



Crossing

A JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Volume 16 ■ 2025 ■ ISSN: 2071-1107 ■ E-ISSN: 2958-3179



Department of English and Humanities

UNIVERSITY OF LIBERAL ARTS
BANGLADESH

CROSSINGS: A Journal of English Studies

Department of English and Humanities
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)
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Volume 16 | December 2025 | ISSN 2071-1107 | E-ISSN 2958-3179

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Indexed by

ASCI | Crossref | DOAJ | EBSCO | Google Scholar | MLA International Bibliography
ROAD | WorldCat

Cover Design

Md. Maksudul Islam

Published by

Dr. Kazi Anis Ahmed, ULAB Press

Price

BDT 500; USD 20

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, 688 Beridbadh Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207, Bangladesh

journals.ulab.edu.bd/index.php/crossings | ulab.edu.bd

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This volume is dedicated to

Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam
(1951–2025)

scholar, writer, mentor, and a steadfast member of the
***Crossings* Editorial Board**

Editorial Note

During the publication of this volume, we lost a distinguished member of the editorial board, Syed Manzoorul Islam. It is with deep gratitude we recall his intellectual contribution and critical acuity that have shaped *Crossings* in decisive ways. The journal continues to uphold the high standards envisioned by our former colleague.

Over the last 16 years, *Crossings* has consistently moved across boundaries—disciplinary, methodological, and geographic. Our humble start as a regional initiative to curate scholarship by Bangladeshi academics in English Studies has evolved into a rigorous academic platform from the Global South. Being open-access, the journal's global reach has steadily increased, strengthening our claim for inclusion in top-tiered indexes. Our international partners, with their critical labor in reviewing the articles and promoting the journal, have helped *Crossings* aspire to be both a gateway and a meeting ground to draw scholars towards Bangladesh while contributing meaningfully to global conversations in humanities and language studies.

The Occasional Papers section features two highly respected scholars of South Asian studies. Ian Almond reflects on Agha Shahid Ali's poetry as a transhistorical and transcultural dialogue. He treats Ali's use of memory and migration as an intersectionality of myth and history to examine the nuances of contested geographies. Almond's transgression of borders segues into the second occasional piece by Niaz Zaman on translation. Zaman's essay shares her praxis to show how the ethical, aesthetic, and political components of translation define the correspondence between cultures. This is an important essay as we seek to facilitate multilingual scholarship needed for global academic exchange.

There is an underlying theme in the Literature and Cultural Studies section. Our contributors from Bangladesh, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and North America have shown the intimate spaces of community life and how knowledge travels through languages, myths, oral traditions, and cosmopolitan culture. The Language and Applied Linguistics section demonstrates the changing attitude towards language teaching and learning. Md. Mahadhi Hasan, with co-authors from Nigeria and the USA, studies the differences and adaptive strategies in language learning. This chimes with ULAB's sustainability focus through partnership. Mahmud Hasan Khan's application of ethnomethodology to read Ngugi wa Thiong'o through a Heideggerian lens is an original contribution to African Studies. In the book review section, two Moroccan scholars critique Wyndham Lewis' account of his travels to their native country.

This issue reiterates our commitment to publish research that is both locally grounded and globally resonant. If our readers, both local and global, find *Crossings* intellectually stimulating, and worth sharing and citing, it will be a reward for our efforts.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,
Shamsad Mortuza, PhD
 Chief Editor

Occasional Papers

Some Brief Reflections on the Function of Myth in Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without A Post Office*

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It is almost thirty years since the publication of *The Country Without A Post Office* (henceforth *Country*), years which (sadly) have done little to make the violence and suffering Shahid Ali depicts in the book outdated or historical. The most recent violence brings an undesirable relevance to poetry which many people would prefer to date historically. Earlier this year – and in the wake of the bombing of Gaza – I watched Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains* (2009), and felt the similar, uncomfortable sensation of watching art act out and comment upon a series of injustices it factually pre-dated.

And yet, in some ways, *Country* tries its best to transcend history, whilst simultaneously engaging with it. It is a paradox which lies at the heart of the pleasure the reader obtains from its pages. On the one hand, we are plunged into the landscape of Kashmir: Zero Bridge, Shalimar gardens, Dal Lake, Gupkar Road; on the other, Ali draws us through a world of literary ghosts which *Country* palimpsestically dances with: Mandelstam, Eliot, Rilke, Mann. One moment, we witness horrifying scenes of violence – a burning tire drip-dripping on the back of a young boy, an Indian army officer bragging about how effective his torture is on Kashmiri boys; the next, we are speaking to the Fates, or dwelling on the union of Shiva and Parvati, or reflecting on the sacrifice of Iphigenia. One of the aims of this brief essay will be to try and understand what the nature of this duality is in Ali's collection, and to tentatively argue that not only is this ambivalence central to the aesthetics of Ali's poetics, but that myth has a large role to play in the success of this project¹ (Benvenuto 263).

Both myth and history lie at the center of *Country*. Ali plays with Hindu/Greek myth, draws on stories of both Biblical and Quranic heritage, weaving them into his text. At the same time, there is a specific focus on history – and even pre-history – where the narrator moves into the distant (Harappan, pre-Aryan, even geological) past, as though to make a point anterior to all ideology. In "At The Museum," the speaker stares at a bronze statue of a servant girl, and reflects on the intention of the sculptor, and the feelings of the sculpted. Throughout *Country*, there is this delight in the attempted recollection of distant, inarticulable time,

¹ Even in interviews, Ali has talked of his obsession with certain figures of Greek myth – for example, with Eurydice.



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most obviously as a haven from the politically-cursed present, but also as a place where the ancient rhythms of suffering can be detected then, as now.

Vinay Dharwadker, in an essay on Indian-English literature, is upfront about the status of Ali as an “unapologetically elitist” writer:

But the new immigrant and itinerant writers of Indian origin come overwhelmingly from privileged-class backgrounds on the subcontinent as well as outside it. The biographies of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, and Amitav Ghosh, for instance, show that their migrations and traveling identities do not cross or disturb class boundaries as they move back and forth between the upper levels of Indian society and the upper levels of British, American, and European society. (258)

To some extent, our consideration of the role of myth in Ali's work has to negotiate, however tangentially, the issue of his biographical context; that is, the larger question of what it means for a Kashmiri to write poetry about Kashmir within the pages of the *Yale Review* and the *Denver Quarterly* (of the twenty-six journals which had previously published the poems of *Country*, every single one was North American). Ali's own relationship to modernism – to T.S. Eliot, in particular, and the modernist preoccupation with myth – also brings to mind some of the politically reactionary, even in its extremes fascistic, aspects of modernism and the university-educated readership it chose to perform for.

What is the function of myth and myth-allusion in *Country*? Perhaps the most obvious purpose it serves for Ali is to internationalize the text; by describing the liquid of a goblet as “rum-dark” (Ali 80) (parodying the Homeric formula “wine-dark”), or in the very next line by invoking Noah and the Ark as a predicament for Srinigar in 1990, Ali transcendentalizes the political situation of the text and creates a wider series of referents and parallels for the injustices he examines within it. This strategy is initiated almost provocatively in the very first poem of the collection, when Shahid Ali writes in intimate parallel with Osip Mandelstam's “The Blessed Word” the opening poem, also named after Mandelstam's 1920 piece. Mandelstam's anti-Soviet, anti-communist sentiment in the poem – he speaks of saying a “prayer in the Soviet night” – chimes, intentionally or not, with Ali's own description of military occupation by a bullying state, even if the anti-communist subtext put Ali at odds with other, more left-wing anticolonial critiques of colonial (in this case, colonially-inherited) power. The Soviet occupation of nearby Afghanistan, up until a few years before the events of the poem, would also have been a context that would have overshadowed any Kashmiri use of Mandelstam.

In other words, if the invocation of myth – other people’s myths, everybody’s myths – internationalizes the poetry of *Country*, it does so in ways which are sometimes at odds with one another. The ease with which Ali brings in Islamic and Persian tropes – not just Abraham and Karbala, but also Leyla and Majnun – suggests that his own autochthonous culture is not the only, or even primary, warehouse of tropes and motifs he is drawing on.² Aamir Mufti examines the poet’s work in his own *Forget English!*, drawing attention to the way Ali modifies and re-writes the ghazal in English, keeping to its constraints (the *takhallus* or common third person self reference at the end of each ghazal, for example) whilst innovating and re-configuring it within a wider international framework – a practice Ali himself memorably referred to as “unfaithful fidelity” (Mufti 182, 184). This ambivalence towards the Indo-Islamic world – indeed, towards the faith which inspired it – is what makes *Country* so interesting for outsiders (and I most certainly am, with no pretensions to the contrary whatsoever, an outsider). There is an oscillation between local and foreign lenses, which uproots the book and sets it floating free across contexts, somewhat like “The Floating Post Office” we encounter in the middle of the book, a deliverer of messages but with no fixed abode. Readers steeped in Faiz, Mir, Ghalib and Lal Ded will pick up the references placed there especially for them; devotees of Hopkins, Apollinaire, Trakl, and Auden will also find, in different places, mail for them too. Occasionally (as Yeats discovered), a symbol can hold two or more meanings at the same time – the moon can be Chandra, it can be the orb Petrarcan lovers such as Sidney invoked in addressing their mistresses, it can also be the crescent of Islam; Ali appears to delight in the proliferation of meanings and connotations each symbol provides as he goes (to follow the logic of “The Floating Post Office”) from houseboat to houseboat.

Amit Chaudhuri, writing on the writer Nirad Chaudhuri (but also on the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt), has described this process as a kind of Freudian *fort-da* movement: “All his life, Chaudhuri strove both to express his Bengaliness and to escape it” (49). We flee the familiar, are drawn to the unfamiliar, and then – in an irrepressible cycle – we return to the familiar in a defamiliarized form, and the circular process begins all over again. In Ali’s case, however, this is not so much a circle as a spiral – not merely a ping-pong movement of endless dissatisfaction between opposing poles, but rather a more all-encompassing, self-expanding, self-enriching movement of thought as the poet’s literary voice expands its wavelengths, incorporating and digesting previously disparate influences and texts. It would not be outrageous to say that,

² Upasana Dutta has written of Shahid Ali’s “exactly global sensibility” which “pulls Kashmir into a global literary legibility” (2, 4)

in some ways, he Persianizes Emily Dickinson, repeating the Amherst poet's words (Ali lived, worked, and was ultimately buried in Amherst) in such a vein that we think of her brief, random mention of "Cashmere" as somehow central to her work (against all evidence to the contrary).

Perhaps this is what uprooted, interstitial poets like Ali do best – they bring two spaces together, each one changed by contact with the other, and produce not just two slightly different vocabularies, but also a third, completely new efflorescence, something which is neither Sophocles retold on a Kashmiri lake, nor an Anglicized ghazal, but a strange new voice (perhaps what Foucault once called "the thought from outside"). There is a historical aspect to this process too, however – in fact, you could argue that Ali's work has always seen history (including Kashmiri history) as a similar set of oscillating influences and fusions, which is where the poet's own frustrations with the violent homogenizing of an Indian nation state come to the fore. One of *Country's* most poignant poems is "Farewell," an imagined love letter between a Kashmiri Muslim and a Kashmiri Pandit. Despite its star-cross'd lovers feel, the poem also works as a wider series of reflections on the gradual separation of two identities:

In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
Your history gets in the way of my memory. (22)

Without lapsing into either sentimentality or fake anti-nationalist nostalgia, the poet carefully presents the contours and mechanisms of how "others" are made, the subtle tricks of differentiation and self-differentiation which enable us to disavow the past, even pretend it never happened. Through a simple yet brilliant fusion of political and personal, of micro and macro, Ali takes the frustration of a failed love and applies it on multiple levels – political, existential, ideological:

There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.
If only somehow you could have been mine,
what would not have been possible in this world? (22)

A sentimental "could-have-been" element in the poem becomes suddenly, massively something else – a moment of (as Pheng Cheah would have it) "unworlding,"³ where the temporality of our lived experience with others ceases to infuse our world as a meaningful thing (Cheah 95). The poem becomes a melancholy reflection on the loss of possibility, and the kinds of world that expire once this loss becomes irreversible.

A second function of myth in Ali's poems is slightly more complicated to expound: it introduces a second kind of time, one which sets up a tension

3 Obviously the term belongs to Heidegger, but I am referring to the use Cheah makes of it in his book.

alongside historical time, and creates a flurry of consequences for the text itself. Seven years earlier, on another continent, the Latin American critic Roberto Echevarría had already written a book on the subject of myth, history and the Latin American novel. Concentrating on figures such as Borges and Marquez, Echevarría claimed “the modern Latin American novel transforms Latin American history into an originary myth in order to see itself as other” (14).⁴ The idea that there is a productive tension between historical time and mythical time – one which creates a kind of self-alienation, and produces a new kind of subject in the process (as we have just mentioned above) – perhaps explains why Ali is so fond of myth, and returns to it in poem after poem. Of course, this fascination with the becoming-myth of all history could also easily have been infected in him from his Western influences, Yeats and Eliot (an epigraph from Yeats’ “Easter, 1916” is found at the beginning of “I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight”). But we do not need to go to Yeats and terrible beauties being born to understand how a Kashmiri poet, viewing the atrocities in his homeland during the 90s from the viewpoint of an American college town, became fascinated by this relationship between mythical time and historical time; how history becomes myth, and how myth changes history, runs like a thread throughout *Country*. In this respect, references to Leda or Thea or Elijah are not merely there to “internationalize” or even “universalize” Ali’s subject matter, although they incontestably do; myth also initiates a process which subtly begins to “other” the poet’s own experiences, (recollected in the relative tranquility of Massachusetts), transforming the very fabric of Ali’s own experience. As a result, the historical time of Kashmir as a region is stretched to match its mythic parameters, a gesture which also involves the mythologization of recent events too. In the “1993” section of “The City of Daughters,” the poet follows a line from a Mexican poet (“God’s secret: He put His lips to my ear/and didn’t say a thing”) with a line from a friend’s letter: “Dear Shahid, they burned the Palladium” (82). The sublimity of *Country* is often generated by these juxtapositions of classical references and contemporary reports, which the poet accomplishes masterfully, albeit at the expense of a local audience unfamiliar with the foreign reference. Often the reference is not so much foreign as provocative – in “A History of Paisley,” Ali mixes an origin tale for the vale of Kashmir (Parvati arguing with Shiva and running away in her anklets, until the God catches up with her to reconcile) with the destruction of Srinagar in the present, all imagined through the gaze of an “ancient ... trader,” one who does not hear the “bullets drowning out the bells of her anklets” (67). The poem takes place in three staggered times – mythical, Moghul, modern – and cleverly transforms the image of Parvati, fleeing across the valley, into a local girl, fleeing a razed city as the military roll in.

⁴ For more on this, see Ian Almond, *World Literature Decentered*, Routledge, 2021.

Are there any dangers in this free use of myth – Greek, Hindu, Biblical, Nordic, Indo-Islamic – to warp and change and transform the poet's own subject? Perhaps only one: not necessarily the familiar and already mentioned danger of an elitist aesthetics, one which relies on a lifetime's reading to catch the allusions of two dozen poems; rather, there is the possibility that the rich spectrum of mythic and cultural references *Country* offers actually empties Kashmir itself of any identity or content. Pulled in a dozen directions by a host of references – some of them Western, some Persian, some Islamic, some Vedic – one can imagine a posthumous attack on Ali's legacy, one in which the military occupation of Srinagar, the atrocities suffered by Kashmiris, are so riddled and poeticized with different vocabularies, that in the end we lose sight of the actual land and people itself. Kashmir, if you like, is so multiply signified in *Country* that it ceases to signify anything at all. It is certainly not my argument – but I confess, I would feel remiss not to mention it.

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Father Tongues, Mother Tongues, and Other Tongues

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Abstract

A considerable amount of translation is done in Bangladesh, functional and literary, from English – and other languages – to Bangla – and from Bangla to English – and other languages. Most translations in other parts of the world are from another language to the speaker’s own language, from another tongue to the mother tongue. In Bangladesh – as well as in other parts of the sub-continent – translations from the mother tongue to English are common. In addition, there is a lot of translation into Bangla from “other tongues,” languages which one has not learned. These translations are almost always via another translation, generally an English one. What are the problems related to this sort of translation? The paper discusses the issues which crop up in these situations and attempts to suggest solutions.

Keywords: father tongue, mother tongue, other tongues, functional translation, literary translation

A lot of functional translation has been going on in Bangladesh, both for international and domestic purposes. The World Bank, UNICEF, and the numerous NGOs need reports, papers, handouts, etc. to be translated. The growth of international travel – for education, work or other purposes – also means that there is an increasing need to translate different types of documents. The result has been the development of a veritable translation industry, with shops along busy thoroughfares advertising translation services.

However, in addition to this functional translation – of documents, transcripts and reports – there has also been a steady growth of literary translation, much of this sporadic and dependent on the translator. While most Bengali writers are still fiercely nationalistic, a sociological and demographic change has taken place. There is a large Bengali diaspora, with people moving out of Bangladesh for education, jobs, and “the pursuit of happiness.” While the first generation of immigrants cling to their mother tongue, their children soon forget it. In Bangladesh as well there is a whole generation of young people growing up away from their mother tongue because of English-language education. Bangla writers want to reach this audience by publishing English translations of their writings.



