

## DISCOVERING INDIAN WOMEN – A CULTURAL JOURNEY

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### *Abstract*

*This is a small exploratory attempt at discovering perceptions of Indian women through Romanian eyes. This will be done through the medium of Indian literature written in English and through the personal experience of the author. We all have our collections of cultural stereotypes through which we look at the world: our own as well as others'. One of the starting points in this cultural journey is the sheer difference in size between the two spaces and the incredible variety of people who inhabit India. Our classical lenses or, at the other end, our Bollywood goggles, distort our perceptions of the realities of present-day Indian women. The author will compare her constructed images of modern Indian women as they appear mainly in Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth, with her own experience of real women that she had actually met either in Romania or in India. In today's complex world, in what is called more often and with more valid arguments the Asian century, it is relevant and worthwhile to have such an exercise of cultural and gender exploration in order to better understand ourselves.*

**Keywords:** Asian century, India, Indian women writers, cultural stereotypes, India – Romania relations

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### ***1. What do we know about Asia and Asian women in 2022?***

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It is in some ways depressing to discover that in the age of increasing connectivity and availability of data about anything that we could imagine and ask for, the level of general knowledge, what is usually described as “an ability to view cultures, lifestyles, and backgrounds from objective and informed perspectives” [Vander Schee (2011)] is going downwards. We can all understand the mechanism, but is understanding enough?

Asia is, by the vast majority of objective evaluations, the new hub of the world's economic development. Nicolae and Nicolae (2021) show that although Asia is advancing so rapidly, in spite of the Covid 19 pandemic, a lot of people still understand the most populous continent in the world through the lenses of stereotypes and cultural cliches. And this is true not only for individuals, but also for large organizations, who are supposed to have a strong and updated knowledge infrastructure and specialists in multicultural management. Singh (2017)

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underlines, however, the difficulties of dealing with India which is considered not a homogeneous country, but a huge, fragmented market. It is difficult to realize and often to misjudge and underestimate the regional differences caused by language, culture, talent, infrastructure, and wealth. Singh further explains that India's states are usually discussed in comparison with individual countries. She gives the example of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state which has a population equal to that of Brazil, while Maharashtra, India's most prosperous state has an economy roughly the size of Iraq's. In an interesting article about India's contradictions, Raman (2013) highlights the situation of women who, he says, have always been at the heart of Indian society. Raman supports his statement by underlining that Indians talk of their country as Mother India. Nevertheless, many Indian men tend to consider women if not as slaves at least as their personal property. And he points out more contradictions such as the "struggle between the country's ancient spiritualism and modern materialism, the friction between the majority community's beliefs and those of the other great religions India nurtures, the battle for power between the central and state governments". Raman considers that these contradictions have a benefic effect as well, making the country more resilient and pluralistic.

My own first-hand encounter with Asia happened under extreme mental strain for me in 2013, a week after my husband had died. I went to an international conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, that I had booked months before. The conference theme was "WOMEN — Creating NEW Economies" and it had been attended by people, true, mostly women, but not only, from all over the globe. The conference is the *Global Summit of Women*<sup>2</sup> and it is so attractive that for almost 35 years it continued to grow and it is now called the women's equivalent of the World Economic Forum in Davos. It is an opportunity for networking, discussions, inspiring presentations of issues and mainly solutions among a really global group of women leaders in business and government from all over the world. It is mainly an occasion to discover and explore deeply, if you are interested and have the occasion, the people and the places where the summits are organized, by providing a start on a journey of discovery. A fascinating and captivating issue on my own journey into Asia was the realization and better understanding of the "colour codes" and dress requirements for official situations.

