly that death becomes the only conceivable freedom. This stark depiction urges audiences to confront the dire consequences of systemic violence against women and questions societal complacency.

By refusing to depict perfect women, *Aahar* challenges entrenched patriarchal myths that continue to burden women with impossible standards. Sarma's portrayal of flawed, suffering, yet resilient women exposes the contradictions of societal expectations that demand emotional labor and perfection despite ongoing pain. The motif of death as a form of liberation serves as a stark critique of patriarchal oppression and a radical call to recognize and dismantle the structures that consume female lives. Through this, *Aahar* articulates a feminist vision rooted in honesty, complexity, and urgent social critique.

VII. The Male Voice: Exposing Patriarchal Hypocrisy

In *Aahar*, while the narrative centers on women's experiences, it is crucial to note that the storytelling is often framed through the male point of view. This narrative choice reflects a fundamental reality of patriarchal societies, where men control the discourse and shape the interpretation of women's lives—even their suffering. Sarma's deliberate use of male voices thus serves a critical function: rather than empowering men, it exposes the contradictions, hypocrisies, and failures inherent in patriarchal masculinity.

Narrative Framing from the Male Point of View

The play foregrounds male characters as narrators and agents, highlighting how patriarchal structures enable men to dominate the storytelling arena. Feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" is pertinent here—men, as gatekeepers of knowledge and narrative, often silence or distort women's voices (Spivak, 1988). In *Aahar*, the male perspective shapes the depiction of female suffering, frequently reinterpreting or minimizing it through self-serving lenses.

For instance, Kamal's proclamations of love mask his abusive control over Nilima, illustrating how male narratives often camouflage violence behind romantic rhetoric. Similarly, Nalini's husband attempts to "revive" love through fear and domination, projecting his desire for order and control rather than genuine care. These male voices dominate the frame yet fail to authentically engage with the women's lived realities.

Male Characters as Self-Pitying and Power-Seeking

Sarma portrays male characters as deeply conflicted figures who crave redemption and moral authority but consistently evade responsibility for their actions. This tension reflects what feminist psychoanalytic theory identifies as male "crisis of masculinity," where men's fragile sense of power and identity leads to defensive behaviors such as self-pity and aggression (Connell, 1995).

The men in *Aahar* cloak their desires in grand ideals—love, revolution, care—but these ideals often function as façades that mask self-interest and complicity in oppression. Kamal's violent hypocrisy, Dhiren's revolutionary fervor overshadowing his emotional neglect of his mother, and Nabin's "heroic" rescue that ultimately perpetuates Hira's exploitation reveal how patriarchal men often appropriate noble language to justify control and domination.

This dynamic resonates with bell hooks 'critique of patriarchal masculinity, which she describes as rooted in "domination disguised as protection" (hooks, 2004). The male characters 'desire for power manifests in their need to control not only women's bodies and labor but also the narrative about women's

lives, maintaining patriarchal hierarchies through emotional and ideological manipulation.

The Playwright's Technique: Giving Voice to Expose

Sarma's decision to give men a significant voice in the play is a strategic dramaturgical choice. Rather than centering male perspectives to reinforce their authority, the playwright uses these voices to lay bare the internal contradictions and moral failings of patriarchal masculinity. This aligns with feminist theatrical techniques that aim to "de-naturalize" male dominance by exposing its constructed and performative nature (Case, 1988).

Through dialogues and interactions, male characters inadvertently reveal their complicity in sustaining systems of violence and erasure. Their self-pity emerges not as genuine remorse but as a defense mechanism against accountability. Their power-seeking is not heroic but desperate and destructive. Sarma thus invites the audience to critically interrogate these male narratives, recognizing them as sites of both domination and vulnerability.

This exposure destabilizes the myth of benevolent patriarchy and invites a deeper understanding of how men participate in, benefit from, and suffer within patriarchal frameworks. By giving voice to these contradictions, *Aahar* advances a feminist critique that insists on accountability and transformation rather than passive acceptance of male authority.

The male voice in *Aahar* is not a celebration but a critical instrument used by Sarma to reveal patriarchal hypocrisy. Through male narration and characterization, the play highlights how men dominate storytelling, conceal violence behind ideals, and seek redemption without responsibility. By exposing these contradictions, Sarma challenges audiences to see beyond patriarchal narratives and recognize the complex dynamics that sustain women's oppression. This technique reinforces the play's overarching feminist message, demanding both recognition and rupture of the systems that consume female lives while allowing male voices to maintain control.

VIII. Conclusion

Arun Sarma's *Aahar* offers a profound feminist critique of the ways in which women are systematically consumed—physically, emotionally, and symbolically—across multiple relationships and ideological frameworks. Throughout the play, women are not only subjected to direct violence and exploitation but are also metaphorically consumed by patriarchal narratives that define, restrict, and ultimately erase their identities. This consumption transcends the personal, implicating broader societal and cultural structures that commodify women under the guise of love, revolution, and domesticity.

The play's culminating act, where a woman discards her adornments, serves as a powerful metaphor for rejecting the patriarchal identities imposed upon her. These adornments—likely symbols of beauty, submission, and prescribed femininity—are cast aside, signaling a refusal to remain trapped in roles defined by male expectations. This act of symbolic shedding is an assertion of agency, a break from the cyclical consumption of women's bodies and identities. Moreover, this gesture challenges the passive role women are often forced into as "painful caterpillars" in the male memory—small, insignificant creatures whose suffering is remembered only insofar as it causes male remorse or regret. By refusing to be reduced to these images, the woman in the final act demands that women's narratives be heard on their own terms, free from the distortions of patriarchal memory and power.

Ultimately, *Aahar* is more than a critique of individual male characters; it is an indictment of the systemic and cultural forces that sustain patriarchal consumption of women.

Sarma's play highlights how deeply entrenched ideologies of desire, power, and memory work in tandem to objectify and marginalize women. Even seemingly positive ideals—love, revolution, poetry—risk becoming instruments of oppression unless women reclaim control over their own stories.

Through its layered narrative and symbolic depth, *Aahar* advances a feminist vision that calls for the dismantling of these systems and the creation of new spaces where women's voices, identities, and experiences are fully acknowledged and respected. This feminist reading underscores the necessity of ongoing resistance against the consumption of women—not just in their bodies or labor, but in their histories and memories—marking *Aahar* as a seminal work that continues to resonate in contemporary struggles for gender justice.

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