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As a result, there is a lot of literary translation from Bangla to English – from the “mother tongue” to what Bobby Islam, the late editor of a local daily, termed the “father tongue.” He had used the term when he had applied to the Department of English, University of Dacca, as it was spelled in those days. At the time, the university had separate admission tests for its different departments. Bobby Islam was being interviewed by the formidable head of the department and was asked, “Why do you wish to study English?” The young man replied, “Because it is my father tongue.” Taken aback, the head asked for an explanation. Bobby replied that English was the language of power. It was the language that opened doors to prestigious jobs. He did get admitted and went on to become the editor of a newspaper now defunct. In one of his editorials he mentioned this incident.¹ It is his phrase that I use when I refer to English as the “father tongue” with all the implications that it has.

Most translations in other parts of the world are from a foreign language to one’s mother tongue. Why in India or Bangladesh – perhaps in Pakistan as well – do we see so many translations from one’s mother tongue into the father tongue, from one’s native language to English? Many explanations have been given, the predominant one being that we would like to translate our writings so that the world can read these master works. The famous example given is that of Tagore. Would Tagore have won the Nobel Prize if the *Gitanjali* had not been available in English? Many writers hope that their work will win the next Nobel Prize and look for translators to help them. However, many translations do not succeed. Writers who show their translations to foreign publishers are told that the translations are not up to the mark. And yet that has not prevented people from translating or having their works translated.

Native Bangla-speakers often lack command of the language into which they are translating – the *target language*. Furthermore, even when they do have competent target language skills, they lack the ear for the target language which is essential for all creative writers and translators. Many years ago, in his introduction to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao talked about the necessity of the language being not just part of the writer’s intellectual makeup but also of his “emotional makeup.” While he was talking about the creative writer, this is also true of the translator. It was a point that Amiya Chakravarty made when discussing the difficulties of translating from Bangla in general and Tagore in particular. He noted that the resonances of the language and its cultural undertones are often lost in translation. To have a “valid” translation, as he put it, it must be “done in the language learnt by a poet at his mother’s knee, a poet

¹ Anwarul Islam, better known as Bobby Islam (1942-1994), founded the now defunct *Morning Sun*. He mentioned this incident in an editorial in the paper.

for whom it is the language of his subconscious” (317). Chakravarty was mainly talking about translating poetry, but what he said applies to other creative writing as well: plays, short stories, and novels. However, to be a good writer or translator, must a language be learned at one’s mother’s knee? One of the most remarkable creations of the last century was Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett, an Irishman, wrote the play in French before translating it into English. Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* plays with the English language in the most delightful way – and Nabokov grew up in Russian. And, even earlier, one of the masters of the English language, Joseph Conrad, was not born into English. Roquiah Sakhawat Hussain wrote the remarkable “Sultana’s Dream” in English before she translated it into Bangla as *Sultanar Swapna*. Significantly, neither Bangla nor English was Roquiah’s mother tongue. Abu Sayeed Ayyub, one of the great literary critics in Bangla, did not learn Bangla at his mother’s knee.

Other more recent examples of writers who have moved from their mother tongues to writing in the father tongue include Khaled Hosseini from Afghanistan, Aamer Hussain and Nadeem Aslam from Pakistan, Neamat Imam, Zia Haider Rahman, and Arif Anwar from Bangladesh. Of course, these are creative writers, but, as the PEN America organized “World of Translation Conference” in 1970 noted in a “Bill of Rights,” a translator is also a creative writer:

Since translation of works of literature by the very nature of the task is the creation of a new work, the translator must be regarded as sovereign. The translator’s chief obligation is to create the work in a new language with the appropriate music and the utmost response to the silences of the original.

A good translation is possible only when the translator has not just the language skills but the imaginative brilliance and literary skills of a creative writer. Translators not familiar with the idioms of the target language, not familiar with the culture, not familiar with the music of the target language, cannot be good translators. Weak translators are not quite sure when to paraphrase or translate literally and when to paraphrase, convey the meaning.

Sometimes translators are aware of their limitations but persist, hoping that the translation will interest someone better qualified to rework it. Sometimes this is a false Bengali/Asian humility such as when Tagore expressed his weakness in English. Tagore was not weak in English as his remarkable prose translation of “চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির” (“Chitta jetha bhoysnunno, uccho jetha shir”) shows.

Tagore's original Bangla reads:

চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির,
চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির,
জ্ঞান যেথা মুক্ত, যেথা গৃহের প্রাচীর
আপন প্রাঙ্গণতলে দিবসশর্বরী
বসুধারে রাখে নাই খণ্ড ক্ষুদ্র করি,
যেথা বাক্য হৃদয়ের উৎসমুখ হতে
উচ্ছ্বসিয়া উঠে, যেথা নির্বীরিত শ্রোতে
দেশে দেশে দিশে দিশে কর্মধারা ধায়
অজস্র সহস্রবিধ চরিতার্থতায়,
যেথা তুচ্ছ আচারের মরুবালুরাশি
বিচারের শ্রোতঃপথ ফেলে নাই গ্রাসি,
পৌরুষেরে করে নি শতধা, নিত্য যেথা
তুমি সর্ব কর্ম চিন্তা আনন্দের নেতা,
নিজ হস্তে নির্দয় আঘাত করি, পিতঃ;
ভারতেরে সেই স্বর্গে করো জাগরিত।

Tagore's own translation reads:

Where the Mind is Without Fear
Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and
action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

However, often that false humility about one's weakness proves actually quite true. For example, some years ago some selected poems of the Bangladeshi writer Al-Mahmud were translated into English. In his introduction, Mahbubul Alam Akhand, the translator expressed his reservations about the quality of the translation as English was not his mother tongue. He hoped, however, that someone better qualified would take up the task that he had attempted.

As Rimi B. Chatterjee points out in her essay "Translation,"

Furthermore, India is probably the only country where people who

read the originals also read the translations just as avidly. They are invariable disappointed. It is very difficult to explain to readers that translation cannot and must not attempt to recreate the original in another language. All it can do is provide an approximation that asymptotically approaches the excellence of the source without ever quite reaching it. A good translation should awaken in its readers a twinge of regret that they cannot read the original in its pristine glory. Yet people here are conditioned to the idea that English and its works are somehow superior, and that the verse of Rabindranath Tagore in English, for example, must be a wonderful thing. They do not realize that as readers of the originals they are in the closest, most privileged position anyone can be in with regard to the text, and that translations are meant for those unfortunate beings who will never reach that state. (26)

This is also true to some extent of Bangladesh as well. Readers of translations from Bangla are almost always disappointed because the translations do not achieve the quality of the originals.

However, even a translator who is equally skilled in both SL and TL, the mother tongue and the father tongue, might face problems. The formidable head of the English Department whom I mentioned earlier faced problems of translation – how true could he be to the original? – when faced with the complexities of cultural differences. Syed Sajjad Husain who did some remarkable translations of Kazi Nazrul Islam – though he did not often hesitate to change the order of the lines, which only a comparison with the original will reveal – hesitated when he came to translate Nazrul’s masterpiece: “Bidrohi.” In addition to the almost breathless pace of the verse, the tone of the lines, reminiscent of Whitman in “Song of Myself,” there is also a range of images drawn from Hindu mythology which Husain felt would be impossible for a non-Bengali reader to understand. He explains the reasons for his truncation of Nazrul’s remarkable poem.

[The poem’s] dazzling array of images and metaphors drawn from numerous sources, Indian, Islamic, Greek, and even industrial, strung together in apparent disregard of logic, is difficult to translate. The repetitions, inconsistencies, and paradoxes in Bengali are redeemed by the vigour and energy of the verse and the fascinating succession of rhymes. But I found that a literal rendering would result in a version which would not only fail to convey the superb beauty of the poem but even expose it to the ridicule of foreign readers not familiar either with the idiom of the Bengali language or with non-western mythology. I have therefore pruned away lines which I thought

would not translate well and also tried to avoid the repetitions which would tire the reader's ear in English. The translation is consequently slightly shorter than the original. (25)

Husain seems to belong to the Macaulay school of education, believing that Indian mythology is ridiculous. Macaulay was not talking specifically of Indian mythology but of the language of education, but his scoffing at the contents of books in “Sanskrit” – which is how he spells the word – reveals his distaste for them.

The question now before us is simply whether, when it is in our power to teach this language, we shall teach languages in which, by universal confession, there are no books on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own, whether, when we can teach European science, we shall teach systems which, by universal confession, wherever they differ from those of Europe differ for the worse, and whether, when we can patronize sound philosophy and true history, we shall countenance, at the public expense, medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made of seas of treacle and seas of butter.

Thanks to writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Indian myths and legends as well as Indian words and phrases have entered literature. (Earlier, of course, Indian words like khaki, jodhpurs, bungalow, pajama had become part of the British lexicon. These words are no longer italicized.) The newer words – not so common in English – are still, for the most part, italicized except by publishers like Zubaan who deliberately do not italicize words from indigenous languages.

As Rimi B. Chatterjee notes, western readers have grown more tolerant of cultural differences. Many terms too have become common beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent.

Today many of the Indian originals (at least in the case of *kebab*) are now almost universally familiar to most Western readers. In addition, readers, have become more tolerant of cultural difference and no longer balk at a glossary of Indian kinship terms; food, flora and fauna; and articles of dress and daily use. Concomitantly, it is fast becoming standard practice among publishers of translations not to translate such words, but to leave them (in italics, usually) where the context makes it fairly clear what they are (supplementing

this with a glossary at the back of the book) or, if such practice interferes seriously with the flow of the text, to substitute a short descriptive phrase for the Indian name rather than look for a closely matching English word. However, the practice can be a problem if the publisher/translator lacks the vision to see readership beyond the immediate locale. Not being a Tamil speaker, when reading some translations of Tamil works, I have been frustrated to find numerous words untranslated in the text, but no glossary provided. It is not merely translations which offend thus; Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, could have done with a glossary for non-Malayalam speakers. (25-26)

To return to Husain. It is clear from other translations that Husain did that he was an able translator. His skill as a translator is revealed in his moving translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's "Shat-el-Arab":

Forever glorious, forever holy,
Your sacred beaches, Shat-el-Arab,
Are bathed in gore, the blood of fighters
Of many races, and diverse colours.

Strewn on these sands lie the bones of Arab,
Egyptian and Turk and Greek and Bedouin,
Also of women, bold and daring,
Who sobbed as they battled, reckless of danger.

The surging waters of the roaring Tigris
Bring you the blood they shed at Amara;
And the Euphrates thunders daily
Warnings to those whose hearts are evil.

You the nurse of the brave and the fearless
Who'd rather die than bow to a master,
These beaches ring with the voice of Ali
From a distant past, now dim and shrouded.

The crimson flame-like roses of Basra
Are radiant emblems of war and glory;
They flourish on soil where heads have tumbled
Like fruit from the date-palm in arid deserts.

We met by chance, but here are my greetings –
Homage sincere from a fellow bondsman –
To the sacred beaches of Shat-el-Arab,
Forever glorious, forever holy. (85)

A comparison with the Bangla original will reveal that Husain's translation lacks much of the declamatory nature of Nazrul's poem. Husain also does not try to replicate the structure of the original poem. Nor does he emulate the repetitions in the poem. By itself, however, Husain's translation succeeds in conveying the spirit of Nazrul's poem – the past glories of the Arab world and the loss of that glory which reminds the poet of the condition of his own country. The Arab of Nazrul's times was a “bondsman” like the Indian.

শাত্-ইল্-আরব

শাতিল্-আরব । শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর ।
শহীদের লোহু, দিলীরের খুন ঢেলেছে যেখানে আরব-বীর ।
যুবোছে এখঅনে তুর্ক-সেনানী,
যুনানি মিসুরি আরবি কেনানি; –
লুটেছে এখানে মুক্ত আজাদ বেদুঈন্দের চাঙ্গা-শির!
নাঙ্গা-শির –
শম্শের হাতে, আঁসু-আঁখে হেথা মূর্তি দেখেছি বীর-নারীর!
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর ।

‘কত-আমারা’র রক্তে ভরিয়া
দজলা এনেছে লোহুর দরিয়া;
উগারি’ সে খুন তোমাতে দজলা নাচে ভৈরব ‘মস্তানী’র
ব্রস্তা-নীর
গর্জে রক্ত-গঙ্গা ফোরাত,- “শান্তি দিয়েছি গোস্তাখীর!”
দজলা-ফোরাত-বাহিনী শাতিল! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর ।

বহায়ে তোমার লোহিত বন্যা
ইরাক্ আজমে করেছ ধন্যা –
বীরপ্রসূ দেশ হ’ল বরণ্যা মরিয়া মরণ মর্দমীর!
মর্দ বীর
সাহারায় এরা ধুঁকে মরে তবু পরে না শিকল পদ্ধতির ।
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর ।

দুশমন-লোহু ঈর্ষায় নীর
তব তরঙ্গে করে ঝিল্-ঝিল্,
বাঁকে বাঁকে রোষে মোচড় খেয়েছে পিয়ে নীল খুন পিঞ্জরীর!
জিন্দা বীর
“জুলফিকার” আর “হায়দরী” হাঁক হেথা আজো হজরত্ আলীর –
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! জিন্দা রেখেছে তোমার তীর ।
ললাটে তোমার ভাস্বর টিকা
বস্ৱা-গুলের বহিতে লিখা;
এ যে বসোরার খুন-খারাবি গো রক্ত-গোলাপ-মঞ্জরীর
খঞ্জরীর

খঞ্জরে বারে খজুর- সম হেথা লাখো দেশ-ভক্ত-শির!
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।

ইরাক-বাহিনী! এ যে গো কাহিনী,
কে জানিত কবে বঙ্গ-বাহিনী
তোমারও দুঃখে “জননী আমার!” বলিয়া ফেলিবে তপ্ত নীর!

রক্ত-ক্ষীর -

পরাদীনা! একই ব্যথায় ব্যথিত ঢালিল দু'ফোঁটা ভক্ত-বীর।
শহীদের দেশ! বিদায়! বিদায়!! এ অভাগা আজ নোয়ায় শির। (83-84)

Some other translator might, it is true, retain more of Nazrul's repetitions, keep closer to the original, but Husain's translation does not require the explanations that he felt were needed for his translation of Nazrul's master poem. Was it then the matter of Nazrul's "Bidrohi" that was a problem for Husain and caused him to excuse the truncation of the poem?

Whereas Husain decided to leave out much that was culturally different, other translators too attempt to cater to foreign readers by trying to omit the cultural differences and substituting synonyms. Thus, translations of Bangla texts often see the word "gamchha" being replaced by the phrase "rough towel" or "coarse towel" and the words "sari" and "lungi" replaced by "native dress/garment." Sari has become an accepted word now, though *lungi* and *gamchha* are not that common. But even if they are not, translators can easily retain them, giving an explanation in parenthetical commas – rather than in parenthesis, footnotes, or a glossary. Of course, Rimi B. Chatterjee is critical of the lack of a glossary to the many Malayalam terms that Arundhati Roy used in *A God of Small Things*. Much the same can be said of Junot Diaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008), which is full of Spanish words and sentences and problematic for readers who do not know Spanish.

Salman Rushdie was perhaps the first writer from the Indian subcontinent to use Hindi/Urdu words and phrases with a vengeance, refusing to explain or gloss them. How much should one think of the foreign reader when translating? How much of the original should be left untranslated? And how much should be translated for an audience not familiar with the language or its culture? This is not a problem only relevant to Bangladesh but to India as well. I would like to take the example of the same vignette from Sa'adat Hasan Manto's *Siyah Hashiye* (1948) – "Black Margins" – translated in three different ways by three different people.

The translator who is most well-known for his translations of Manto is Khalid Hasan. Here is Hasan's translation:

MODESTY

The rioters brought the train to a stop. Those who belonged to the other religion were methodically picked out and slaughtered. After it was all over, those who remained were treated to a feast of milk, custard pies and fresh fruit. Before the train moved off, the leader of the hosts addressed the passengers: “Brothers and sisters, since we were informed late of your train’s arrival time, we were not able to offer you the kind of hospitality we would have wished.” (407)

Hasan, believing that his English-reading audience would not understand “halwa,” uses the term “custard pies.”

Mushirul Hasan, in *India Partitioned*, has a slightly different translation:

Hospitality Delayed Kasri Nafsi

Rioters brought the running train to a halt. People belonging to the other community were pulled out and slaughtered with swords and bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to halwa, fruits and milk. The chief assassin made a farewell speech before the train pulled out of the station. “Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies. News of this train’s arrival was delayed. That is why we have not been able to entertain you lavishly the way we wanted to.” (97)

Mushirul Hasan uses one Urdu word, “halwa.”

In addition to “halwa” – but spelled “halva” – M. Asaduddin also retains the Urdu address: “Bhaiyon aur Behnon.” By retaining the Urdu, he places the story in North India/Pakistan where the train massacres took place. These seemingly “slight” differences reflect on meaning. A careful translator chooses words, synonyms, phrases consciously. Perhaps even more than the original writer.