For example, in Kuala Lumpur we were invited to various dinner parties by women leaders at the highest level of the country. If, during the conference and the various social activities offered by the organizers, the recommended attires had been business or traditional dress, for the highest-level events special dress codes had been issued and requested. For example, for the Royal Dinner hosted by the Queen<sup>3</sup>, her official title in Malay being The Raja Permaisuri Agong, in the new

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<sup>2</sup> <https://globewomen.org/globalsummit/>

<sup>3</sup> At the time (2013) the Queen was Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Hajah Haminah.

palace in Kuala Lumpur, called Istana Negara, participants were asked not to wear “solid yellow” as being the Queen’s official colour, or solid white, a colour of mourning in Asia. The rules for dressing for the conference delegates were: long sleeves, a long dress, skirt or pants reaching the foot with closed-toe shoes.

Later on, I briefly visited Thailand and Singapore, on my way to Australia. Those were however very superficial and touristic encounters with parts of Asia. The next meaningful real-life Asian contact for me was with India in 2015 attending another international conference, this time an academic one. It was an interdisciplinary conference on the challenging and delicate subject of “Beyond Borders and Boundaries: Imaginings and Representations”<sup>4</sup>. It had been organized by CoHaB (Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging), the European Union through its Marie Curie Actions ITN (innovative training networks) programme, the University of Mumbai and CASII (Centre for Advanced Studies in India), Bhuj, India. The conference brought together research scholars and academics from all over the world, but relevant to the focus of this article is the large number of women present and the many perspectives through which women issues have been explored. Chronologically, however, my colleague with whom we went to India and I had met the organizers of the above conference a year before in Bucharest, at our own faculty’s international conference – The Future of Europe<sup>5</sup> in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

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## ***2. India and Romania***

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The relations between the two countries are intense and could become even more so in spite of the obvious differences in size and culture. There is clear interest on both sides for increasing economic partnership as pointed out by the Indian ambassador to Bucharest who underlined that in 2021 the bilateral trade between India and Romania increased to over US\$ 900 million in spite of the difficulties caused by the pandemic<sup>7</sup>. The new India-EU Free Trade Agreement negotiations have been relaunched in June 2022, as well as those on Investment and Geographical Indications (GIs) and their concluding hopefully in 2023 will open new opportunities for increased trade and investment between the two countries, India and Romania.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://archive.mu.ac.in/others/cohab/CoHaB%20CASII%20Conference%20March%20202015.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.rei.cercetare.ase.ro/FoE\\_Conference/](http://www.rei.cercetare.ase.ro/FoE_Conference/)

<sup>6</sup> The distinguished Indian academics were Avtar BRAH, Professor Emerita at Birkbeck College, University of London; Nilufer E. Bharucha, Director, Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging Indian Diaspora Centre and Visiting Professor in Humanities, Centre for Excellence in Basic Sciences, at the University of Mumbai, and Sridhar Rajeswaran, founding Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies in India (CASII) and a distinguished poet.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.eoibucharest.gov.in/event\\_detail/?eventid=163](https://www.eoibucharest.gov.in/event_detail/?eventid=163)

However, the relations between the two countries are much older. I am not referring here to the questionable, but still much used reference to Alexander the Great who might have linked in one way or another the territory of what is today known as Romania to what is today known as India<sup>8</sup>. I rather refer to the documentable examples of first Indian influences on Romanian culture starting with Eminescu (his poem *Kamadeva* was written in 1887) and Coşbuc (his translation of *Sacotala* by Kalidasa from German appeared in 1891). The diplomatic relations were established in 1948 and have been constantly maintained at a friendly level<sup>9</sup>. Besides diplomatic and economic relations, the two countries collaborated in culture, science and technology. Romanians have had an interest in traditional Indian culture, spiritual practices and medicine and nowadays in Indian popular culture. What started with Eminescu and Coşbuc continued with a long line of writers, philosophers, artists who had been interested and influenced by Indian culture. Probably the most well-known ones have been, in no particular order, Blaga, Eliade and Brâncuşi. Amita Bhose<sup>10</sup>, a relatively little known Indian woman with an immense love for culture and for building bridges among people and peoples, has probably been one of the most dedicated researchers of the connections between India and Romania.

