

CRAFTING RESPONSIBILITY: ETHICAL HUMANISM AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN A. S. M. GIRI'S VALDA: THE WANDMAKER

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Abstract

Fantasy literature is frequently dismissed as escapist narrative, and contemporary

Indian English fantasy remains critically under-examined, particularly in relation to material culture and ethical inquiry. This study addresses that gap by analysing A. S. M. Giri's Valda: The Wandmaker through a hybrid framework combining Ethical Literary Criticism and Material Culture Theory. The objective is to demonstrate how the novel repositions fantasy as a site of moral negotiation mediated through crafted objects. Using close textual analysis supported by theoretical insights from ethical criticism and thing theory, the paper examines the wand not merely as magical instrument but as a material artefact shaping authority, relational identity, and communal responsibility. The findings reveal that craftsmanship in the novel functions as moral labour, while prophetic anxiety transforms heroic adventure into ethical burden. The study argues that Valda contributes to emerging dimensions in Indian fantasy by integrating object culture with holistic humanism, thereby expanding the critical possibilities of contemporary fantasy studies.

Keywords: *Ethical criticism, holistic humanism, fantasy studies, relational identity, collective survival, contemporary Indian fiction.*

INTRODUCTION

Fantasy literature has long endured the accusation of escapism. Its invented kingdoms, enchanted objects, and prophetic dreams have frequently been interpreted as departures from historical and social reality. Such a view, however, overlooks the structural capacity of fantasy to intensify moral inquiry through symbolic displacement. By constructing alternate worlds, fantasy enables writers to externalize ethical dilemmas in concentrated form. The distance from empirical reality does not negate seriousness; rather, it permits focused examination of responsibility, power, and vulnerability without the immediate constraints of realism.

In Indian English literary studies, the critical engagement with original secondary-world fantasy remains comparatively limited. Much scholarly attention has concentrated on mythological retellings, magical realism, or diasporic allegory. Contemporary fantasy narratives that build independent cosmologies are still emerging within academic discourse. A. S. M. Giri's *Valda: The Wandmaker* occupies this evolving space. The novel centers on Denut Valda, a master wandmaker whose recurring prophetic dream compels him to leave behind domestic security in order to confront an uncertain but impending catastrophe.

At first glance, the narrative resembles familiar quest structures. However, a closer reading reveals that the novel is not structured around heroic conquest but around ethical disturbance and material accountability. The wand, the crafted object at the center of the narrative functions not merely as magical instrument but as mediator of authority, identity, and responsibility. Simultaneously, the prophetic dream destabilizes any illusion of mastery derived from craftsmanship.

This paper argues that *Valda: The Wandmaker* reconfigures fantasy through a hybrid framework combining Ethical Literary Criticism and Material Culture Theory. By examining how objects mediate power and how moral anxiety destabilizes authority, the novel constructs a holistic humanist model in which creation entails accountability and identity emerges through relational networks. Through extended close reading of key narrative moments including Valda's dream, his departure from home, and the symbolic function of the wand this study demonstrates that the novel transforms fantasy into a serious exploration of material and moral consciousness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with fantasy literature has evolved significantly over the past century. Early criticism often treated fantasy as mythic escape or psychological allegory. Later studies recognized its capacity for political and cultural critique. Yet within Indian English scholarship, fantasy remains marginal compared to realism or postcolonial narrative. Internationally, fantasy studies have emphasized mythopoeic structure, archetypal symbolism, and world-building strategies. However, the intersection of fantasy and ethical philosophy has received more nuanced attention only in recent decades. Critics influenced by ethical literary approaches have argued that narrative fiction shapes moral imagination by dramatizing dilemmas rather than prescribing solutions. Such scholarship foregrounds the reader's evaluative engagement with characters' decisions.

Parallel to this development, Material Culture Theory has expanded literary analysis beyond thematic symbolism to consider the active role of objects in shaping narrative meaning. Artefacts in fiction are no longer viewed as decorative props but as agents within networks of power and identity. Objects stabilize hierarchy, transmit cultural memory, and mediate legitimacy.

Despite these advances, few studies have brought ethical criticism and material culture analysis together within the context of contemporary fantasy. In Indian English fiction specifically, the material dimension of magical objects remains largely unexplored in theoretical depth. Discussions often treat enchanted artefacts symbolically without examining their embeddedness within systems of production, circulation, and responsibility.