Humility

The moving train was forcibly brought to a halt. Those who belonged to the other religion were dragged out and killed with swords or bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to halva, fruits and milk. Before the train continued on, the chief organizer of the hospitality addressed the passengers, “Bhaiyon aur Behnon! We found out about this train’s arrival rather late. That’s why, even though we wanted to, we weren’t able to treat you in a more befitting manner.” (186)

How much of the original language should be retained in translation? One can always say that one should retain only those words and phrases that have

no equivalents in the target language. Thus, spelled or pronounced “hulwa” or “halva,” the sweetmeat is both unique and common to the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. And even if it is not as familiar as “kebab” or “kabab,” it has no English equivalent and should be retained. However, “Bhaiyon aur Behnon” does translate to “Brothers and Sisters.” Nevertheless, the use of this phrase suggests where the train massacre took place – without the translator having to say as much.

Another problem when translating from the mother tongue to the father tongue is unfamiliarity with correct idiomatic English. By this I do not mean ungrammatical English – though many translators are guilty of this – but a lack of familiarity with contemporary English. A number of English words have become part of Bangla – but have slightly different meanings. The word “hotel,” for example, has a different meaning in English and in Bangla. In English it means a place which provides accommodation, meals, and other services for travelers and tourists. Interestingly, in South Asia, the word can mean a restaurant, café, or roadside eatery. Signs such as “Highway Hotel,” “Muslim Hotel,” “Bhai-Bhai Hotel” are common in India and Bangladesh. While one can use these names while writing a story, it is a little absurd to say one stopped at a hotel for a meal and then resumed one’s journey. If one is actually stopping at a hotel for a meal – many people do have just meals at a hotel – the context must clarify it. However, if the writer means a roadside eatery, that is the term that should be used.

Translators – and writers – need to be familiar with current English as well as their prospective audience. Many terms introduced by the British in India are no longer used. Thus, translating the simple Bangla word “baigun” can be a problem. In India it is known as “brinjal” in English. Similarly “bhindi” or “dherosh” was “lady’s fingers” in British India. Today, perhaps a translator would use “aubergine” or “eggplant” for “baigun” and “okra” for “bhindi.” In other words, would-be literary translators need to familiarize themselves with the current terms and idioms of the target language as well as with contemporary fiction and poetry, with literature as it is written today in the target language.

Translators also need to be aware of cultural differences. A word or image might mean entirely different things to readers of the original and readers of the translation. Some years ago, I was translating a short story by Makbula Manzoor. The story was about a young woman who was raped during 1971, betrayed by the man she loved, and consequently had to leave her village to work in the city. The title of the Bangla story was “Kochuripana,” meaning water hyacinth. To an English reader, the hyacinth is a beautiful flower; for an educated reader who

has read Greek mythology, the term carries suggestions of homosexual love.² In Bangladesh, where this beautiful flower floats on the riverways, clogging them and becoming a nuisance, it is waste, unwanted rubbish. Therefore, instead of using “Hyacinth” for the title, I used the word “Flotsam,” to give the sense of something unwanted but also floating – as the protagonist is after the war.

All translations, however, are not from the mother tongue to the father tongue or vice versa. They are also from other tongues. Two hundred years ago, Raja Ram Mohun Roy knew Bangla, Persian, Arabic, and English. He knew Persian well enough to found and edit *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* (Mirror of News), a Persian language journal.³ Even fifty years ago, Bengalis were familiar with languages other than their mother and father tongues. Hindu students were expected to take Sanskrit as a second language at school, Muslim students Persian. An educated Bengali Muslim at the beginning of the twentieth century would be expected to know English, Bangla, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Despite his checkered schooling, Kazi Nazrul Islam learned Arabic as well as Persian in addition to Bangla and English. He was able to translate the *Ampara* from Arabic as well as the Persian poetry of Hafiz and Omar Khayyam.

Many translations in Bangladesh from languages other than English into the mother tongue are via another translation, generally an English one. What are the problems related to this sort of translation? To explain the problems, I am going to examine different translations of two *rubais* of Omar Khayyam. Edward Fitzgerald’s translations of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* are still the best-known English translations.⁴ However, anyone attempting to translate from Fitzgerald’s translation will not be translating Omar Khayyam but Fitzgerald. The following examples will explain why it is necessary to go to the original rather than to a translation.

While there are occasions when Nazrul Indianized the Persian of Khayyam as Rachel McDermott points out in an unpublished paper,⁵ Nazrul was translating from the original Persian to Bangla – directly, not through another language. The following examples show how Fitzgerald deviated from Khayyam in these two *rubais*, and how much closer Nazrul was to the original Persian in one of them because he was translating from the original.

2 See James E. Miller’s discussion of the Hyacinth girl in *T. S. Eliot’s Personal Wasteland* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1977).

3 The newspaper was published on a weekly basis on Fridays. It was first published on April 12, 1822. The last edition appeared on April 4, 1823.

4 His name is spelled both FitzGerald and Fitzgerald. He was the first and most famous English translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

5 “Omar Khayyam’s Persian *Rubaiyat* in Nazrul Islam’s Bengali World.”

We are familiar with the following Fitzgerald translation:

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

Here is Nazrul's translation of the *rubai*:

মুসাফিরের এক রাত্রির পাস্ত-বাস এ পৃথীতল –
রাত্রি-দিবার চিত্রলেখা চন্দ্রাতপ আঁধার-উজাল।
বসল হাজার জামশেদ ঐ উৎসবেরই আঙ্গিনায়
লাখ বাহুরাম এই আসনে বসে হল বেদখল। (138)

In Persian the *rubai* reads:

in kuhnah ribat ra kih 'alam namast
aram-gah-i ablaq-i subh-o-sham ast
basmist kih vamandah-i sad jamshid ast
gorist kih takyah-gah-i sad bahramast⁶

As McDermott notes, E. H. Whinfield's translation is closer to the original Persian than is Fitzgerald's:

This earth is a journeyman's lodge –
Its canopy alternating bright and dark, day and night.
A thousand Jamsheds sat in this festival courtyard;
A lakh of Bahrams were forced off their seats.⁷

Like Whinfield, Nazrul too refers to Jamsheds and Bahrams, and is thus closer to the Persian than is Fitzgerald. There is no reference to Jamsheds or Bahrams in Fitzgerald's translation, only to generic sultans.

Another famous "translation" by Fitzgerald is the following:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Here is Nazrul's translation – Indianizing the *rubai* as McDermott notes – but with no reference to the book of verses which exists in Fitzgerald but not in the Persian original:

⁶ Quoted in McDermott.

⁷ The translations from Whinfield are also quoted from McDermott's paper as are her translations of Nazrul's translations.

যতক্ষণ এ হাতের কাছে আছে অচেল লাল শারাব
গেছুর রুটি, গরম কোর্মা, কালিয়া আর শিক-কাবাব,
আর লালা-রুখ, প্রিয়া আমার কুটির-শয়ন-সঙ্গিনী, –
কোথায় লাগে শাহানশাহের দৌলৎ ঐ বে-হিসাব। (143)

McDermott's translation of Nazrul's translation reads:

As long as plentiful red wine is near at hand,
Wheat bread, warm kormas, kaliya curry, sikh-kababs,
And a tulip-cheeked beloved, a partner with me in bed –
The inestimable riches of the Shahenshah are no match for this.

The Persian original reads:

gar dast dahad z maghz-i gandam nani
vaz mi du mani z gusfandi rani
ba lalah-rukhi nishastah dar virani
'aishi bud in nah hadd-i har sultani

Whinfield's translation of the Persian reads:

As long as I possess two maunds of wine,
Bread of the flower of wheat, and mutton chine,
And you, O Tulip-Cheeks, to share my cell,
Not every Sultan's lot can vie with mine.

While Nazrul has also taken some liberties in his translation – made the tulip-cheeked beloved his partner in bed, the sultan a shahenshah, the choices made are his, not the translation of choices made by another translator. Many Bengali translators translate “other tongues” through the medium of an English translation of the original. These examples of a couple of Khayyam's translations reveal just how fraught with problems such translations can be.

Would-be translators will ask, does that mean we have to learn Greek or Italian or Spanish in order to translate world masterpieces into Bangla? Is it possible? Perhaps no, but in this case translators should choose the other tongue they wish to work with, learn some of it and then work with someone who knows the source language and can communicate with the translator. Sometimes it is important to know the connotations of words, sometimes to know the sounds of the original. This is perhaps a tedious way of working but that is what good translators have been doing.⁸

⁸ Many years ago, Carolyn Wright translated Bangla poems into English. She almost always worked with a person knowing Bangla. Rachel McDermott, who has been doing a lot of work on Nazrul, also works with persons knowing Bangla.

I would like to end by quoting from “Translating Fiction /Connecting Cultures,” an essay I wrote earlier:

A good translation should be in the language in use, but should also retain the cultural differences that are embedded in the source language. The translator must tread a thin line: be faithful to the universalities in the text being translated but also convey the differences in that text. Often it is simply a matter of using words from the source language appropriately. (21)

And, for translations from other tongues, translators should go to the original, not a translation. They should choose one other tongue to translate, instead of piggy-backing on other translators to “translate” from several.

NOTE: This paper was one of the two plenaries presented at the East West University Conference on “Transgressing/Transcending Borders through Translation,” January 25-26, 2019.

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Literature and Cultural Studies

Fiction as Ethnography: Impact of Zora Neale Hurston's Academic Training on Her Creative Work

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Abstract

This paper explores how Zora Neale Hurston's training as an ethnographer impacted her creative work as a fiction writer. It achieves its stated objective by first theorizing upon the topic by juxtaposing Hurston's ethnographic career and research work with those of two women ethnographers, Cuba's Lydia Cabrera and Poland's Anzia Yeziarska, to illustrate how Hurston utilized her academic training and inside knowledge of her community to develop special methodologies uniquely designed to address her specific challenges in conducting ethnographic research on Black American minority culture. Next, the paper theorizes Hurston's use of various ethnographic details, such as religious imagery derived from local spiritual and cultural practices, as well as feminist Biblical revisionism. Two short stories by Hurston, "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," are thoroughly analyzed for their aspects of material culture (specifically religious symbolism and money), representation of women's economic empowerment, and depiction of marriage. The paper concludes that Hurston's earliest work was more likely to have benefited from her recollections and experiences of her native Black American culture as compared to her later work, which included richer ethnographic details.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, fiction as ethnography, black women's writing, feminist literature, American South

The relationship between fiction and ethnography has been studied extensively previously, with conclusions that differ widely between generations of scholars and across disciplines. The former is naturally fictitious, and yet a fictional text is nearly always rooted in reality, whereas the latter is an academic subfield that falls within the ambit of anthropology. Any ethnographer would be required to negotiate certain sets of methodological tools and guidelines to produce an ethnographic text that can be considered as suitably valid research. Essentially, the only, and probably the most important, similarity between a fictional and an ethnographic text is that they are both based on narrative. Both texts are effectively stories, each with its own separate methodologies and narrative techniques, as



well as unique creative approaches and practices. Zora Neale Hurston, an author and ethnographer, for instance, had to develop a separate methodology for her work because the existing ethnographic methods at the time adversely affected her fieldwork (Jirousek 20-21). Overlaps are, however, also possible between these two forms of narrative media. For example, an entire fiction text could be created from the findings of ethnographic or other academic fieldwork, as reflected in Hurston's short story, "Sweat."

This paper postulates that Hurston's training as an ethnographer had a definite and profound impact on her creative work, greatly enhancing her observational skills. It demonstrates how Hurston's deep insight into the rural African-American community reveals her in-depth knowledge of her community and profession. The paper also explores the thematic relevance of some short stories by Hurston for their literary and ethnographic merit and sociopolitical importance. The first section presents a theoretical overview of selected scholarly material that enhances our comprehension of the wide range of themes and issues that come into play in both Hurston's ethnographic research and in her creative work. Next, the paper provides a literary analysis of two of Hurston's short stories, "Sweat" (first published in 1926) and "The Gilded Six-Bits" (first published in 1933). It addresses and analyzes some important ethnographic details, such as elements of material culture, language, as well as the themes of marriage and women's economic independence, in the following sections.

This section addresses two main objectives. First, it provides an insight into Hurston's background and training as an ethnographer, and attempts to comprehend how it influenced her fiction. Second, it offers a thematic understanding of her short stories, particularly in terms of the use of language and religious symbolism in her fiction. It also analyzes the representation of heterosexual conjugal relations, the problem of domestic abuse within the community, and women's empowerment with a particular focus on Black women's economic independence. Two of the secondary texts, by Lynda Hoffman-Jeep and Lori Jirousek, are comparative pieces juxtaposing Hurston's work with those of other women ethnographers. As a result, there are several overlapping areas in both articles. However, these articles were selected for their analyses of Hurston's ethnographic research work because they help us to understand and interpret the ethnographic details in her fiction. Articles by Cheryl A. Wall, Catherine Carter, and Tammy Jenkins analyze various thematic aspects of Hurston's fiction and illustrate how she drew upon her skills as an ethnographer, the data she collected as part of her ethnographic research, the kind of narrative strategies she employed while putting together her collected data, and how she used all of it to embellish her stories.

In her 2005 essay, “Creating Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia Cabrera,” Lynda Hoffman-Jeep analyzes Hurston’s role as a “native ethnographer” who “recreate[d]” in writing a culture she had experienced firsthand, and invigorates it with certain creative strategies as part of her experimental response to the scholarly traditions of ethnography (337). She juxtaposes Hurston’s origins and her work on Black American folklore with the work of Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera on Afro-Cuban folklore. The first section outlines Hurston’s educational career to illustrate how she began researching Black American minority culture, although she was a native of the said culture. Hoffman-Jeep also writes about how Hurston’s experiences of studying in an entirely white academic environment at Barnard College helped to provide her with a certain emotional distance that enabled her to view her connection with the Black American minority culture objectively when and as required. However, Hurston simultaneously dealt with the implications of being a Black person studying in a predominantly white university and with her hyperawareness of her different cultural identity. In doing so, Hoffman-Jeep addresses the importance of the “paradoxical and yet fundamental role” played by the physical and emotional distances in “facilitating insight and recognition, while simultaneously promoting a scholar’s self-construction” (337). She then analyzes Hurston’s use of the spyglass metaphor, which is most interesting and is closely connected to her scholarly self, because it shows that she recognizes that her investigations are covert, and therefore involve numerous maneuvers that are necessary for Hurston’s field research. In the second section, Hoffman-Jeep delves into an analysis of the various conceptual problems that occur within the standard methodology of native ethnography. Although it might be a good idea to send a native anthropologist or ethnographer, well-trained in their discipline’s modes of collecting data, to gather field work data on a particular group, such as the Black American minority culture in Eatonville, US, the fact that many such native anthropologists/ethnographers possess what is known as the “multiple planes of identification” (qtd. in Hoffman-Jeep 345) can have implications for the authenticity of the finished product of that research. However, both Hurston and Cabrera were able to successfully negotiate their so-called multiple planes of identification in their undertakings of their respective collections of folktales, resulting in what could be considered a type of feminist experimental ethnography.

Similarly, Lori Jirousek juxtaposes Hurston with a Polish ethnographer, Anzia Yezierska, in her essay, “Ethnics and Ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska.” However, she provides a more detailed insight into their struggles with the traditional practice of participant observation, and their complex relationships with their mentors, Franz Boas and John Dewey,

respectively. Jirousek also notes their struggles faced by Hurston and Yeziarska in gaining the acceptance and trust of their informants, and asserts, like Hoffman-Jeep, that both Hurston and Yeziarska had to negotiate their way through the traditional ethnographical methodologies. Hurston was particularly successful in eventually gaining her informants' trust by personally engaging with them. When writing *Mules and Men*, she becomes an almost-character in the text instead of maintaining the conventional passivity and detachment of an ethnographer. Jirousek conjectures that by authoring an "ethnographic fiction" (qtd. in Jirousek 22) that will eventually subvert the "Boasian standards of objectivity and accuracy," Hurston injects subjectivity into her work by mixing the genres of pure narrative and social science research to gain greater accuracy. She believes that an accurate ethnographic text has no pretense of objectivity, but instead it assumes its form from the perspectives and interests of the informants' community. Moreover, an ethnographic text would be more accurate if it directly incorporates the informants' participation, while keeping the entire process transparent. Having achieved this, Hurston was able to gain the acceptance and confidence of the community and thus greater access to folklore material to share with the readers. The format of her text mirrors this "mutual personal exchange," which results in the emergence of a plot and characters (Jirousek 22), thus resembling a fiction text. The article, then, discusses Yeziarska's experiences while conducting her ethnographic research, which produced very different results compared to Hurston's. Jirousek concludes by stating that Hurston, along with Yeziarska, inaugurated their creative writing careers in significant ways through their ethnographic fieldwork and mentors. They produced exceptional "cross-genre texts" that encapsulated "ethnic informant voices" in a remarkable manner, while also functioning as "models of sensitive and personal cultural documentation for future writers of fiction and ethnography" (Jirousek 30).

Cheryl A. Wall's 1989 essay, "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment," analyzes how the narrative strategies used by Hurston in *Mules and Men* depict a "successful quest" (Wall 661) for women's empowerment. She provides an immensely detailed insight into Hurston's structuring and flow of the narrative, which is introduced by a narrator named Zora, and assimilates the exact "structural patterns of the folk tales" (Wall 666) through her in-depth discussion. The interludes between the folk tales are peppered with what Wall terms as the "between-story conversation[s]," while "directional markers" are used to signal the exact points of transition between the tales, the interludes, and the sections of the book. This enhances the vividness of her narrative of Black American folklore. Moreover, the real-life character of Big Sweet, with whom Hurston spent a lot of time during her fieldwork, appears to be rather an important

symbol of women's empowerment. There are, of course, other women that Hurston's narrator-persona interacts with during her fieldwork, but Big Sweet receives greater attention from Wall in her analysis. Wall's detailed analysis of *Mules and Men* also establishes clear connections between Hurston's collected data from her ethnographical fieldwork and her fiction, especially her novels like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, and by implication, with her short stories as well; for example, the symbol of the porch frequently crops up in her fiction, such as in one of her earlier short stories, "Sweat."