Bharucha (2014) gives a comprehensive image of the contributions and influence of the Indian diaspora to European culture in general and to Romanian culture in particular looking, among others, at the film industry. Bharucha underlines the importance of the size of Indian cultural markets and the range of film audiences in an attempt to explain some characteristics as compared to, in our case Romanian films. I would not venture to say that the Romanian film production has a market. At best, it has a niche, whether we talk about national or international audiences, while the size of the Indian market, the differences in ticket prices and the repeat value of films for the various layers of audiences contribute to the impressive returns of the film industry. Bharucha gives the example of DDLJ which is the much used abbreviation of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* [The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride] an Indian Hindi-language romance, as expected a musical as well, which despite being produced in 1995 is still on in Mumbai, at the very large Maratha Mandir cinema house. The revenues the movie has produced are over 17 million US dollars in India and over 2.6 million US dollars in overseas markets.

Comparatively, in 2019 Romania's most two profitable films have been, according to the few and scattered official sources publicly available<sup>11</sup>: "Oh, Ramona!" and "Maria, Regina României" (Queen Marie of Romania). "Oh, Ramona!" was

<sup>8</sup> [https://wikicro.icu/wiki/India%E2%80%93Romania\\_relations](https://wikicro.icu/wiki/India%E2%80%93Romania_relations)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/3117#761>

<sup>10</sup> <http://amitabhose.net/Biografie.html> and <https://mnlr.ro/remember-amita-bhose/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://adevarul.ro/entertainment/film/topul-filmelor-romanesti-avut-cele-mai-mari-incasari-2019-1\\_5e048ced5163ec42716576f7/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/entertainment/film/topul-filmelor-romanesti-avut-cele-mai-mari-incasari-2019-1_5e048ced5163ec42716576f7/index.html)

directed by Cristina Iacob, had 260,531 movie goers with gross revenues of 5,094,311 lei (approximately 1,136,058 USD) out of which 2,209,669 lei (approximately 492,768 USD), in the first weekend. “Queen Marie of Romania” was directed by Alexis Cahill and Brigitte Drodloff, it had been watched by 139,081 movie goers and had gross revenues of 2.626.958 lei (approximately 521,340 USD).

I gave these few, however in my opinion, relevant examples about the differences between India and Romania as most people that I know, students as well as acquaintances, have an outdated, conventional perception of India which they tend to look at through the stereotyped glasses of cultural cliches induced mainly by various film industries and some traditional literary reflections.

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#### ***4. Cultural journeys – realities and literature***

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When I decided in 2015 to embark on the adventure to go to India to attend the international conference “Beyond Borders and Boundaries: Imaginings and Representations” organized at the University of Mumbai I had to prepare not only the paper that I intended to present, but mainly to build up or rather update a certain type of cultural understanding of the place that I intended to visit. As part of my preparations, I watched a number of documentaries, read some articles and listened to some Indian people talking about their own country, history and their own experiences travelling abroad. Moreover, I had some memories of Indian classical culture from my own university studies. We had been requested in our course on world literature to read at least about, if not the real pieces of Ramayana<sup>12</sup> and Mahabharata. Since the Mahabharata was not available for me at the beginning of the ‘70s of the last century I bought and read the next best thing available at the time a book entitled Indian Philosophy in Texts<sup>13</sup> which contained Bhagavadgita, Book VI of the Mahabharata. And, though it was not on our compulsory reading list, I also got The Panchatantra<sup>14</sup> probably because the interest in India and its culture was really important and, having no internet and other digital repositories of information and knowledge, we would be collecting the most important books not only to be read for certain exams, but also to come back for cross-references in our Romanian literature courses.

However, how much do ancient tales and poems tell you about what is happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? They might possibly give you the confidence or sometimes arrogance of educated people that you will be able to cope with a new culture. Not even the modern novels *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997) or *The Folded Earth* (Roy, 2013) helped me much. Literature is an invaluable glimpse into a culture but

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<sup>12</sup> Valmiki, 1968, *Ramayana*, Editura pentru literatură, BPT.