Valda: The Wandmaker provides fertile ground for such synthesis. The wand is neither incidental nor purely symbolic; it is crafted through disciplined labour. The protagonist's identity is inseparable from this act of making. Simultaneously, the narrative's moral structure hinges upon anticipatory anxiety regarding communal destruction.

This study therefore addresses a gap in fantasy scholarship by examining how crafted objects mediate ethical responsibility. By situating *Valda* within the intersecting frameworks of Ethical Literary Criticism and Material Culture Theory, it expands the analytical vocabulary available for interpreting Indian English fantasy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ETHICS AND MATERIAL MEDIATION

Ethical Literary Criticism views narrative as a site of moral inquiry. Rather than treating fiction as detached from ethical life, it emphasizes how stories dramatize competing obligations and invite evaluative engagement. Characters' decisions carry relational consequences, and narrative tension arises from the conflict between legitimate but incompatible goods.

In *Valda*, the recurring dream functions as ethical disturbance. It introduces the possibility of widespread devastation without guaranteeing its inevitability. This uncertainty generates anticipatory responsibility. Valda must decide whether potential catastrophe justifies immediate sacrifice. The novel emphasizes hesitation. Valda does not embrace destiny with enthusiasm; he is "burdened by a vision that refused to fade" (Giri). The repetition of the dream transforms it into moral summons. Ethical action emerges not from ambition but from anxiety.

The departure scene illustrates this tension vividly. As Valda prepares to leave, the narrative notes that he walks away "with the weight of unanswered questions pressing harder than any armour" (Giri). Armour typically symbolizes protection in fantasy narratives; here, uncertainty replaces it. The ethical burden outweighs martial confidence.

Ethical Literary Criticism clarifies that the novel's central drama lies not in physical combat but in moral deliberation. The dream externalizes responsibility. The reader is invited to assess whether leaving home constitutes abandonment or necessary prevention.

MATERIAL CULTURE THEORY

Material Culture Theory examines how objects shape social and symbolic systems.

Artefacts embody labour, authority, and cultural value. In literature, objects often mediate identity and stabilize hierarchy. The wand in Valda functions precisely in this capacity. Crafted through patience and technical expertise, it represents accumulated knowledge and disciplined artistry. The narrative describes Valda's workshop as a space where "intent and material met in careful negotiation" (Giri). This phrasing underscores relational engagement with matter.

The wand's circulation within the kingdom confers legitimacy upon its wielder.

Authority is materially anchored. The wandmaker's status derives from the excellence of his creations. Yet the prophetic dream destabilizes this anchor. Material mastery does not eliminate existential threat. The wand symbolizes power, but power proves fragile. The novel thus interrogates the assumption that technological or magical proficiency ensures security. Creation does not absolve responsibility; it intensifies it.

Craft, Anxiety, And The Ethics Of Creation

The structural center of Valda: The Wandmaker lies not in warfare, prophecy, or spectacle, but in the act of making. Unlike conventional fantasy narratives that position kings, warriors, or sorcerers as protagonists, Giri places a craftsman at the heart of the story. This decision is neither incidental nor decorative. It reorganizes the moral architecture of the novel. Authority in this narrative does not originate from conquest but from production. Power is not seized; it is crafted. The wand, as the novel's central artefact, represents accumulated labour, discipline, and intentionality. Wand making is portrayed as a slow, attentive process rather than an explosive magical act. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes patience, precision, and alignment between material and maker. This emphasis invites interpretation through Material Culture Theory, which argues that objects are not passive tools but embodiments of social relations and value systems. The wand in Valda is the condensed expression of cultural knowledge and personal responsibility. Valda's identity is inseparable from his craft. He is not merely someone who makes wands; he is recognized through that act of making. His social standing, his sense of dignity, and his place within the guild derive from his craftsmanship. In this way, the novel constructs identity as materially mediated. The wand is not simply used—it confers legitimacy upon both wielder and maker.

However, the narrative complicates this legitimacy by introducing anxiety through the prophetic dream. The more refined Valda's craft becomes, the more destabilizing the dream appears. The wand symbolizes control and mastery, yet the dream suggests uncontrollable destruction. This juxtaposition is crucial. It reveals the limits of material authority.