Catherine Carter analyzes the radical conservatism and revisionist Biblical symbolism in Hurston's short story, "Sweat," in her essay, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus." According to her, Hurston rewrites the Biblical story of Genesis to associate men instead of women with the original sin, both as its cause and the result of the fall. She also attributes Christ-like values like meekness, forgiveness, and hard work to Delia Jones, a Black woman, in anticipation of the eventual realization by the white Western world that historical Jesus Christ was unlikely to be "white." Carter also explores how the snake and its role in the story depict it as a divine figure, while the whip, which initially resembles the snake in its body and movement, eventually develops into a phallic symbol that connotes evil, devilish tendencies. Discussing heterosexual relationships in the context of the story, she argues that Sykes and Delia's conjugal relationship echoes the master-slave relationship from the slavery era. This master-slave connection, in her opinion, is symbolized by the whip that Sykes uses to beat Delia. However, Carter finds that the story relays "a discouraging message" for domestic violence survivors despite its rich revisionism and its overall "condemnation for the many instances of abuses of power and love" (617). Nevertheless, she agrees in her conclusion that the lack of options for Delia resulted directly from the then-contemporary, real-life situations where women did have limited options when faced with domestic abuse.

Tammy Jenkins undertakes a more in-depth exploration of African religious symbols and lore in Hurston's "Sweat," juxtaposing it with her novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. She first describes both New Orleans Vodou and the Hoodoo, which initially started in the Mississippi Delta and was then transported to Haiti. Both of them are "eclectic practices" that are derived from not only the old African religions, but also from the various branches of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition of the New World. They draw upon language, culture, lore, and various other cultural elements from their surroundings to reinvent the old African religious practices. This echoes Hurston's experiences with these religio-cultural practices that she encountered during her ethnographic fieldwork and forms an entire section in her ethnographic text, *Mules and Men*. She, then,

moves on to a detailed discussion on how the Vodou and Hoodoo practices are alluded to in “Sweat.” Just like Carter drew upon Biblical connotations to examine the symbolism of the snake and the chinaberry tree, Jenkins draws upon specific figures and symbols from the Vodou and Hoodoo practices to the same effect. She also interprets Hurston’s use of words depicting color to establish a connection between the African spiritual practices, Vodou, and Hoodoo. Most important, however, is the fact mentioned by Jenkins that “Sweat” was written in 1926 and was one of Hurston’s earliest writings. She had not yet embarked on her ethnographic fieldwork, during which she visited New Orleans and Haiti. As a result, she incorporates very few “elements from African-derived religious practices” (Jenkins 222) in “Sweat.”

The first two essays by Hoffman-Jeep and Jirousek, respectively, provide detailed and insightful overviews of Hurston’s ethnographic research work and methodology. Despite some overlapping areas of discussion, their overall focus and conclusions are not identical. These are followed by an outline of some important points from Wall’s in-depth analysis of Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, which reflects upon her use of narrative methods in the context of female empowerment. The essays by Carter and Jenkins offer contrasting, yet fascinating perspectives on the religious imagery in “Sweat” and, therefore, form an important part of the next section of the paper, which explores two of Hurston’s short stories: one of her earliest, “Sweat” (1926), and one of her later works, “The Gilded Six-Bits” (1933), focusing on material culture (religion, religious symbolism, and money), the representation of women’s economic empowerment, and the depiction of conjugal relationships.

Material culture refers to any tangible features of culture that cannot disintegrate easily, in case humans perish. These include objects such as utensils, weapons, tools, art, ornaments, written documents, religious artifacts, money, and clothing. Interestingly, both “Sweat” and “The Gilded Six-Bits” utilize certain aspects of material culture more symbolically; specifically, these stories depict the religious symbolism of material objects and the significance of money. Regarding the former, it must be noted that, conceptually, religious symbolism is deeply intertwined with material culture as they coalesce into assigning a symbolic, religious significance to tactile objects that have no prior symbolic significance attached to them. Once this special significance has been ascribed to these physical objects, only then do they acquire meaning as significant religious artifacts of a spiritual material culture.

Although “Sweat” was written before Hurston undertook her ethnographic research project, the story is nevertheless chock-full of rich and varied religious symbolism derived simultaneously from both Biblical and African religious

practices. It is possible that Hurston drew upon her native knowledge and experiences of Black American religious practices, with the Christian religious tradition as its central focus, when she wrote the story. This is evident through its depiction of Delia as a Christ figure and the use and subversion of various Biblical imagery, symbols, and motifs. However, some scholars observe that the same imagery, symbols, and motifs are derived from old African religious practices, such as Hoodoo and Vodou. On the other hand, money plays a significant role both as a motif and a vital part of the story's plot in "The Gilded Six-Bits."

At the beginning of the first story, Hurston describes Sykes' whip as a "long, round, limp and black" object, which "slithers to the floor" ("Sweat" 73), suggesting the whip's resemblance to a snake's body shape and style of movement. At this point in the story, Sykes' whip functions as a simple material object that has not yet been ascribed any overt religious symbolism. However, the specificity of its description foreshadows the introduction of the real, live snake as a character, central to the story's plot, a few pages later. This whip incident also establishes Delia's phobia of snakes, as well as reveals Sykes' tendency to exploit her fear for his amusement, exposes his scorn towards her, and displays how he attempts to assert his dominance over her (Jenkins 219). Thus, it provides an insight into the abusive conjugal relationship between Delia and Sykes, the two main characters, and also successfully establishes the chain of religious symbolism that plays such a crucial role in the story. According to Carter, the whip packs various connotations, especially of violence, from gendered, historical, and religious perspectives. The whip, functioning as a phallic symbol, denotes "violent male sexuality" and represents, by extension, the domestic violence that Sykes inflicts on his wife, Delia. Historically, the whip represents the violence connected to the slavery of both the Black Americans and the Hebrews in Egypt, a religious tale that has heavily influenced African American Christian traditions. The historical and religious relevance of the whip is interesting because it symbolizes the master-slave relationship by situating Sykes in the role of a potential master and Delia in the role of a slave (Carter 607). Here, the whip's religious symbolism is limited entirely to Abrahamic religions, specifically Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, Jenkins also makes a similar argument that Sykes's use of the whip to threaten Delia is reminiscent of its similar use by the slave owners to evoke fear in their slaves and guarantee their obedience. However, the crux of her argument is the opposite of Carter's, whose argument focuses more on the Abrahamic religious symbolism for her analysis of the whip. Jenkins, on the other hand, claims that by using the whip to frighten Delia, Sykes activates a series of events that allow her to call upon the spirit of Ogun, who is the god of iron in the Vodou pantheon (219), exhibited as she grabbed "the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose" ("Sweat" 75). By assuming this defensive position and

holding a metal object, Delia begins her journey towards an initiation into the Vodou rituals and practices (Jenkins 219). This is an interesting point because one may also read Delia's defensive pose from a gendered point of view, in which one witnesses a woman finally standing up and retaliating against her abusive husband who frequently assaults her most brutally. This gendered reading could also be one's very first impression of the short story. Similarly, in the scene where one of the villagers asks Sykes how he caught the snake, he cockily replies that he is a "snake charmer" ("Sweat" 81). Jenkins also reads this as "a reference to Sykes possibly being a devotee of Damballah, the serpent god of Haitian Vodou, and Li Grande Zombi, the snake god of New Orleans Hoodoo" (219). It should be noted that both Damballah and Li Grande Zombi are immensely powerful spiritual entities in their respective pantheons, are symbols of wisdom, peace, and purity, as well as the creators of the universe and sources of life force. Hence, they carry chiefly positive connotations. Although Jenkins' reading is rather intriguing and definitely merits further study for acquiring a better understanding of the topic, it still renders Sykes, most undeservedly, into an almost god-like, divine figure who carries great wisdom and spiritual power. Jenkins' argument is, thus, in sharp contrast with that of Carter's, who perceives the snake to signify Delia's deliverance from her husband's brutality, an image that essentially subverts the symbol of the Biblical serpent who led Eve, the first woman, astray and caused her to commit the original sin. Instead, the snake is now the "agent of divine justice" (Carter 613). Jenkins also explores the imagery evoked by the "love feast" that Delia attends at the church in the story's climax. This event is full of warmth, because of which she becomes "full of spirit" ("Sweat" 82), hinting that while participating in a Vodou or Hoodoo ceremony, she became "spiritually possessed by one of the Iwas" (Jenkins 219). Here, Jenkins's exploration of the imagery of the love feast echoes the earlier arguments made by her, as well as Carter, that position Delia as the source of resistance of a woman against patriarchy, the oppressed slave against the oppressive master, the tyrannized subject against a tyrannical ruler, if we also consider the significance of the story's Biblical connotations. Therefore, one postulates that essentially, the central theme of resistance against abuse and oppression underscores all the historical and religious symbolism of material objects, such as the infamous whip, in the story.

Both Carter and Jenkins concur that Delia symbolizes, or resembles, the Christ figure, or even a prophetic figure, whether examined through the lens of the Judeo-Christian tradition or the old African religious traditions, though the latter connects her to first being an initiate, then becoming an experienced practitioner of Hoodoo and Vodou. Hurston portrays her as an extremely hardworking woman who is deeply respected by all the villagers. Dedication

to one's work is considered quite a Christian value and thus serves the purpose well within the story. But what evokes the image of the Christ figure is Delia's "habitual meekness" ("Sweat" 75), her absolute calmness, and "triumphant indifference to all that [Sykes] was or did" ("Sweat" 76). However, she also displays more human qualities like genuine anger, resistance against oppression, and assertiveness. One perceives Delia's calm indifference as more of a trauma response to the domestic violence and abuse she suffers regularly; one does not always have the physical, mental, or emotional capacity to continue fighting and arguing pointlessly in such domestic situations. Hurston strikes a good balance between Delia's calm indifference, her assertiveness, and self-assuredness, as well as her acts of resistance in the story. This is what the generic, non-religious, and non-Christian reader perceives more readily than her Christ-figure qualities.

Another interesting aspect of material culture in "Sweat" is the use of color words to denote specific material objects central to the story, which Jenkins discusses in her article, making connections between the African spiritual practices and those of Vodou and Hoodoo. Colors like red and white feature extensively throughout the story and are used to refer to tangible objects or liquids. For example, the color red signifies Delia's steadily increasing rage when she angrily stares at the snake and does not run away like she did previously. Hurston describes her rage as "a red fury that grew bloodier" with every second that passed ("Sweat" 81). Jenkins connects this symbolism of the color red and Delia's act with her initiation ceremony, where the color red is characterized by Petro Iwas (219). The color red also denotes the color of blood, a material object in liquid form, which is rather significant in the story for its instances and open threats of domestic violence, as well as Sykes' eventual death by snakebite. At the beginning of the story, Delia is sorting the whites from the colored laundry and piling them separately. Jenkins reads this as a symbol of Delia's initiation "as a devotee in service to the Iwas." Similarly, Sykes' trampling and soiling the white-colored clothes ("Sweat" 74) signifies his status as the uninitiated (Jenkins 220).

The motif of money, another more tangible aspect of material culture, plays an important role in Hurston's later short story "The Gilded Six-Bits," functioning as a literary device that moves the plot forward. Although money also serves as a source of conjugal bonding between the protagonists, that aspect will be addressed in the later sections of this paper. Here, the focus lies mainly on how the motif of money functions as a symbol of greed, as well as of wrath, which are all Biblical sins. Missie and Joe are happily married, and though they are not very rich, they have a rather satisfying conjugal life. Though Joe is in awe of Slemmons' quality dressing, he does not express any desire to emulate him. But Missie shows some implicit interest in Slemmons' apparent wealth,

thus expressing the sin of greed. The first instance of this occurs after they visit Slemmons' ice cream parlor, where Missie insinuates that maybe one day they "might find some" gold while "goin' along the de road" ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 91). On one level, this is an abstract possibility, or a piece of common knowledge that might happen someday. However, in the story, one knows that this is where Missie may have planned her next steps. When her betrayal is revealed, Joe hides the gold coin in his trouser pockets to torture Missie passively in revenge, thus giving in to the sin of wrath ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 95).

While depicting Delia as a hardworking washerwoman in "Sweat," Hurston demonstrates how economic independence strengthens a woman and enables her to achieve the power and confidence to resist her abuser, as well as regain her freedom from abuse, violence, and oppression. This is illustrated in the following passage:

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

"What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it." ("Sweat" 75)

Here, Hurston establishes sweat as a motif to symbolize Delia's struggle to feed herself and take care of the household expenditures. She does so by repeating the word "sweat" eight times in this short passage to emphasize its symbolism. Delia's economic struggle began in the early days of her marriage to Sykes. As the men on the store porch corroborate, she would have starved to death if she had not commenced working as a washerwoman ("Sweat" 77). The above passage also shows that Delia is at a stage where she can now successfully assert her true position as the sole breadwinner of the household, and by extension, her economic independence. Not only does she possess confident self-awareness regarding her position, but she has also won the respect of her fellow villagers, both men and women, as illustrated in the porch scene ("Sweat" 76-77). Even Sykes is aware of it and reacts by constantly degrading Delia, and makes ludicrous, but simultaneously abusive, violent, and rather dangerous, attempts to assuage his bruised ego, which makes him an even more unsympathetic character than he already is ("Sweat" 73-76).

Though marriage is a central theme in both "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," the stories present vastly contrasting representations of it. "Sweat" illustrates an

abusive and toxic marriage between Delia and Sykes, which ends with the latter's sudden death. Alternately, "The Gilded Six-Bits" highlights a happy, loving marriage between Missie and Joe that experiences a temporary rough patch as a result of Missie's greed for money.

Delia and Sykes have been unhappily married for fifteen long years. Their marriage has now soured into an abusive and physically violent relationship that has left large amounts of "debris that clutter[s] their matrimonial trail" ("Sweat" 75). The true extent of their conjugal state is expressed in the passage that follows the iron skillet scene and Sykes' subsequent exit from the house. Delia lies in bed and reminisces about their marriage and thinks about how she was the one who "brought love to the union and [Sykes] brought a longing after the flesh," hinting at his past adulterous behavior. In the same passage, the reader also discovers that the domestic violence began within two months of their wedding, a very short time indeed ("Sweat" 75). Sykes is also abusive in other ways and has been beating Delia up for nearly as long as they have been married. He leaves no stone unturned in degrading her at every chance he gets, and also openly engages in adultery, parading his mistress through their village for everyone to see. Nevertheless, Delia remains patient and avoids confronting him about his relationship with Bertha, as well as avoiding her fellow villagers to remain "blind and deaf" ("Sweat" 79) towards her husband's infidelity. On one level, Delia's patience, silence, and lack of confrontation as an act of willful ignorance appear to encourage the interpretation that she is a Christ-like figure, as discussed above. But on another deeper level, one might also interpret her patience, silence, and lack of confrontation as a trauma response to the betrayal by her abusive husband, who blatantly carries on with his adulterous activities in public. Their conjugal relationship contains echoes of the slavery era's master-slave relationship, which is symbolized by the whip that Sykes uses to beat Delia in the story (Carter 607), as discussed above. At various times during the story, one may wonder why Hurston does not allow Delia to throw him out of her house, an act that would effectively end her conjugal relations with Sykes in the eyes of the entire village. Carter also raises this question and firmly believes that "Sweat" conveys a "discouraging message" for domestic violence survivors (617). This is a valid argument because Delia does possess the material means to take the practical step to separate from Sykes. One may even conclude that such an ending to Delia's story reveals Hurston's awareness as an insider, if not a fully trained ethnographer, that it was not entirely socially acceptable for a woman, even if she were financially stable, to separate from her husband, no matter how abusive and violent he may be towards her. This can only be explained by the influence of the social factors in taking such a decision, like having nowhere to seek refuge and support, and experiencing social ostracism, which were

important factors in 1920s America, and continue to be so today. Thus, it may be concluded that Hurston chose to end the story in a truthful manner that suited the actual social conditions of the community she was a part of.

On the other hand, the nature of conjugal relations in “The Gilded Six-Bits” is vastly different. Missie and Joe share a happy, contented conjugal relationship, which is reflected in the aura of their house and garden (86). The story quickly establishes their easy camaraderie, as well as mutual love and understanding, by depicting their Saturday routine, where Joe drops nine silver dollars on their porch and Missie pretends to be annoyed and chases after him. The chase culminates on their kitchen floor in a “furious mass of male and female energy” (“The Gilded Six-Bits” 87), a rough-and-tough cuddling session, the tone of their conversation suggesting that they are not only husband and wife, but also friends, as well as passionate lovers. Missie rummages through Joe’s pockets to extricate the little presents he has brought for her. There is also a slight hint of violence and rough sexual behavior on Missie’s part here, as can be perceived from Joe’s shouts and her attempts to be forceful. This may be considered as a foreshadowing of Missie’s betrayal, as it hints at her greed, and probably also lust to some extent, as something insatiable. On the other hand, Joe represents a rare sensitivity and a certain passivity, unlike Sykes Jones. He appears to be submissive to his wife, and quite happily so. So, when he discovers his wife’s betrayal, he is understandably angry and hurt, and one would expect him to react much more violently in contradiction to his inherently passive nature. However, his revenge turns out to be as passive as he is himself: he carries the gold coin in his pocket at all times and leaves it around the house where Missie may find it to remind her of her misdeeds and convey to her that he still remembers the incident. But, unlike Sykes’ overtly violent actions, Joe’s revenge proves to be more mentally violent, and an intriguingly more effective method of getting his way with his wife and asserting his position as the husband and breadwinner.