<sup>13</sup> Al-George, S. *Filosofia indiană în texte*, 1971, Editura Științifică.

<sup>14</sup> Panciatantra (cele cinci cărți ale înțelepciunii), 1969, Editura pentru literatură, BPT.

it cannot be a substitute for the real thing. I tried then to read and listen to what people of various backgrounds talk about on the internet, I used some of the valuable advice and experience of our own colleague who was doing a Ph.D. at Mumbai University<sup>15</sup>, and remembered a valuable lesson of one of our Indian master students<sup>16</sup> in the master programme of our department between 2007 – 2009. I am not sure how our Indian student interacted with other Romanians, although there is an interesting glimpse in Marinescu, A. (2014: 230), but he pointed out in several situations the respect one needs to show for one's teacher's and school without which one cannot really show any credentials for one's competences.

Among the many fascinating and often challenging things that I learned on this cultural journey I will focus here on two issues that I found relevant for my trip to India: the relation of mother nature with people and the respect for elders and teachers in India (and in most of Asia for that matter). These two issues are also relevant for the subject of the present paper as well as, changing perspective, to the way we tend to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Romania. I do hope there are lessons to be shared and possibly learned from each culture that we have visited on our life journeys.

One of the most impressive things that I have learned about nature and the relations people have with nature is the amazing knowledge people used to have about nature, which knowledge induced respect as well, and the speed with which nature takes over human efforts visible in this childhood memory that Arundhati Roy talks about in an interview with John Freeman (2020).

*As a child I think I knew every plant, every insect, every smell, every tree, every word. We didn't even have toys. We used to know how to make things with leaves and sticks, and we entertained ourselves with peculiar habits and various insects and so on. (...) We used to fish a lot (...). The rods would be made of bamboo, and I remember the thing that would always delight me was that you couldn't fish during the rainy months (...) and you just left the fishing rod outside the house and when you went to it next it was a plant. It had grown roots and shoots and leaves. (Freeman, 2020)*

The same process of distancing ourselves from nature described above is captured in various parts of *The Folded Earth* (Roy, 2012). In the quote below, Diwan Sahib, one of the central characters, tries to explain to schoolchildren how nature is no longer seen as a whole with human beings included, but was changed into a

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<sup>15</sup> Rascanu, I., [https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=\\_xV2uAsAAAAJ&hl=ro](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=_xV2uAsAAAAJ&hl=ro)

<sup>16</sup> Gandharve Abhimanu Singh, 2009, *Negotiating in India*, master dissertation, <http://mibcom.ase.ro/>

resource with nobody knowing or caring for what happens in a future without the usual animals, birds and plants in their respective habitats.

*They are building a log cabin on the spur – for the entertainment of bureaucrats. They are building grand wooden gateways out of logs from these old trees. The trees with the eagles were cut down too. Nobody knows where the eagles went when their trees were felled. That is the forest now – it is a park, it is what is called a resource, a factory. It belongs neither to the people who owned it before, not to the animals and plants that lived in it. I had thought I would tell you how fortunate you were, to live in this part of the world where you are surrounded by rocks that breathe and animals that call each other. You wanted me to call their calls for you – but I’ve forgotten their voices now. They have no voices any longer. ... (175)*

The other issue that I became aware of initially through my Asian students in Bucharest, and later on through personal experience gained vicariously through books and movies, as well as directly through my travels to various parts of Asia is the respect for elders and teachers in India and most of the rest of Asia. Compared to the western world, particularly the Anglo-Saxon one, there is a visible difference between various forms of showing respect that are worth investigating.