Craftsmanship in the novel therefore operates within a paradox. On the one hand, it is empowering. The wandmaker shapes instruments that structure hierarchy and influence the kingdom's political and magical systems. On the other hand, that very act of shaping implicates him within structures he cannot fully oversee. Creation extends agency into unpredictable futures.

Ethical Literary Criticism helps illuminate this tension. If narrative action is understood as moral negotiation, then craft becomes ethically charged. Valda does not merely produce objects; he produces possibilities. Each wand carries potential consequences beyond his immediate intention. The novel subtly implies that the maker cannot remain neutral regarding the uses of his creations. This ethical dimension intensifies when read alongside the dream. The recurring vision of destruction destabilizes the comfort of believing that skill guarantees safety. If catastrophe looms despite his expertise, then craft alone cannot secure the world. The wandmaker must confront the unsettling recognition that mastery does not equal control.

The text reinforces this awareness through reflective passages in which Valda contemplates his workshop not as a sanctuary but as a site of responsibility. The tools arranged neatly before him are no longer mere instruments of productivity; they become reminders of participation in a larger system of power. The silence of the workshop is heavy, not peaceful. It carries the weight of implication.

Through this portrayal, Giri resists romanticizing craftsmanship. The wand is not celebrated as magical solution. Instead, it becomes symbol of accountability. The maker's authority is inseparable from moral consequence.

Furthermore, the novel interrogates the distinction between skill and art. Technical precision alone does not confer mastery. True craftsmanship requires imaginative engagement with material. Yet imagination, in fantasy, is always double-edged. It can produce beauty or destruction. By foregrounding this ambiguity, the narrative suggests that creativity itself carries ethical weight.

Valda's internal unrest, therefore, is not simply fear of external catastrophe. It is also recognition of the fragile foundation upon which authority rests. The wand may command respect within the kingdom, but it cannot command fate. Material production organizes power, but it does not eliminate vulnerability.

In positioning a craftsman at the center of the narrative, the novel redefines heroism. Heroism becomes attentive making rather than aggressive conquest. Yet even this redefinition is destabilized by anxiety. Creation demands responsibility; responsibility produces burden.

Thus, in Valda: The Wandmaker, craftsmanship is not background detail but structural principle. It mediates identity, authority, and ethical reflection. The wand is both symbol of power and reminder of fragility. Through the intersection of material production and moral anxiety, the novel transforms fantasy into a meditation on the responsibilities

embedded within creation itself.

The Dream As Ethical Catalyst Rather Than Deterministic Prophecy

In many fantasy narratives, prophecy operates as narrative guarantee. A foretold event structures the plot with inevitability. The hero acts because destiny demands fulfilment. Such determinism often simplifies moral tension: action becomes obedience to a prewritten script. In Valda: The Wandmaker, however, the recurring dream does not function as deterministic prophecy. Instead, it operates as ethical disturbance—an unresolved summons that produces responsibility without certainty.

The dream's ambiguity is central to its power. It does not provide a clear image of what must occur, nor does it specify how catastrophe might unfold. Rather, it introduces the possibility of destruction and leaves interpretation open. This openness generates anxiety. Valda is not responding to an instruction; he is responding to a fear of potential harm.

Ethical Literary Criticism illuminates the significance of this ambiguity. Moral action carries greater weight when certainty is absent. If the future were fixed and guaranteed, Valda's departure would be an act of compliance. Instead, the dream forces him to deliberate. He must decide whether anticipated disaster justifies present sacrifice. The narrative thereby stages a classic ethical dilemma: is it morally defensible to disrupt immediate stability for the sake of uncertain prevention?

The dream also destabilizes Valda's confidence in material authority. In the previous section, we observed that craftsmanship provides identity and status. The wand symbolizes structured power. Yet the dream introduces a dimension beyond structured power—an uncontrollable horizon. No crafted object can fully neutralize what the dream suggests.

Importantly, the dream persists. It does not vanish after a single appearance. Its repetition transforms it from fleeting fear into psychological structure. It infiltrates waking consciousness. The narrative suggests that Valda cannot separate himself from its presence. In this sense, the dream becomes quasi-material. Though intangible, it occupies mental space with the density of an object. It shapes perception and directs action.