Of course, the most vital difference between the two marriages discussed here and their eventual resolutions, notwithstanding the amount of time they have been married for, is the presence of love, or absence thereof, in their conjugal relationship. Missie and Joe rekindle their relationship because their love is not subjected to overt violence and abuse by either of them. The implicit mental torture of Joe’s revenge loses some of its edge because Missie May is overcome with a great sense of shame and guilt at her adulterous actions. Delia and Sykes, on the other hand, are unable to do so because they never really shared that kind of love, because she “brought the love” and he “brought the longing after the flesh” (“Sweat” 75) to their conjugal relationship, which ended practically two months into their marriage.

Hurston did indeed possess a deep insight into the rural African-American culture, mainly because she hailed from that cultural background. The richness of the imagery and symbolism, as well as her in-depth knowledge of what could and could not be acceptable in such a village society as depicted in her earliest short story, "Sweat," illustrates her profound knowledge of her community. Hurston also possessed a thorough knowledge of ethnography through her training, which helped to polish her intrinsic observation skills. The detailed summaries of her ethnographic training and fieldwork experiences provided in the theoretical overview portion help form an overall picture of Hurston the ethnographer. Furthermore, the detailed textual analysis of her short stories, "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," focuses on many important ethnographic details, such as certain elements of material culture, specifically religious symbolism of otherwise unconnected tangible objects and money, as well as the themes of marriage and women's economic independence. It is, however, important to note that "Sweat" was published in 1926, much before Hurston conducted her ethnographic research and published *Mules and Men* (1935) based on that research. On the surface, this seems to defeat the objective of this paper, but it can be countered by the fact that she graduated the following year in 1927 from Barnard College with a BA in Anthropology (Hoffman-Jeep 339). This means that when she wrote and published "Sweat," she already possessed considerable knowledge of anthropology. Also, the textual evidence provided above illustrates that many images, symbols, and motifs in "Sweat" also occur in her other works, and their authenticity is thereby validated in comparison to Hurston's *Mules and Men*. Therefore, this paper concludes that although Hurston's training as an ethnographer did produce a profound impact on her creative work, her earliest work was more likely to have benefited from her recollections and experiences of her native Black American culture, as compared to her later work, which included richer ethnographic details.

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Symbolic Representations as an Impetus to Conflict Development in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

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Abstract

Specific themes and features of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* such as tradition, history, proverbs, characterization and generic classification have enjoyed much criticism. But little or no critical attention has been given to the exploration of symbolism in the play. Therefore, this study examines how symbolic representations of certain (Yoruba) objects and rituals contribute to the development of conflict in the play. The study adopts Northrop Frye's mythical symbolism. The findings of the study show that three symbolic meanings of these objects and rituals contribute to the development of conflict in the play as well as reflect certain realities in modern Nigeria. These include communion for protection or victory, diplomatic support or allegiance, and coded message as a symbol of disdain. Finally, the study concludes that Ola Rotimi deploys symbols sourced from Yoruba tradition to contribute to the development of conflict in *Kurunmi*, to decry the prevalence of religious deceit, corruption, and conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, and recommends avoidance of rituals or messages that are symbolic of hostility or war.

Keywords: symbolism, Yoruba rituals, conflict, communion

Symbolism is a common literary device used by writers to conceal meanings or interpretations of their works. Gazala Qadri defines symbolism as a "practice of representing things by means of symbols or by investing things with a symbolic meaning or character" (154). She further clarifies that "in literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself" (154). That is, symbolism comprises images that have meanings beyond the literal. "Symbols," in the words of Rajkumar Lakhadive, "are a means of complex communication that often times can have multiple levels of meaning" (1). Writers often use symbols to spice up the meaning of literary works. Not only do symbols enhance the meaning and complexity of a literary work, they also add to its aesthetics (Kadhim et al. 798). This suggests that writers use symbols for both thematic and aesthetic purposes. The reader's ability to decipher the symbols in context will further expose the work to different possible interpretations. Lakhadive affirms that "[t]he meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the symbol itself, but is culturally



learned” (1). The fact is that symbols are closely related to culture (Kadhim et al. 799). A good example is the symbolic representation of the snake in Yoruba culture. Conventionally, a snake is a symbol of fear and danger, but it amazingly has other positive meanings in Yoruba culture. Besides its iconic meaning, a snake, in Yoruba culture, is “regarded as the king of all animals. And as its kingly posture symbolizes greatness and dominance, the Yorùbá people associate with it as a way of coveting its kingly attribute” (Akande 148).

Moreover, literary scholars from Plato, Aristotle, Kant to Blake have propounded theories of symbolism (Bhatnagar and Kumar 5891). One of such is the nineteenth-century French symbolist movement (Abdulwahid et al. 45). Initiated by some rebellious French poets like Paul Verlaine, Stephan Mallarme, and Jules Laforgue, the movement, which later spread to other European countries like Belgium, Russia, “came to be as an opposition to the new materialist and industrialized society” (45). Another theory of symbolism was founded by the American philosopher Susanne Langer who differentiates between sign and symbol, emphasizing that the former relates solely to the environment while the latter creates imagery outside of the real world (Sandamali 126). Alfred North Whitehead perceives symbolism as fallible in representing the human imaginations and thoughts (126). He claims that direct knowledge is superior to symbolism which is open to incorrect interpretations and mistakes. Similarly, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure propounded semiotics: the study of signs, symbols and their interpretations. He “described semiotics as connection between an object (the signified) and its linguistic representation (the signifier) and how the two are interconnected” (126). Frye’s theory of symbols is an attempt to synthesize the elements of different theories (Bhatnagar and Kumar 5892). Therefore, his mythical symbolism, which primarily focuses on ritual and dream as underlying patterns in myth, is adopted for this study.

Furthermore, the adoption of mythical symbolism in this study is born out of the curiosity to analyze African drama using a theory of symbolism. Many a critic has examined the use of symbols in African drama without recourse to any theoretical lens. Obyerodhyambo establishes that John Ruganda’s plays like *Black Mamba* and *The Burdens* are dominated by symbols mainly derived from African folklore and African post-independent politics to address sociopolitical realities of the continent (62). Olaniyan studies how John Pepper Clark and Femi Osofisan employ common symbols in *The Raft* and *Another Raft* respectively to reflect the post-independent socio-political situation in Nigeria (71). In a similar vein, Yusuf identifies traditional and modernist symbols used in Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* to show the detrimental effects of modernity on African traditions (3).

To add, critical studies on Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* have extensively explored how certain features like history, genre, proverbs, and Greek tragic conception contribute to the development of characterization or conflict in the play (Azeez 102; Sonde 117). Other critics have dissected traditional and satirical themes in the play (Ayodabo 68; Chukwu-Okoronkwo 11). However, critical attention is least paid to the exploration of symbolic representations of (Yoruba) objects and rituals in the play. Azeez's paper, for example, is concerned with the misclassification of *Kurunmi*, which is based on the 19th-century Yoruba war between Ijaye and Ibadan armies, as tragedy, historical play, or satire instead of delineating it as "Factual Historical War Drama" (102). Sonde studies the contextual use of proverbs to project themes and characters in *Kurunmi* (177). He argues that it is through proverbs that the eponymous hero, Kurunmi, realizes the destruction his rash decision has caused his people (178). Sonde's study hardly differs from Jegede and Eniola's (92) work which is also focused on the contextual interpretation of proverbs used in *Kurunmi*. Likewise, Adeoti examines the use of proverbs as a communicative tool to establish themes and develop characterization in *Kurunmi* (95).

Kehinde probes into Kurunmi's act of suicide and altruism, arguing that his suicidal decision is a direct result of his egocentric personality trait (197). Olu Obafemi holds a similar view of Kurunmi when he posits that his tragic flaw lies in his supreme belief in his powers and military astuteness (45). Not even Oso, who reflects on Kurunmi's overzealous struggle for power (43), could be said to have exonerated him from this egocentric allegation. Adade-Yeboah and Edward are more subtle in their depiction of the fluctuating traditionalist and egocentric personality of Kurumi (43). This inflexibility as the tragic flaw of Kurunmi is also at the center of Chukwu-Okoronkwo's study (11). Ayodabo, on the contrary, appreciates Kurunmi's obstinacy, seeing it as an impetus to the preservation of African/Yoruba tradition (76). Like Chukwu-Okoronkwo (1), Ayodabo relates the events in the play to those of the contemporary Nigeria (74) – a thread which the present paper also discusses.

As already noted, previous studies on Rotimi's *Kurunmi* fail to pay critical attention to symbolic representations of objects and rituals in the play. So, this study examines how symbolic representations of certain objects and rituals used by Rotimi contribute to the development of conflict in the play. Through the use of Northrop Frye's mythical symbolism, the study also shows how such symbols reflect certain realities of modern Nigeria.

Considered as one of the great literary critics of the twentieth century, the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye is mostly remembered for his book, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye claims that the book, which is divided into four essays, was

fueled by his interest in, and an attempt to make sense of, the words such as myth, symbol, ritual, and archetype which he came across in the course of his reading (1). The second essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* is titled “Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols.” In this essay, Frye asserts that we can arrive at the literary meaning through an understanding of the complex structure of symbolism. For him, a symbol is “any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention” (71). In his postulation, a symbol does not exist in isolation, but operates within a larger literary structure. A symbol, Frye perceives, could be construed in five different contexts or phases, namely: the literal (motif), descriptive (sign), formal (image), mythical (archetype) and anagogic (monad) (64).

Since the mythical phase of symbolism is adopted for this study, it is pertinent to expatiate on it. In this phase of symbolism, a symbol is taken as an archetype, that is, a recurring image. Here, a literary work is framed as an imitation of an existing work: “the new poem has a similar relation to its poetic society [T]he new poem manifests something that was already latent in the order of words” (Frye 97). As much as the new text imitates the form of the existing text, it is still original in contributing to the community. Reflecting on the social essence of literature in this phase, Frye states:

If we may use the word “civilization” for this, we may say that *our fourth phase looks at poetry as one of the techniques of civilization*. It is concerned, therefore, with the social aspect of poetry, with poetry as the focus of a community. *The symbol in this phase is the communicable unit, to which I give the name archetype: that is, a typical or recurring image. I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience.* And as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. (99, italics added)

Though specific mention is made of poetry, some of the tenets of mythical symbolism deducible from the excerpt above can be applied to drama too. Such tenets as relevant to this study include: a symbol has a wide breadth of communicable potential; a symbol is represented by a recurring image in literature; literature is a technique of civilization insofar as it has a social function; and “[t]he union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication is myth” (Frye 106). That is, myth makes cyclical (ritual) and dialectical (dream) patterns communicable.

This study affirms that, notwithstanding the shortcomings of the theory, the

tenets of mythical symbolism highlighted above can be adopted to analyze Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. Consequently, this study employs mythical symbolism to examine not only how objects and rituals used as communicable symbols contribute to the development of conflict in the play but also how such symbols become a corollary of certain realities in contemporary Nigeria.

Frye avers that symbols have communicable potential (99). Added to this is his postulation that myth is based on two organizing patterns: the cyclical and the dialectical (106). The cyclical pattern, on the one hand, relates to ritual which has the quality of recurrence. This includes the recurring cycles of human life such as the season. On the other hand, the dialectical pattern is parallel to the world of dream, "a presentation of the conflict of desire and actuality" (111). Examples of these two patterns vis-à-vis the symbols used in the play are laid open in the following discussion. In a nutshell, the following is an analysis of how select objects and rituals serve as communicable symbols in *Kurunmi*. The three identifiable symbolic representations or meanings in *Kurunmi* are hereby explicated.

Myth, as seen in *Kurunmi*, is paramount to Frye's mythical symbolism which specifies that rituals usually find expression in folk plays (107). *Kurunmi* belongs in this category as it tells about Yoruba mythical figures such as gods and ancestors. Yoruba gods and ancestors are always symbolically represented with different objects (Olusegun 1-12). The compound of Kurunmi, Are Ona Kakanfo of Yoruba and hero of the play, is home to different ritual statues or objects symbolizing Yoruba gods and ancestors. The narrator says that in Kurunmi's compound, "the gods of the tribe [Yoruba] are present in varying images of earth, granite and wood. Here also exist, or believed to exist, the spirits of departed ancestors: ethereal, invisible – eternal guardians of the bodies of the living, bodies that have warmth, and blood, and sweat" (Rotimi 11). Anyone who is unfamiliar with the Yoruba culture may see these images as ordinary objects, but they actually represent powerful gods and ancestors who rule the affairs of human beings. From Frye's perspective, these objects have communicable potential. Harboring these objects (gods) in his compound, Kurunmi communicates with them easily and enjoys their protection. Eventually, he is accused by some of his warriors of being too selfish and powerful:

AMODU: You have become too powerful my lord.

FANKARA: You lord it over everybody, over everything.

EPO: You are even Chief Priest to all gods; look at them, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Orunmila. All of them, the gods of our fathers are now your personal property.

AKIOLA: Like clothing, you use them to your taste; tired of one, you pass it to your brother Popoola, who now owns the Egungun cult. (39)

Sacrifice is also symbolic of celestial protection in the play. Abogunrin, one of the messengers of Kurunmi, goes to the shrine of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, in Kurunmi's compound to pour libation of palm wine on it. In Yoruba cosmology, each god has his favorite feast; palm wine is Ogun's. The evidence for this assertion can be found in Wole Soyinka's "Idanre" where the poet says: "Ogun is the lascivious god who takes / Seven gourdlets to war. One for gunpowder, / One for charms, *two for palm wine*" (Soyinka 72; italics added). He further warns: "A human feast / Is indifferent morsel to a god" (76). Frye maintains that a symbol is "bound to expand over many works into an archetypal symbol of literature as a whole" (100). This reference to Soyinka indicates that palm wine to Ogun is a recurring image in (Nigerian/Yoruba) literature. Also, Frye argues for critical appreciation of literature in relation to nature (95). So, palm wine is a natural product which anyone desirous of help from Ogun must bring to him to symbolize readiness for communion. This consciousness drives Abogunrin to establish communion with the god through this libation. Because palm wine is alcoholic, it may be generally considered a negative symbol, but it has a positive usage here. This is so because the receiver (Ogun) cherishes it.

Ritual has the quality of recurrence (Frye 97). Clearly, libation to Ogun is a Yoruba ritual. This fact also makes Abogunrin invoke Ogun to protect Kurunmi against his enemies. Having paid Ogun his due, Abogunrin concludes the invocative incantation involving a comparison of the deteriorating life of any would-be enemy of Kurunmi to that of a termite that will ever remain underground (Rotimi 11-12). It is also a euphemistic statement suggesting the death of such an enemy of Kurunmi through the powers of Ogun. The point is, it is the palm wine that establishes communion with Ogun. Similarly, Kurunmi offers palm wine to Ogun for protection and victory over the looming war. He reminds Ogun of his promise to him: "anytime Are Ona Kakanfo goes to war, / he must bring his body before you, / and give you drink, / in case the body of Are Ona Kakanfo has seen corruption" (31). From this, it is obvious that Kurunmi has an obligation to give drink (palm wine) to Ogun before embarking on any war. This gesture will not only symbolize a cleansing rite but will help fortify Are Ona Kakanfo against any enemy. This desire for support could be located within Frye's realm of dream.

Additionally, when the reality of imminent defeat hits Ibadan warlords, Ibikunle and Ogunmola, they call Kujenyo, an aged witch-doctor, for divine consultation. After divination, Kujenyo reveals that the Egba army joining the

army of Kurunmi will truly bring disaster to Ibadan warriors, but there is a solution. He says:

We shall cast a spell on them, my lord. The heads of twenty-one slaves. Entrails of three lizards. Five goats. Seven dogs. Eleven tortoises. Five pigeons. And by daybreak, if the armies of Egba and Ijaiye do not ready themselves to cross the River Ose, chop off my head, and chop off the head of everyone in my family born and yet to be born. (73)

The old man believes this sacrifice of blood to the deities will make the Ibadan army conquer their enemies. As Sawyerr writes, “[s]ince blood is a gift, which is a vehicle of the life offered to another, it not only revives the life of the recipients, but it also gives new life to the donors” (qtd. in Olowola 4). Shedding of human blood might appear to be an absurd symbol, but that is what the deities demand in order to establish communion between them and Ibadan warriors, an action believed to give the latter victory in the war. Their action enunciates, to invoke Frye (97), a “dialectic of desire” for victory. Warriors would do anything to be victorious. Greek warriors won the ten-year war against Trojans thanks to their trickery via the constructed Trojan horse (Murgatroyd 2). Here, Ibadan warriors seek support from gods by offering them a sacrifice and their wish is granted. They are able to conquer Ijaiye with Kurunmi himself committing suicide.