When I went as a Fulbright senior scholar to the California State University of San Bernardino in 2005, one of the first tips for cultural adaptation was that students will not show any outside signs of social respect to me on the campus because I was a woman and a professor. They would not hold the door, greet first, or let you first in the elevator or a lecture room. When in 2015 I got to the Kalina Campus of the Mumbai University to attend the International Conference “Beyond Borders and Boundaries: Imaginings and Representations” I was impressed by the careful attention of the hosts to the smallest details of politeness in order to make us comfortable around the campus, with young teaching assistants or students accompanying us to the various buildings, helping us setting up our presentations and generally making themselves very useful. Obviously, there are different strategies of politeness around the world, however, the role of culture is also very deep in shaping those strategies. And even if there are Indian scholars, for example, who complain about the disappearance of some of the traditional values, they also call on the education system, mainly the teachers to contribute to a better society and world. Sharma (2014) warns that “the unity and progress of our society is threatened because, core values that promote law and order, respect for elders, sanctity of human lives, brotherliness, honesty and tolerance are disappearing. This situation calls for an urgent need for values orientation through our educational system.” Of course, the issues are not so simple, education can change a lot, but not everything, and it can change society mainly if it is well-funded and managed.

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*4.1 Reading “The Folded Earth”*

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Roy's art in *The Folded Earth* is clear and convincing in the well-built, multifaceted story, in the presentation of memorable characters who are entangled in their personal life quests which also, when added up, paint the larger social and convoluted fresco of northern India. Ranikhet, the town at the feet of the Himalayas, is the background for the characters' quests for love, dealing with hate, understanding continuity and change, loss and grief. The main character Maya is a teacher who has to cope with her choices in life, but also with the strong social norms of a postcolonial India. Maya transgressed her father's will and married a Christian man thus having to give up her family and comfortable social status. After her husband dies in a mountaineering expedition, Maya chooses to settle in Ranikhet only to discover in the end that you cannot run away from your past, even if you may seem to. “I was going to be two thousand kilometers from anything I knew, but that was just the numbers. In truth the distance was beyond measurement” (15).

As most good texts, the novel can be read in various ways, from various perspectives. However, irrespective of how we choose to relate to it, focusing on the love stories and dramas, on the changes of people and society, on the position of women in that society or the way nature is slowly changed into a resource, the novel is not sentimental: it objectively shows northern India with its specific social and political realities. Obviously, the point of view is that of a woman, both as a character and as a writer. But beyond this, you very rarely, if at all, hear a judging voice, and if you do, then it belongs to one of the characters and is well integrated in that character's persona.

As Marinescu, R. (2014) points out, in India marriage is still an important identity marker in which “families, their social group or caste, the village or town, and even the nation at large are involved (...), in which not only the individual lives of the bride and groom are at stake, but the very functioning of society. In their turn, the protagonists know they have to respect the unwritten social laws of this union, and when they do not, and when rules of caste, gender, ethnicity or nationality are transgressed, their destinies can only turn bad.” (198) What Maya did when choosing to live up to her own feelings and principle is, according to Zagade (2016), to join a rather long line of women characters in postcolonial India “struggling with their pasts even as they fight for freedom and clarity in the present” (695). Women struggling to change from their submissive and voiceless past to the force they actually represent in the modern world is not an easy one. And Maya learnt it the hard way, but she also had good teachers, mainly her father, and also the other male characters she meets on her journey. Maya sets the context of her efforts from the very beginning: her father, her strongest antagonist, is also her best teacher:

*... But I was his daughter. Before my fall from grace, he had done his best to train me to follow his example: to be ruthless in getting what I wanted, to take calculated risks. His efforts must have yielded results. I escaped him within a fortnight, knowing I must never return home. (14)*

And her revenge at the end of the book not necessarily only against Veer, another male who took advantage of her feelings and emotions, but against the whole patriarchal and postcolonial order that makes life so sampled and difficult to live for women, is prompted also by her other mentor Diwan Sahib:

*I am balanced on the edge of a knife. I can do harm.*

*Diwan Sahib's face appears before me, his white hair a mess, his beard overgrown, and he says, "Go on, what are you waiting for? You know what I'd do. Revenge is a kind of wild justice."*