This transformation of fear into structuring force reinforces the hybrid theoretical approach of this paper. Material Culture Theory reminds us that objects organize behavior; here, the dream functions as internalized object organizing Valda's decisions. It exerts pressure analogous to a physical artefact. Ethical disturbance acquires material consequence.

Unlike deterministic prophecy, which relieves the protagonist of interpretive burden, the dream in Valda intensifies interpretive responsibility. Valda must read the vision. He must decide whether it is warning, illusion, or projection of inner anxiety. The narrative does not clarify its metaphysical origin. That ambiguity is deliberate. It preserves the ethical space of decision.

Furthermore, the dream's imagery destruction, fragmentation, instability mirrors Valda's internal fracture. The external catastrophe it depicts parallels the internal instability it produces. The dream thus collapses the distinction between private fear and public danger.

Personal anxiety becomes communal concern. This collapse is ethically significant. Valda's action is motivated not by desire for recognition but by dread of failing others. The dream does not promise him greatness; it threatens him with guilt. If destruction occurs and he has remained passive, he will bear responsibility.

Here the novel departs decisively from triumphalist fantasy structures. The protagonist does not relish his calling. He endures it. Ethical life in the novel is characterized not by glory but by burden. The dream also exposes the limits of rational control. As a wandmaker, Valda operates within structured systems of craft. Precision governs his work. The dream resists such precision. It is symbolic, unstable, resistant to technical analysis. This contrast deepens his anxiety. The structured world of material production collides with the unstable world of prophetic imagination.

This collision produces narrative tension. Valda cannot solve the dream as he solves problems in his workshop. He cannot refine it, reshape it, or sand it into clarity. He must confront uncertainty. Such confrontation situates the novel within a broader philosophical conversation about anticipatory responsibility. Ethical action often arises not from certainty but from suspicion that inaction may cause harm. The dream embodies that suspicion. It is less revelation than warning of possibility.

Through this structure, Valda reframes prophecy as ethical catalyst rather than narrative guarantee. The dream does not close the future; it opens it to moral deliberation. It compels the protagonist to weigh loss against risk, intimacy against prevention, comfort against responsibility. The result is a fantasy narrative that privileges ethical uncertainty over deterministic destiny. By destabilizing the prophecy trope, Giri deepens the moral seriousness of his text. The dream becomes not magical shortcut but philosophical challenge.

In this way, the novel strengthens its holistic humanist orientation. The future is not fixed; it is shaped by decisions made under uncertainty. Responsibility emerges from interpretation. And interpretation, in turn, requires courage.

Migration And The Ethics Of Collective Vulnerability

The journey toward Solskin marks a structural shift in Valda: The Wandmaker. What begins as private ethical disturbance becomes collective movement. Migration transforms Valda's personal anxiety into shared vulnerability. The caravan is not merely a narrative device to move the plot forward; it embodies a reorganization of identity from individual authority to communal interdependence.

Unlike conventional quest fantasies that isolate the hero, Valda situates its protagonist within a group. Survival depends not on singular brilliance but on cooperation. The caravan's progress through forests, storms, and uncertain terrain foregrounds fragility rather than dominance. Environmental forces do not recognize hierarchy. Lightning strikes without regard for status. Terrain resists control. In this context, the wand symbol of structured authority within the kingdom

loses its singular prominence. Crafted power cannot command wilderness. This ecological dimension intensifies the novel's ethical framework. Material Culture Theory reminds us that objects function within contexts. The wand's authority is meaningful within social systems, but it proves limited within natural systems. Migration thus exposes the contingency of object-mediated power. Authority does not translate automatically across environments.

Ethically, this recognition generates humility. Valda's craftsmanship cannot eliminate vulnerability. The caravan survives through shared vigilance, mutual support, and collective responsibility. The narrative resists glorifying conquest of nature; instead, it emphasizes negotiation with it. Human beings are embedded within ecological conditions they cannot fully master.

Migration therefore functions as ethical education. Valda's understanding of responsibility expands beyond craft and prophecy to include interdependence. His journey is not merely spatial but relational. He becomes part of a system of shared risk. Through this portrayal, Valda reinforces its holistic humanism. Identity is not autonomous; it is communal. Survival is not individual triumph; it is cooperative endurance. Fantasy here becomes a lens for examining collective vulnerability in a world where power is always provisional.