In short, it should be noted that all the symbols in *Kurunmi* explained above revolve around religious rituals – a cyclical pattern in Frye’s thesis. Kurunmi gives palm wine to Ogun, the god of iron and war, for spiritual cleansing. He believes that this cleansing rite will offer him divine fortification. Another instance of ritual is the rite of crisis entailing giving a sacrifice of blood to the deities for victory by Ibadan warriors. Overall, Ola Rotimi uses ritual/sacrifice as a symbol of communion between man and gods to develop the conflict in the play. Establishing communion with Ogun, Kurunmi regains confidence to start the war. Perhaps if palm wine were not available, he would not dare seek Ogun’s support in the first place. His overreliance on this divine fortification or support aggravates the conflict in the play. Equally, Ibadan warriors might have quit the war and returned home as Ogunmola has suggested, but they regain confidence by offering a sacrifice to the deities. Their offering of this sacrifice leads to the continuation of the war. Besides, the dialectical pattern is exemplified by the warriors who lurk between the desire for and the reality of war/victory. Since rituals in drama primarily perform social function (Frye 107), *Kurunmi* can be better understood vis-à-vis the realities in contemporary Nigeria. Today, many adherents of Christianity and Islam in the country give exorbitant gifts (as sacrifice) to their clerics to seek divine favors and blessings. These clerics have now replaced gods who served (and, to some people, still

serve) as representatives of God on earth. All this demonstrates that a symbol possesses “the ability to communicate in time and space” (107).

For Frye, a symbol is represented by a recurring image (99). In *Kurunmi*, gift giving, which facilitates a rite of passage, is a recurring image. In Yoruba mythology, the rite of passage is an important ritual (Dunmade 182). This is illustrated by a funeral rite in *Kurunmi*: when an Alafin (king) of Oyo dies, his first son must die with him. But Alafin Atiba ensures that all important kings in Yoruba swear to make his first son, Adelu, Alafin after his demise. Only Kurunmi, who views Atiba’s action as perversion of their tradition, refuses to swear. When he hears the sound of guns in the early morning – symbolizing the crowning of Adelu, who is supposed to commit suicide after the death of his father, as a new Alafin – Kurunmi begins to strategize for war against Oyo. He sends a message to Bale Olugbode and Balogun Ibikunle of Ibadan airing his dissatisfaction with the new untraditional development. Gift giving is one of the first strategies he employs to seek support from other territories. Kurunmi parcels gifts in bags to be taken to the Emir of Ilorin to seal a diplomatic relation between Ijaiye and Ilorin during the imminent war. His action shows the importance of gifts as a symbol of communication in winning people to one’s side. He later instructs some of his warriors to journey to Ilorin to present the gifts to the Emir. With this gesture, Kurunmi hopes to get the support of the Emir in fighting king Adelu whom he metaphorically refers to as a baby lion that must not be allowed to grow old. However, there is no pointer in the play to Ilorin offering support to Ijaiye during the war. What is obvious, however, is that the Egba to whom Kurunmi personally takes some gifts for the same purpose support Ijaiye during the war.

Furthermore, gifts serve as a symbol of allegiance in *Kurunmi*. Kurunmi feels betrayed by his warriors who accuse him of lording it over them by taking a personal decision for Ijaiye to wage war against Oyo. To worsen his disappointment, he discovers the five warriors have come on the order of Balogun Ogunkoroju and Areagoro Ajayi – his two trusted warlords. Kurunmi humbly feels sorry and offers the warriors some gifts. This kind gesture cools their temper. Two of the warriors drink palm wine to stupor and stagger to the shrine of Ogun to pledge support to Kurunmi (Rotimi 42). The reaction of the warriors shows the extent to which people can be influenced by gifts. After collecting the palm wine and other gifts from Kurunmi, the warriors begin to sing his praise. They are even unconcerned about the would-be reaction of the two warlords to the gifts before they get themselves drunk. Kurunmi eventually succeeds in using the gifts as a symbol of his allegiance to the warriors and Ijaiye people as a whole. The warriors, deciphering the message, reciprocate by accepting to wage war against Ibadan.

According to Frye, the cyclical pattern is mediated by ritual (97). This is manifest in the preceding analysis where conflict over the rite of passage informs gift giving and the journey motif. Characters transit from one place to another to deliver gifts (messages). Kurunmi sends his warriors to Ilorin for the same purpose. On their way home, all of them but one are attacked and murdered by Ibadan warriors. Kurunmi himself travels on his horse all the way to Egba to give some gift items to the warriors as a symbol of the need for their support. It may be concluded that the warriors of Egba endorse Kurunmi because of the gifts. Apparently, Frye's mythical symbolism views literature as a technique of civilization because of its social function (99). Although this play alludes to events in pre-colonial Nigeria, its symbolic representation of gifts still finds relevance in contemporary Nigeria. Nigeria has established diplomatic relations with various countries of the world through giving and receiving aid. It has also been sanctioned by some of these countries for human rights violation (Eshiet 49). The fact remains that aid or assistance to and from foreign countries are means of cementing diplomatic allegiances. Related to this is the prevalence of bribery and corruption in Nigeria today. Many Nigerians give bribes (disguised as gifts sometimes) to get what they want, whether good or bad – consequently espousing Frye's notion of “the conflict of desire and actuality” (111). This idea of giving gifts to curry favor is what, Ola Rotimi suggests, should be discouraged.

In mythical symbolism, a literary work is considered as “an imitation of nature” (Frye 95). Aroko (coded message) is a Yoruba communication code mostly made of/from plants and/or animals. Aroko is “an ancient non-verbal communicative strategy in Yoruba culture” which “involves sending an item or a combinable number of items to a person from which the decoder is expected to infer a piece of information” (Abdullahi-Idiagbon 116-125). It is the tradition of the Yoruba to send warning on an impending war to the other party through Aroko: “If the recipient community embraces peace, the matter will be settled amicably, but not without payment of tribute. However, the recipient community may decline in sending message of peace, which may eventually lead to both communities engaging in war fare” (Ojo 49). The latter case is evident in *Kurunmi*. In the play, three coded messages are exchanged among characters and they all symbolize negative meaning. The exchange of coded messages between Adelu and Kurunmi climaxes their enmity and officially marks the beginning of the war in the play. King Adelu has sent two messengers, Kutenlo and Obagbori, to Kurunmi to present to him some items concealed inside two separate calabashes. But before the messengers could reveal the contents in the calabashes, the angry Kurunmi contrives a coded message for Adelu in a dramatic and symbolic manner:

KURUNMI: Take this message to your new king, Adelu.

[He leans back relaxedly in his chair, dips the ladle into the bowl of stew, scoops the contents: okro [sic] stew. He lifts the spoonful towards his mouth, repeatedly, letting much of the sauce slaver sloppily from his mouth down on to the white cloth, smirching it. The messengers are shocked.]

KUTENLO: Contempt!

[Kurunmi ends the act by wiping his mouth clean with the unsoiled part of the cloth, then casually he undoes the knot behind his neck, folds up the cloth in a crude bundle, and holds it out to the messengers.] (Rotimi 26-27)

Obagbori reluctantly takes the cloth from Kurunmi after much threat. The messengers know that the stained cloth symbolizes a stain on the king's honor and Kurunmi's total rejection of his kingship. Ordinarily, white cloth symbolizes purity, but it is transformed into a negative symbol by Kurunmi.

Later, Obagbori and Kutenlo reveal the contents in the calabashes sent by Alafin Adelu to Kurunmi. In one bowl are gunpowder and bullets, and in the second "are the sacred twins of the Ogboni Cult – the symbols of peace" (27). That is, the objects symbolize war and peace respectively. Kurunmi chooses the bowl containing gunpowder and bullets, which means he has chosen war over peace. He immediately leaves for the shrine of Ogun to deposit the bowl there and thus inform the god about the impending war. Ogun is the god of war to whom those items belong, so it is expected that Kurunmi will seek his support for victory in the war. Again, Rotimi shows how this exchange of Aroko between the duo helps advance the conflict in the play.

The characters of Balogun Ibikunle and Ogunmola also exemplify the use of coded message as a symbol of disdain. Rancor breaks out between the two great Ibadan warlords over whether or not to wage war against Ijaiye in support of Oyo. While the former is trying to persuade the elders and other warriors to avoid the war, the latter is bent on waging war majorly because of his personal vendetta with Kurunmi. Ogunmola calls the much older Ibikunle a coward, leaves the venue angrily only to return some minutes later with a coded message for the now-departed Ibikunle. He calls him out: "that warrior of yester-years, now turned weakling with the bearing of too many children. Where is Ibikunle? I have brought him a present" (51). Ogunmola asks Latoşisa, one of his warriors, to lead other warriors to Ibikunle's house to "tell the old warrior I send him this present" (51): a dead crow. The dead crow symbolizes death of Ibikunle's bravery. The receipt of the coded message contributes to Ibikunle supporting the war eventually. He makes this known at the warfront when Ogunmola tries to

leave for Ibadan, fearing that Ijaiye would win the war with the support of the Egbas. Ibikunle dares him to run away:

When it's time to talk about war, the clamour of voices is loudest. This now is war, brother. We stand and fight. Fight to the end. Remember, seven months ago, you, Ogunmola, called me a coward. Not only that, you got your boys to deface my front porch with the symbol of cowardice – a black crow. A dead, black crow. Now Ibikunle has come to fight. And brave Ogunmola is on the run. Why is that? (69)

This portends the right time for Ibikunle to get back at Ogunmola. Now, neither of them wants to accept the tag of cowardice. In the long run, they agree to seek a solution to the looming defeat. The main argument here is that the coded message influenced Ibikunle's decision to support the war. Being the most senior warlord in Ibadan, he would not like to be seen as cowardly. Ibikunle's action could be likened to that of Boko Haram terrorists in contemporary Nigeria who are often emotionally induced and financially sponsored to destroy their country. For instance, in Ahmed Yerima's *Heart of Stone* (2013), Musa, apart from being handsomely paid to perpetrate terrorist acts, is encouraged by his accomplice, Ali (Yerima 24). Relating the ritual of Aroko in *Kurunmi* to the happenings in modern Nigeria underscores the social function of literature which Frye stresses (99).

On the whole, Frye's perspective of cyclical pattern is prevalent in the ritual of Aroko and rite of passage. Here, natural items like calabashes and crow, symbolic of coded messages, are taken to different places in *Kurunmi*. For instance, Adelu's messengers travel from Oyo to Ijaiye to deliver Aroko to Kurunmi. In addition, the dialectical pattern here can be explained in terms of the conflict between desire (for war) and reality (of war) as explicated by Frye (111). The coded messages Adelu sends to Kurunmi symbolize peace and war. Kurunmi has the option of choosing either, but he does not only choose war, he sends a coded message symbolic of war to Adelu. This symbolic exchange of coded messages elicits the desire for war. Ogunmola's coded message to Ibikunle is intended to excite him to have such desire for war too. Yet, ironically, when the reality of war sets in, Ogunmola tries to run away from the battlefield while Kurunmi commits suicide to avoid being captured by the rampaging Ibadan warriors. In the long run, the two strong warlords who send messages symbolic of disdain (and desire for war) learn in a hard way the necessity of peace in our world. Finally, analyzed through the lens of Frye's mythical symbolism, *Kurunmi* illustrates that rituals such as sacrifice, Aroko and rite of passage are symbolic representations of desire for war and victory, which is relatable to the reality of contemporary Nigeria.

Critical studies on Rotimi's *Kurunmi* have broadly explored how certain features like history, genre, proverbs, and Greek tragic conception contribute to the development of characterization or conflict in the play. Other critics have dissected traditional and satirical themes in the play. However, previous studies on the play fail to give critical attention to the symbolic representations of objects and rituals in the play. This study employs Frye's mythical symbolism to examine how symbols contribute to the development of conflict in the play. It also shows how such symbolic representations reflect certain realities of modern Nigeria. Three symbolic meanings of such objects and rituals are identified in *Kurunmi*, viz. communion for protection or victory, diplomatic support or allegiance, and coded message as a symbol of disdain. Finally, the study concludes that the symbolic meanings of these objects and rituals in *Kurunmi* contribute to the development of conflict in the play and simultaneously reflect the prevalence of bribery, corruption and terrorism in contemporary Nigeria. The study, thus, recommends that avoiding rituals and messages that are symbolic of disdain or war is a good requisite of humanity.

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Mind the Gap: Writing Across London Spaces

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Abstract

“Mind the gap”: the phrase is familiar on the London Underground, as a warning to passengers boarding or leaving trains. The gap in question is between train and platform. The London Underground first used the phrase as a warning in 1968, earlier than any other mass transit system. As a London-specific reference to a boundary, it is germane to the theme of this essay, which will survey some of the crossings that have been made between spaces, or over thresholds, in the modern literature of London. Mundanely enough, the gap on the London Underground is such a threshold. To talk of a gap, though, might also be to emphasize the incommensurability of worlds, or the difficulty of climbing across from one to another. Gaps could be social as well as spatial distinctions.

Keywords: gap, spaces, crossings, modern literature, London

In London, or in any major city, some boundaries are clear in the way that the gap on the Underground is. Some are less so, as areas fade into one another. Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia, Holborn, Covent Garden, King’s Cross – they seem somewhat distinct, but we might not all carry precisely the same idea of where one ends and another begins. Cities, then, might be made up of nodes – clearly distinct like the dots that mark stations on the Underground map. Yet they are also made up of overlapping zones with blurred edges. The edges are blurred in part because they exist in the mind, and there are eight or nine million different minds involved.

This thought corresponds to a sense of London which has been quite pervasive in critical literature: that its real spaces are also unreal, that that which is concrete is also constantly a place in the mind. The same place, it seems, can be real and imaginary, existing in both material and ideal modalities. Thus Georg Simmel, in a classic account of city life from 1903, talked of examining the body of culture with reference to the soul (52), and proposed at length that urban existence was a matter of mental adjustments and habits as much as physical facts. Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City*, first published in 1974, is a sophisticated statement of this principle for what was becoming called an era of postmodernism. For Virginia



Woolf too, the city was a hard place of stone buildings and a soft one of wayward thought; equally a place where undeniable inequality and exploitation coexisted with more fugitive experiences of feeling and connection. The city is a place materially constructed to facilitate human life, but such life is also a matter of daydreaming, creativity, fear, and fantasy, and so the structures that facilitate it facilitate them, and are quickly taken up and metamorphosed by them into a secondary, imaginative life.

Now, in ways unknown to Simmel or Woolf, we could even mirror this duality as not so much the real and the unreal as the immediate and the virtual: the city around us at any moment, as experienced through our eyes, ears, and other senses, and the other experience we might be having through a mobile electronic device. Many people's experience of London now is the experience of a given location and also simultaneously of a digital elsewhere, rendering the mind half-involved with the street or square. Virginia Woolf might have said that this was simply a technical confirmation of what she had shown all along about the absent-mindedness or otherworldliness constitutive of consciousness.

In her 1927 essay "Street Haunting," which has belatedly become a classic of London writing, Woolf posits this coexistence of real and unreal, of different modalities of existence together:

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some tree-sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all round them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley. But this is London, we are reminded; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light – windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars – lamps; this empty ground, which holds the country in it and its peace, is only a London square
(71-72)

The Bloomsbury square is difficult to distinguish from a rural scene, surrounded by "the silence of fields." The brain "sleeps," Woolf proposes, allowing such conflations to occur. Woolf immediately goes on to describe what the urban square is really like:

set about by offices and houses where at this hour fierce lights burn over maps, over documents, over desks where clerks sit turning with wetted forefinger the files of endless correspondences; or more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some

drawing-room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china, its inlaid table, and the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which – She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in? (72)

This is the real London, not the imagined world of the hooting owl and the train in the valley. But then, how real is it? The offices and houses are real enough; their “fierce lights,” maybe. Unmistakably, though, Woolf has no sooner reverted from the fanciful to the factual than she is fictionalizing again. The “clerks [who] sit turning with wetted forefinger the files of endless correspondences” are too closely imagined not to be fictional characters, near-descendants of Forster’s Leonard Bast. Likewise the room where “more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some drawing-room,” and where a woman is “measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea,” is the beginning of a domestic short story, in which actual drama begins to unfold with a ring at the doorbell, before Woolf cuts herself off and starts again.

Real and unreal London swiftly prove difficult to disentangle. In a sense that is her essay’s primary theme: the incorrigibility of the mind’s propensity for fiction – as in window-shopping, where “Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one’s will,” then “dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses” (75). The real world of the commodity and the unreal one of fantasy cannot easily be distinguished, as the former has been created and brought to market to foster the latter. More fancifully still, the sight of pearls in an antique shop leads Woolf to

imagine how, if we put them on, life would be changed. It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair. Only motor-cars are abroad at this hour, and one has a sense of emptiness, of airiness, of secluded gaiety. Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair.

Then, once more, she snaps out of it:

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter’s evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June?” (75-76).

This particular experience of the city is an illustration, for Woolf, of a profound multiplicity in the constitution of the human subject.

Few writers can have been more explicit and thoroughgoing than Woolf in

articulating the sense that the solid city incorrigibly generates a fluid one, in two modalities of reality that are hard to separate. But in the rest of this essay we shall consider how three other, more recent writers have depicted and imagined London spaces.

It is commonplace to say that a city can be a character in a story. Thus: “*Ulysses* centres on Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus – but its true protagonist is Dublin itself”; “Dickens’ greatest character was not David Copperfield or Mr Micawber, but his London” – and so on. This way of talking responds to the sense that in fiction, a place can be as powerful a force, or as vividly described, as a human character. Yet it seems imprecise. What the city is doing in a text is generally somewhat different from what a character is doing, even if it is actually more vivid and powerful. It has a different textual function and agency.