*I remember him at his fireplace, thrusting the pages of his manuscript into it, then throwing the photograph of his dog into the flames, watching his life burn. (252)*

And then Maya imagines the scene of Michael's slow death in the freezing landscape of the Himalaya's, left behind by Veer who, as the guide of the expedition, should have taken care of him. And her heart or maybe her entire body takes the decision to improve on an unfair universe. "Slivers of ice in the corners of my heart. If I were turned inside out now, there would be frost and hailstones where blood and muscles were." (252)

And she decides to do what she thinks is the right thing, the only thing that somehow restores, probably, her self-esteem and certainly fits into the wider context of nature in which people are mere transient.

*I hold the will and Diwan Sahib's letter to Veer tight in both hands, and I rip the pages in half, and then the halves into quarters. The sound of tearing paper lacerates on me. I notice the portion that has the words "Ranveer Singh Rathore, provided he undertakes ..." and rip it into tinier and tinier pieces, until not an alphabet can be distinguished of the name.*

*I throw the pieces of paper in the air. The shreds that drift over me are almost indistinguishable from the white butterflies dipping over the wildflowers in this garden gone to seed. (255-256)*

To me, Roy's choice of settling the many layers of the stories and of the novel's narrative is interesting. The male characters, in the end, are themselves subject to women choices. Diwan Sahib acknowledges, even though indirectly, the power of women when he chooses to entrust his most valuable possessions, his darkest secrets to Ama, an uneducated old woman.

*Ama has proven yet again that there is no woman more shrewd this side of the Nanda Devi. (...)*

*“I have something for you too. This is what Diwan Sa’ab’s nephew was looking for, I think,” she said. “Now he’s gone, it’s yours to do with as you please.” Her smile broadened and twisted. She said nothing more as she left me holding the packet.*

*(...) it was clear in the end, Diwan Sahib’s closest, darkest secrets had been biding their time in the care of our town’s greatest gossip. (247)*

Roy makes Ama, the illiterate, but wise old woman, an example of how formal education cannot go beyond the obvious and cannot touch the mysteries of nature and human life.

*She saw the look on my face and her voice rose. “You think I’m a foolish old woman to believe in evil spirits.” She shook her stick toward the flat gray sky to our north. The high peaks were lost in the monsoon mist. “If you told a stranger that there are actually big snow peaks where that sky is,” she said, “would he believe you? What can he see but an ordinary, everyday sky that he can find anywhere? But you and I know the peaks are there. We are surrounded by things we don’t know and can’t understand.” (...) “You city people think you know everything.” (180)*

Returning to the real-life Indian women I had met, I think it is fair to say here that beyond a certain surface of politeness I found them to be tough and resilient, smiling but not giving in when they think they are right, very well-educated, impressively professional, incredibly hard workers and yet so modest, even humble, although very much aware of their role and status in their environment’s road to progress.

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## **5. Conclusions**

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This paper was intended as a limited small attempt at exploring perceptions of Indian women through my Romanian eyes. To this end I used Anuradha Roy’s novel written in English “The Folded Earth”, and revisited some personal memories. I also used my research interests in Asia and on the several articles that I wrote as a result.

I pointed out the impressive diversity and specificity of Asia compared to the western world as well as the fact that most economic, scientific and technological developments happen at present in Asia. Focusing on India I underlined the difference in size between the two spaces and the variety of people who inhabit India. I tried to explain that our perceptions of India are generally based on our classical, traditional education and/or, at the other end, our Bollywood/ pop culture

influences. In different ways they both distort our perceptions of the realities of present-day Indian women. I therefore tried to compare my constructed images of modern Indian women as they appear mainly in women literature written in English, with my own experience of the real women that I met either in Romania or in India.

In today's complex world, in what is called more often and with more valid arguments the Asian century, it is relevant and worthwhile to have such an exercise of cultural and gender exploration in order to better understand ourselves as individuals and our own world.

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