Domestic Separation And The Cost Of Responsibility

Valda's departure from home transforms ethical anxiety into lived sacrifice. The prophetic dream remains abstract until it disrupts domestic continuity. His wife, unborn child, and workshop represent stability shaped through accumulated care and labour. Leaving them is not simple relocation but ethical fracture. The workshop functions as extension of identity. It is the site where material and intention merge. When Valda steps away from it, he temporarily suspends the very practice that defines him. The maker becomes wanderer. Creation yields to uncertainty.

Ethically, the novel stages a conflict between competing legitimate obligations: familial intimacy and communal protection. Valda does not choose between right and wrong but between two forms of moral responsibility. This tension prevents the narrative from collapsing into heroic simplicity. Sacrifice here is not glorified; it is painful and unresolved.

Domestic space in the novel is materially grounded. Objects left behind tools, unfinished work, shared spaces quietly signify absence. Through this material residue, separation acquires weight. The novel insists that responsibility entails loss. Power derived from craft does not shield one from emotional vulnerability. In foregrounding domestic rupture, Valda reinforces its ethical seriousness. Heroism is not conquest but endurance of moral cost.

Object Circulation And Indirect Responsibility

The wand's significance extends beyond its crafting to its circulation. Once completed, it enters social networks where it mediates authority. Material Culture Theory reminds us that objects acquire meaning through exchange, and in Valda, the wand functions as structured symbol of power within the kingdom. Valda's labour therefore participates in broader hierarchies. Though he does not wield political authority directly, his craft enables it. This introduces the possibility of indirect responsibility. Creation disperses agency into contexts the maker cannot fully control.

The prophetic dream can be read partly as anxiety about systemic instability. If destruction approaches, it may involve the very instruments sustaining the kingdom's power structure. The novel does not accuse the wandmaker, but it situates him within a network of consequence.

Ethical responsibility thus expands beyond intention to participation. Objects are not neutral. They mediate influence. Through this subtle emphasis on circulation, the novel complicates simplistic notions of innocence or mastery. Authority grounded in material production is powerful, yet never detached from consequence.

Indian Fantasy And The Reorientation Of Heroism

Valda: The Wandmaker distinguishes itself within Indian fantasy by centering a craftsman rather than a warrior or divine figure. Much contemporary Indian speculative fiction draws from epic or mythological traditions that privilege martial authority. Giri instead constructs a world in which power originates from creation.

This shift redefines heroism. Valda's strength lies in disciplined craftsmanship, not combat. Authority emerges through labour, patience, and skill. By foregrounding production rather than conquest, the novel expands the imaginative possibilities of Indian fantasy.

Furthermore, the narrative's emphasis on relational responsibility and communal survival contrasts with hyper-individualistic hero models. Identity is embedded within family, guild, and caravan. Responsibility is shared, not solitary. Through this reorientation, Valda contributes to an emerging dimension of Indian English fantasy one that integrates ethical reflection with material world-building. Heroism becomes accountable creation rather than triumphant domination.

CONCLUSION

Valda: The Wandmaker demonstrates that fantasy need not function as escapist spectacle but can operate as a serious exploration of ethical and material consciousness.

Through the hybrid framework of Ethical Literary Criticism and Material Culture Theory, the novel reveals how crafted objects mediate identity, authority, and responsibility. The wand, far from being a decorative magical instrument, becomes a condensed expression of labour, legitimacy, and systemic power.

Valda's recurring dream transforms the narrative from deterministic prophecy into ethical deliberation. Rather than guaranteeing destiny, the dream produces uncertainty and compels action under ambiguity. His departure from domestic stability foregrounds the cost of responsibility, while the caravan's migration underscores collective vulnerability within ecological limits. The circulation of wands further complicates the maker's position, suggesting that creation disperses agency beyond intention.

By centering a craftsman rather than a conqueror, Giri reorients fantasy toward accountable creation. Heroism is redefined as moral endurance rather than triumphant domination. Power derived from production remains fragile, embedded within relational and environmental networks.

In situating craftsmanship at the heart of ethical inquiry, Valda contributes to emerging dimensions in contemporary Indian fantasy literature. It demonstrates that speculative fiction can illuminate the interdependence of material production and moral life. Fantasy here becomes not escape from reality, but intensified reflection upon the responsibilities embedded within human creation.

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