We could say that the city is background. Sometimes it is sketched in a few stray words or lines around a narrative that does not much refer to it. Yet this sense of city as background is surely less interesting than the idea that a city can become something else: foreground? Texture? Structure? Subject? Sometimes, it is true, the city can even be deliberately personified, addressed like an individual, as though to confirm the intuition that a city is a character. We shall now look at how the city comes to the fore in three quite recent writers, focusing especially on their treatment of spaces of transition and crossing.

The Human Congestion of the Street: *Money*

First, a writer very unlike Virginia Woolf: Martin Amis. One of the most expansive fictional treatments of London in the late twentieth century appears in his novel *Money* (1984). In this work, London and New York are posited as Eastern and Western poles between which the protagonist swings: alternating long chapters are set in each metropolis. Amis builds up a sense of London through a steady series of extended descriptions. Here is an example:

Tonguing my tooth and twisting my neck for taxis, I now stroll the length of the dental belt, through the stucco of the plagued streets and carious squares, past railings, embossed porches, pricey clinics, tranquilized Arabs, groggy mouth-sufferers in their Sunday best, their women wearing fur coats and Harlem lacquer, their spruced kids either pained or happy – across the bus-torn slum of Oxford Street into Soho, the huddled land of sex and food and film, down narrowing alleys until I reached the glass preserve of Carburton, Linex & Self. (78)

We notice how Amis uses types of people to populate the scene and add character: not realized individuals but generic categories, collectively sketched. We witness movement from one kind of urban space to another: here the genteel “dental

belt,” roughly meaning Marylebone, and the different world of Soho, sundered by Oxford Street’s “bus-torn slum,” make three different pieces of London in one sentence. That sentence comprises some highly wrought rhetoric. We notice the alliterative four t-sounds in the opening clause (suggesting the tongue’s repeated forays against the sensitive tooth), and one of Amis’s simplest and most persistent stylistic features: the carefully paired adjective and noun. Dental belt, plaqued streets, carious squares, embossed porches, Harlem lacquer, bus-torn slum, huddled land, glass preserve. Some of these might be straightforwardly descriptive, but often a literary effect is involved. “Plaqued” and “carious” are dental terms for the “dental belt,” but they are also words to describe city space: literally walls with multiple plaques, and squares decaying as teeth do. And the adjective “bus-torn” gives pause: it may never have appeared outside this sentence, and appears on reflection to be an elaboration of, say, “war-torn” – something you could say of a country or region – yet dialed down to the humdrum level at which it is merely public transport that does the tearing. Amis wanted a way to say that Oxford Street was crowded with buses, and his solution is instantly evocative, even if not immediately quite coherent. The buses are perhaps “tearing” one side of the street from the other.

Money is famously, and deliberately, a novel of the 1980s; an early signature work in the literature of Thatcherism. It is apocryphally thought that Margaret Thatcher once declared that anyone riding a bus after the age of thirty was a failure in life. That notion is curiously consolidated here by the fact that in four hundred pages of often intense motion, despite observing those buses tearing up the slum of Oxford Street, the protagonist never uses London’s public transport. His modes of locomotion are pointedly individual: walking in the streets, observing their strange new phenomena; and driving his car, which like all cars in this novel has a fanciful name – this one a Fiasco, vaguely redolent of the Ford Fiesta. The car’s failure to run is a running joke. And so:

I drove home in my Fiasco, which, apart from the faulty cooling system, the recurring malfunction with the brakes and power-steering, and a tendency to list violently to the left, seems to be running fairly reliably at present. At least it starts more often than not, on the whole. ... The ride from Pimlico to Portobello took well over ninety minutes and it was gone midnight when I beached the car on a double yellow line outside my sock. *Why* did it take well over ninety minutes? A rush-hour style traffic jam at 12 p.m. Something to do with the fucking Royal Wedding. For the best part of an hour I sat swearing in a blocked tunnel under Westway. The Fiasco was overheating. I was overheating. Each car was crammed with foreigners and grinning drunks. The tunnel’s throat

swelled like emphysema with fags and fumes and foul mouths. Then we edged into the blue nightmap of stars. Join the dots ... London has jet-lag. London has culture-shock. It's doing everything the wrong way round at the wrong time. (149-150)

Like the previous passage this one records motion across the city, but here the movement is automotive rather than pedestrian. The walk from Marylebone to Soho is now outstripped by the alliterative drive from Pimlico to Portobello, which turns out to be rendered almost inoperable by contemporary events: the Royal Wedding referred to here is that of Charles and Diana. In such touches, *Money* inserts itself into history, laying some claim to satirical purchase on an actual England. In terms of its primary content, what the passage describes is a failure of urban motion, a blocked transition, with the symptoms of organic and mechanical overheating.

Those last lines, though, lift us to a different register of direct, portentous declaration about the state of London itself, which is another of this novel's characteristic strands. The city is personified, anthropomorphized: only a person should be able to have jet-lag, but here a capital city can have it. The same applies in these instances:

In summer, London is an old man with bad breath. If you listen, you can hear the sob of weariness catching in his lungs. Unlovely London. Even the name holds heavy stress. (85)

Blasted, totalled, broken-winded, shot-faced London, doing time under sodden skies. (159)

Like most things in this novel, this motif has a deliberate excess: both in its sense of adherence to a literary tradition of such personification, and in the characteristic proliferation of adjectives – some of which, like “totalled” and “shot-faced,” almost need their own glosses; the first, at least, means “totally wrecked,” as in a car crash. Despite the sense of crash and the gridlock, the novel is peculiarly interested in the kind of scene of transit that we have already seen, in which the city seems a system in motion. The River Thames, says the narrator, “lassooed and pulsed like a human brain, sending signals, slipping veil after veil as if a heavier liquid had been sent to slide across its face of water, leaving no doubt that rivers are living things. They die, too” (167). Traffic is a field of force:

To me in those days traffic was only traffic, anonymous, indifferent – traffic, mere traffic. Now I know a little more about the movements behind my back. The cars are specific, with force fields, meek, hostile or aloof. I see a car's face and a car's eyes and a car's clamped sneer, a car

cowering or bristling or not caring either way. And when I look into the crowd, into the human congestion of the street, I don't see traffic but human force fields, rattletraps, dropheads, hardtops, hotrods, the human saloons singling me out with the stare of their lights. (241)

In this virtuoso rhetorical performance, first cars are pictured as people – the “clamped sneer” suggesting the unchanging front of a car, while also carrying the trace of a car being clamped for a traffic violation – and then people as cars: hotrods, “human saloons.” If people can be envisaged as machines – as a Wyndham Lewis might have done – they can also, quite differently, be refigured as narratives; for, in the streets, the narrator observes, “London is full of short stories walking round hand in hand. ... London is full of short stories, long stories, epics, farces, sit-coms, sagas, soaps and squibs, walking round hand in hand” (257).

Any Day in Any City: *The Colour of Memory*

Amis at his peak developed a signature style of London writing: elegant yet wildly excessive, poetic yet gross, turning the city from backdrop into agent and back again. Yet there have been other visions of London in the novel too, since that singular achievement. One came from Geoff Dyer, a decade younger. His debut novel *The Colour of Memory* (1989) counts down through sixty numbered chapters, each of which amounts to a vignette from the lives of the anonymous narrator and his friends and neighbors in Brixton. One chapter makes explicit the book's method through an analogy with photography. The narrator describes his exit from the London Underground – that threshold again – then notes: “By the time we get to the ticket barrier, like a photographer whose finger presses the shutter by reflex, I have already drafted these words” (181). The book, he elaborates, “is like an album of snaps”:

In any snaps strangers intrude; the prints preserve an intimacy that lasted only for a fraction of a second as someone, unnoticed at the time, strayed unintentionally into the picture frame. Hidden among the familiar, laughing faces of friends are the glimpsed shapes of strangers; and in the distant homes of tourists there *you* are, at the edge of the frame, slightly out of focus, in the midst of other people's memories. We stray into each others' lives. In the course of any day in any city it happens thousands of times and every now and again it is caught on film. That is what is happening here. (181)

This was published in 1989. We can reflect that the number of images captured in a city now is hundreds of times greater, partly because of the prevalence of digital photography and its distribution; partly because of the spread of CCTV.

Leaving aside that historical intensification, the theoretical wellspring of Dyer's aesthetic is Roland Barthes, especially the Barthes of *Camera Lucida* (1980). For Barthes in this late work the photograph captured contingencies for posterity, and its marginal details, under the name of the *punctum*, often proved more perversely fascinating than the primary subject matter, the *studium*. Dyer could hardly be more explicit about this, writing that what happens at the edges of a picture – “the apparently irrelevant detail” – is often its greatest point of interest:

These details absorb and transform – and are themselves absorbed and transformed by – the principal action; the main subjects become saturated by the accidental inflections of attendant details. The distinction between foreground and background collapses; the subject is usurped by his surroundings, by the momentary pattern of clouds, by other faces in the street; his shadow is lost in a blur of others – the shadows cast by accidental gestures. (182)

This passage remains unusual as an attempt to bring theoretical thinking into British fiction, and to embed it profoundly in the work's aesthetic. For our purposes here it is also an interesting answer to the question of how the space of the city gets into fiction. On this model, the city would not be just unnoticed background, nor need it be personified as a character in its own right. Its texture might drift to the forefront, proving more interesting than a given individual, just as Dyer declares that “The distinction between foreground and background collapses” (182). He also seems to imply that once you start to represent a character in the city, you will find yourself representing the city anyway – because it will be captured on your figurative photographic prints, what seems like an insignificant background turning out to be what is of most interest to a later observer. A novel about London in 1909, 1959 or 1989 might tell later readers things about London that it barely knew it was saying.

One other chapter of Dyer's book merits our attention for its treatment of the experience of different kinds of urban space. Late at night the main characters walk through Westminster, and experience it as qualitatively different from the Brixton that is their habitual environment:

We walked through Whitehall, through all the empty architecture of power with its austere ornamentation and inscrutable attractiveness. Wide streets, discreet trees. ... Suddenly we were tourists. There was no one else around.

The windows in the buildings did not look like windows. They shared the same texture as the walls and were not there to be looked in to or out of. What impressed most about the walls was the suggestion of discreet

thickness. There was only one impulse behind these buildings: they were built to last – and to last it was necessary not only to be impregnable but also to impress. Vandalism was not even an issue. These buildings created their own time. They did not defy time, they consolidated it. ... The buildings had turned the symbolic power invested in them into an active, brooding patience that rendered surveillance superfluous. ... Even the pavement felt more permanent here. We had entered museum time. (117-8)

Briefly, the novel here takes on a kind of architectural imagination, forming itself around a description of built space. That is because within this novel, that space is unfamiliar. Though Whitehall and Westminster are as well known around the world as anywhere in London, within this novel the center is rendered oddly marginal: only visited once in 250 pages. Railton Road, Coldharbour Lane, Electric Avenue, are the center of the London experience. Of course Westminster, while in this sense marginalized, is also described with an awareness of its actual political centrality. As such, it takes a place in a duality of hegemony and dissidence, Parliament and dole queue.

Quicker to Walk: *NW*

So much for the 1980s. We shall lastly look at London space in one more novel: Zadie Smith's fourth novel *NW*, published in 2012. The novel consists of distinct named parts, whose titles include *visitation*, *guest*, *host*, *crossing*. The distinct parts focus on different characters from the same piece of Willesden, an area spanning the London postcodes NW10 and NW2. Moreover, they are not only thematically but formally distinct, differently textured and structured.

How exactly does this carefully wrought novel process London space? First, with its fascination with the delicate portrayal of consciousness, it may be viewed as one of recent fiction's attempts to reactivate some of the strategies of the era of modernism. It thus recalls us to Virginia Woolf, and shares, in a different key, her sense of a real and unreal city as intertwined. The city of *NW* is concrete in every sense, yet also a place of memory and mental association.

Second, this is a novel very interested in the *gaps* with which we began: the divisions between different social spheres in London which also, in numerous cases, map on to geographical spaces. Much reference is made to a piece of social housing called Garvey House, mainly occupied by Britons of Caribbean descent; much is also made to the Caldwell Estate, where the next generation – the book's primary protagonists – grew up and met each other. The power of such a place in a character's life is strong, as in the protagonist of the first section, Leah Hanwell (a white woman of London-Irish background) who has been away to study

philosophy at Edinburgh and appears to have various middle-class pursuits and views, yet repeatedly reflects that she has ended up living back on the edge of the same council estate where she grew up. Small social gradations around Leah's rented flat are telling. Zadie Smith writes with a sense that the relation between place and socio-economic status is finely calibrated, a matter of local knowledge and what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*.

Bound up with place, socio-economic status is also closely entangled with ethnicity. Leah's friend Natalie Blake, the novel's other major character, is a black woman who has renamed herself in making her upward journey from a socially marginal member of an evangelical church to a suave, successful barrister. She now lives with a banker in a Victorian house with a long garden, but still geographically close to where she began. Transitions in social status may map on to moves in physical space, but these moves may only need to be quantitatively small to achieve the desired qualitative difference.

NW envisages the city:

A great hill straddles NW, rising in Hampstead, West Hampstead, Kilburn, Willesden, Brondesbury, Cricklewood. It is no stranger to the world of letters. The Woman in White walks up one side to meet the highwayman Jack Sheppard on the other. ... Once this was all farm and field, with country villas nodding at each other along the ridge of this hill. Train stations have replaced them, at half-mile intervals. (54)

Here Smith's view is panoptic, seeing as if from a distance the scale of the hill and how many discrete areas it unites. She also briskly sketches a historical sense of place. The displacement of villas by railway stations proposes a certain democratization. Elsewhere, the brief chapters 9 and 10 form a textual set-piece that suggests different ways of conceiving travel from NW8 to NW6. The page-long Chapter 9 simply consists of instructions for walking this route as though from a journey planner (supplied perhaps by Transport for London or Google), listing precise distances and estimated timings, and concluding:

These directions are for planning purposes only. You may find that construction projects, traffic, weather, or other events may cause conditions to differ from the map results, and you should plan your route accordingly. You must obey all signs or notices regarding your route. (38)

The statement that contingencies may make reality differ from a map carries a hint of the kind of distinction that writers and theorists like to make: Michel de Certeau's distinction between a world mapped from above and experienced

from the street, or Jorge Luis Borges' much-cited meditations on the relation between map and territory. Smith plays this out more fully by immediately following those directions with Chapter 10, "From A to B Redux," a page and a half describing the experience of walking this route. Here is a sample:

Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock. 98, 16, 32, standing room only – quicker to walk! ... Polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, *News of the World*. Unlock your (stolen) phone, buy a battery pack, a lighter pack, a perfume pack, sunglasses, three for a fiver, a life-size porcelain tiger, gold taps. ... TV screens in the TV shop. TV cable, computer cable, audiovisual cables, I give you good price, good price. Leaflets, call abroad 4 less, learn English, eyebrow wax, Falun Gong, have you accepted Jesus as your personal call plan? Everybody loves fried chicken. Everybody. Bank of Iraq, Bank of Egypt, Bank of Libya. Empty cabs on account of the sunshine. Boomboxes just because. Lone Italian, loafers, lost, looking for Mayfair. ... Security lights, security gates, security walls, security trees, Tudor, Modernist, post-war, pre-war, stone pineapples, stone lions, stone eagles. Face east and dream of Regent's Park, of St John's Wood. (39-40)

This is, roughly, a piece of stream of consciousness writing, with its clipped formulations, pieces of thoughts in response to stimuli. The same sense of sensory bombardment, indeed, was one of the things that Georg Simmel thought made a city dweller's mentality different from others': we can venture that the rate of stimuli here is in excess of what Simmel had in mind. As in Geoff Dyer, we notice the architectural dimension, which here amounts to a list of styles and of features. And one of the most evident aspects of the passage is the sense of a London space occupied by people from different ethnic backgrounds: the Turkish and Mediterranean couscous and kebab; the newspapers catering to different immigrant communities; the slightly broken English selling technical goods; the banks representing different countries of the Middle East. Despite the chapter's title, this space of transition – literally the whole paragraph describes a journey – is not really experienced as one between two different locations, A to B: rather as a journey through multiple traditions and traces that confront the traveler so fast as to be almost simultaneous.

Here is one last instance from *NW*. Another character, Felix, is travelling on the London Underground:

Mind the gap. Felix stepped in the second carriage from the end and looked at a tube map like a tourist, taking a moment to convince himself

of details no life-long Londoner should need to check: Kilburn to Baker Street (Jubilee); Baker Street to Oxford Circus (Bakerloo). (117)

Smith shows us the theme of local knowledge, almost in the taxi driver's sense of that noun: the mental map that the Londoner should supposedly have, but, as this character confirms, might well not in fact securely possess. The scene in fact comes to depict Felix's experience of watching a passenger on the tube train beside his, until "Her train pulled ahead, then his did" (118). Two journeys briefly, contingently converge, then permanently diverge again.

Conclusion

And Zadie Smith, of course, frames her Underground scene with the phrase with which we started: "Mind the gap." It signals imminent movement in the city, of a very literal kind. In this essay we have considered how a small number of writers have found words for such experiences of transition in urban space, while also suggesting that such crossings are often not merely physical but come freighted with social, economic, ethnic, or just psychological dimensions. Virginia Woolf in the 1920s showed how far the city of stone and brick is also a malleable place in the mind. In the 1980s, Martin Amis developed an elaborate literary rhetoric that brought baroque extremity to the depiction of movement around a battered London, whether on foot or by car. Geoff Dyer, writing in Amis's wake, also drew on the thought of Roland Barthes to emphasize urban space as a scene of accidental encounters and contingent juxtapositions. In the twenty-first century, Zadie Smith deploys a range of literary styles to represent her quarter of the metropolis, showing how different modes of writing disclose different conceptions of crossing the city. We arrive at a sense that London contains many dimensions: its 270 tube stations, thirty-two boroughs, eight million people, all in turn finding a different parallel existence on the pages of so many writers.

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Decolonizing the Anthropocene: Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*

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Abstract

In an era of unprecedented environmental catastrophes that have become increasingly difficult to ignore, the term “Anthropocene” has gained prominence, denoting the profound human-induced planetary changes shaping the climate crisis we face today. However, dominant climate change discourses often rely on hegemonic Western techno-scientific paradigms of knowledge that deliberately obscure the enduring influence of colonial agendas in the making of ecological violence over centuries. Consequently, this paper argues for a critical reframing of the Anthropocene through a transdisciplinary approach that foregrounds the unequal power relations and cultural histories that structure contemporary planetary crises. Amitav Ghosh’s fable *The Living Mountain* serves as a vital decolonial literary intervention that recontextualizes the Anthropocene within a historical framework of colonialism to address the complex interplay between ecological and cultural challenges. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Indigenous studies, this paper examines how Ghosh’s narrative dramatizes the structural continuities between colonial extractivism and present-day ecological collapse. Simultaneously, Ghosh highlights the epistemic violence inherent in colonial worldviews that fundamentally sever human and non-human relations, proposing instead the centrality of Indigenous epistemologies for a decolonial understanding of the Anthropocene. Through a close textual analysis of Ghosh’s fable, this paper contends that literature offers powerful alternative imaginaries that contest dominant climate narratives and expose the colonial continuities embedded in global environmental discourse. *The Living Mountain*, thus, exemplifies the potential of storytelling to enact epistemic shifts necessary for confronting the Anthropocene in more just and relational ways, beyond Western epistemes that sustain violent legacies of colonialism.

Keywords: Anthropocene, colonial legacies, transdisciplinary, decolonial, epistemic violence, Indigenous epistemologies

In an era of unprecedented environmental catastrophes that have become

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increasingly difficult to ignore, the term “Anthropocene” has emerged as a dominant framework for conceptualizing the scale and impact of human-induced planetary transformations. Originally coined by biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s and later popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen in the early 2000s, the influential concept of the “age of humans” has catalyzed vital interdisciplinary dialogue between the natural sciences and the humanities, proposing a new geological epoch in which human activity constitutes a major geophysical force. Scholars argue that this epoch, following the Holocene, took shape during the mid-twentieth century industrial boom, when “human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales” (Crutzen and Stoermer 484) began to significantly reshape planetary systems. At present, the dramatic rising atmospheric temperatures, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and increasingly erratic weather patterns are only a few of the observable and measurable cataclysmic effects of this new epoch.

Yet while the Anthropocene has undoubtedly helped contextualize the ravaging changes to our climate in the 21st century and comprehend the human role in environmental destruction, its prevailing usage also occludes the deeper historical and political origins that underlie the current crisis. Dominant anthropogenic climate change discourse remains tethered to hegemonic, techno-scientific Western paradigms that universalize climate change while obscuring the enduring colonial legacies and epistemologies that have long structured environmental violence. Although techno-scientific knowledge is indispensable for quantifying environmental change, these approaches alone are insufficient to trace the deeper genealogies of empire, extraction, and dispossession that continue to disproportionately structure the planetary present and underpin global environmental governance.

Thus, this paper approaches the Anthropocene not merely as a neutral geological epoch but as a deeply contested site of knowledge production – one that necessitates critical interrogation of whose knowledge defines the crisis, and whose histories it erases. Employing a transdisciplinary methodology grounded in postcolonial, decolonial, and environmental humanities frameworks, it draws on literary analysis to explore how narrative, particularly from the Global South, can reorient climate critique toward colonial histories of ecological devastation and reclaim marginalized epistemologies.

The Coloniality of Western Climate Discourse

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a formidable voice among a growing body of Global South thinkers who challenges the Anthropocene’s depoliticized and technocratic framing across both his fiction and nonfiction work. In his recent nonfiction *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Ghosh challenges

the prevailing Western tendency to conceptualize climate change primarily as a “phenomenon that pertains mainly to technology and economics” (147), arguing that such a reductive framing “narrows down the world to quantifiable data and measurements” (152), obscuring the cultural, ethical, and historical dimensions of the crisis. This intervention builds upon his earlier work, *The Great Derangement*, where Ghosh identifies a broader failure of political and literary imagination to reckon with the complexity of the planetary crisis (12). His fictional works, *Gun Island*, *The Hungry Tide*, *A Sea of Poppies*, have also similarly skillfully evinced the entanglement of climate precarity with colonial displacement and made visible the submerged histories often excluded from dominant scientific discourses.

These insights resonate with broader postcolonial climate discourse that have become increasingly vital in the radical rethinking of life in the Anthropocene. Dipesh Chakrabarty, a foundational figure in postcolonial climate thought, argues in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* that climate change challenges the distinction between human and natural history, compelling a reconfiguration of dominant historical and political narratives shaped by colonial modernity (76). Transdisciplinary geographer Kathryn Yusoff, in her seminal work *A Billion Black Anthropocene or None*, similarly asserts that “anthropogenic climate change is as much a political, social and cultural event, as it is a scientific one” (516), drawing attention to the erasures produced by technocratic governance and data-driven solutions. Farhana Sultana, a Bangladeshi scholar of climate justice, introduces the notion of “climate coloniality” to describe how colonial structures continue to shape the governance and discourse of climate change (3). In tandem, Jenni C. Stephens, a leading climate justice scholar-activist, believes that “action toward major societal transformation is hindered by the dominant mainstream approach to conceptualizing the climate crisis as an isolated, discrete, scientific problem in need of individualistic and technological solutions” (60).

Together, these perspectives illuminate the limitations of neoliberal climate governance, which perpetuate homogenized, technocratic solutions that ultimately reproduce the structural inequalities it purports to address. To fully grasp the complexity of today’s multifaceted, interconnected climate crisis facing humanity, we require transdisciplinary approaches that foreground the Anthropocene as a historical formation inseparable from the enduring legacies of colonialism and racialized capitalism.

To counter these erasures, this paper turns to *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*, Amitav Ghosh’s shortest fiction to date, as a decolonial literary intervention within Anthropocene discourse. The fable allegorizes the colonial foundations of ecological collapse by critiquing extractivist logics and

mechanistic worldviews that sever human-non-human entanglements. Through its parabolic structure, *it* envisions alternative modes of being grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and reciprocal ecological relations, worldviews often marginalized in Western climate discourse. Thus, situating this analysis within the growing field of postcolonial and decolonial environmental humanities, this paper demonstrates how literature can serve as a critical mode of knowledge production capable of imagining decolonized ecological futures no longer beholden to the violent legacies of Western modernity.

Reframing the Anthropocene: Legacies of Extractive Colonialism and *The Living Mountain*

The Living Mountain opens with an unnamed narrator introducing Maansi, a Nepalese woman working in New York, who proposes “the Anthropocene” as her virtual book club’s annual theme. Anticipating scientific accounts “with lots of numbers and charts” (Ghosh 5), Maansi instead finds herself confronted by a visceral childhood memory evoked by a book about “some poor people on a remote island who suffer a terrible fate” (5). This recollection, manifesting as a “horrible dream” (5) of the sacred Mountain becomes the vehicle through which Ghosh critiques the structural violence of colonialism and the epistemological ruptures it inflicts upon Indigenous worlds.

Ghosh’s deliberate framing of the narrative through a dream sequence itself functions not merely as a literary device, but as a decolonial epistemic rupture. As Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty have rightly observed, such strategies dismantle the “empirical rigidity” of dominant Western knowledge systems that curtail the cultural and spiritual dimensions of ecological crises (“Episteme and Ecology” 316). The allegorical dream opens up a radically different space, one predicated not by empirical data but instead embodied memory, ancestral knowledge, and storytelling, modes of knowing traditionally marginalized by Eurocentric frameworks.

At the heart of Maansi’s dream-tale is “Mahaparbat,” the Great Mountain, a vital source of sustenance described as a “living being that cared” (Ghosh 8) for the people of the Himalayan Valley for generations. The Mountain, regarded as sacred by the local people and their ancestors, was an intrinsic part of Indigenous life and had been fiercely protected at all costs. In fact, its sanctity is preserved through restraint and cultural practices: “they told stories about it, and sang about it, and danced for it – but always from a distance” (7). Jasmine Sharma insightfully notes how this culturally enforced distance “admonishes the people of the valley against exploiting its scenic beauty and ecological abundance” (28). However, this delicate balance is disrupted when the Mountain’s most revered

gift, the “Magic Tree” with medicinal properties, becomes the object of desire for Lowland traders.

Historically insulated from outside interference, the Valley’s ecological and cultural equilibrium is violently ruptured with the arrival of an invasive settler group known as the “Anthropoi.” Perceiving the Mountain solely as a repository of “valuable trade goods” (Ghosh 11), they enact a colonial mode of appropriation that Chilean environmental humanities scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris conceptualizes as the “extractive view”: “the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and non-human multiplicity” (5). Here, Ghosh’s narrative echoes his larger literary oeuvre, such as the British colonial exploitation of the dense Burmese teak forests in *The Glass Palace* and the fertile landscape of the Gangetic plains transformed into a monocultural commodification of poppy cultivation in *A Sea of Poppies*. In *The Living Mountain*, as in these earlier works, Ghosh employs richly symbolic terrains to trace the contours of colonial extractivism and the asymmetrical culpability of empire in producing the present planetary crisis.

The Anthropoi’s critique of Indigenous stewardship, claiming that the natives “did not abide by what constituted a proper use of the environment” (Ghosh 63), epitomizes what Karmakar and Chetty describe as the “hegemony of capitalist thinking and the legitimization of extractive practices” (“Episteme and Ecology” 317). Indeed, once the Anthropoi seize the land, a familiar colonial pattern unfolds – dispossession, coerced labor, and the transformation of sacred geographies into extractive frontiers, justified by claims of making the land productive. Their ascent of the Mountain, in defiance of the “Law of the Valley” (Ghosh 11), illustrates what Ghosh elsewhere refers to as “terraforming,” a process of “planetary reengineering” that violently remakes landscapes to suit colonial economic ends (53). The replication of these colonial practices has intensified in the neoliberal present, now adopted by postcolonial states, where development, framed as progress, reconfigures ecologies into resource frontiers, as seen in the construction of hydroelectric dams in Uttarakhand, contributing to recurring floods and landslides, or the forced displacement of the Dongria Kondh for bauxite mining in Niyamgiri Mountain. In parallel, the rich Himalayan terrain in Ghosh’s fable becomes a microcosm of this enduring political ecology of extractivism, its exploitation benefiting actors geographically far removed from the ecologies they deplete.

Far from being an isolated event, this fictitious invasion set in the Himalayas is resonant with real-world racialized histories of extractive colonialism in the Global South, where violent encroachment of colonial regimes systematically

restructured and impoverished ecologies for profit. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh traces the violent global trajectory of such extractivist thinking back to the 17th-century European conquest of the Banda archipelago, where Dutch colonizers massacred the Indigenous population to monopolize the nutmeg trade. Similarly, Cameroonian-American novelist Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* dramatizes ecological collapse as the inevitable outcome of extractive greed imposed on a once-sacred African village endowed with vast natural resources. These literary parallels underscore that ecological interventions were not an unintended consequence but a constitutive logic of empire, central to the making of the Anthropocene as a racialized, colonial formation. The colonial logic that drives the conquest of Mahaparbat is the same perverse logic driving mining companies, land grabbing, and oil and gas exploitation to serve settler colonial occupation and global capital in today's world. As Sharma incisively observes, *The Living Mountain* "holds a speculative mirror to the harsh reality of the present" (27), compelling us to confront how the afterlives of colonialism continue to structure the uneven geographies of environmental exploitation.

The Indigenous inhabitants of the Valley, despite concerted efforts of resistance, are violently subjugated: "we must help them do it, or else they will kill or enslave us" (15). Here, Ghosh dramatizes a central mechanism of colonial domination, the conscription of colonized subjects into the racialized labor systems that facilitate their own dispossession. Forced to become "provisions and porters" (17), the Indigenous people are rendered unwilling participants in the destruction of the sacred ecology they once protected. More insidiously, the circumstances worsen when the colonized subjects soon begin to internalize the Anthropoi's values, as Ghosh notes, "reverence slowly shifted away from the Mountain and attached itself instead to the spectacle of the climb" (19). Being indoctrinated to accept Western ideals of civilization and progress, "the Indigenous people begin to harbor aspirations of climbing the Great Mountain, and the ecological sacred transforms into the sacred of materialism" (Mahasweri et al. 1783).

This large-scale assault profoundly disrupts the local ecosystems upon which the Valley's inhabitants depend, systematically depleting the Mountain's natural resources and culminating in "a series of devastating landslides and avalanches" (Ghosh 24) that engulf the surrounding communities. Under the relentless advance of capitalist modernity, the Mountain becomes increasingly destabilized, as "crevasses were opening up everywhere" (25), threatening to "drown the Valley below and sweep everything away" (26). What was once a protective landscape is transformed into a site of catastrophe, its devastation emblematic of what Karmakar and Chetty describe as "the insidiousness of

colonial capitalist extraction” (“Episteme and Ecology” 322). Importantly, the destabilization of Mahaparbat’s landscape is set in motion not by tectonic forces or weather anomalies, but by the violent human-induced encroachment of the Anthropoi, whose actions directly precipitate ecological collapse.

The Mahaparbat, like real geographies, thus, is rendered what Naomi Klein calls a “sacrifice zone” (169), a space rendered expendable, “poisoned, drained or otherwise destroyed” (169) in service of capitalist accumulation. Crucially, such zones are not anomalous but structurally integral to capitalism’s global expansion, which advances through the systematic externalization of ecological costs onto marginalized populations. As Sultana notes, climate coloniality ensures that “the costs of planetary crisis are distributed unevenly, along lines of race, class, and geography” (6). In Ghosh’s narrative, the Valley’s inhabitants, like many frontline communities today, are consigned to bear the disproportionate burdens of ecological collapse, their disposability inscribed within the structural logics of a geopolitical economy that defines the Anthropocene, disrupting the illusion of a singular planetary condition shared equally by all.

In the face of global ecological violence, the allegorical collapse of Mahaparbat as seen through Maansi’s dream reflects not only historical colonial exploitation but also environmental destruction resulting from rapacious capitalist development in its current guise of neo-extractivism. Karmakar and Chetty stress that the fable “foregrounds capitalism’s dominance and anthropogenic control over ecology and Indigenous livelihoods” (“Episteme and Ecology” 317), while Amit Kumar and Vikas Sharma read it as sustained “critiques of colonizing cultures, capitalist modernity, human greed and unsustainable economic development” (3). Ghosh resists the technocratic abstraction of the climate crisis into mere metrics and projections, instead foregrounding its entanglement with cultural histories, racialized geographies, and colonial continuities. Aarthi R.M. and Rani P.L. extend this critique, noting the fable’s indictment of the empire’s persistence in “contemporary climate governance and policy failures” (6). In this way, the Anthropoi’s exploitation of the Mahaparbat functions as a powerful allegory for the broader failure of global systems to confront the colonial-capitalist foundations of ecological collapse. In doing so, the text calls for a reimagining of climate consciousness, one grounded not in abstract data, but in lived experience and historical specificity.

This intervention aligns with other critical Indigenous scholars like Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, who also argue for dating the Anthropocene to the beginning of colonialism, contending, “the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last

five hundred years” (761). Likewise, Yusoff identifies the epoch as a product of “an extractive economy that began with the colonial conquest of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The Anthropocene is a planetary expression of colonialism’s environmental legacy” (24).

Like these scholars, Ghosh critically examines the concept “beyond its current Eurocentric framing” (Davis and Todd 763) that pose it simply as a collateral effect of modernity, and instead contends that our current ecological predicament “are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonization” (Davis and Todd 763). These decisions, “borrowed from the Western colonial extractive models” (Saha 130), continue to be replicated globally under the banners of development, progress, and modernity, remaining foundational to today’s global order. Thus, through the tragic unraveling of the Mahaparbat, Ghosh compels us to reject dominant Western narratives that treat climate change as “a technical problem that can be solved by engineering solutions” (Ghosh 138), and instead, adopt storytelling from those who embody the impact of extractivism as a form of planetary critique that opens up imaginative possibilities for decolonial futures. Ghosh’s narrative, through its allegorical power, insists that storytelling itself is a mode of resistance, one that “holds the potential not only to chronicle the realities and repercussions of the Anthropocene but also to shape its course” (Kumar and Sharma 3).

Temporalities, the Nonlinear Present, and the Anthropocene

By encasing the fantastical tale of Mahaparbat within a contemporary context – a book club where two individuals grapple with the term “Anthropocene” in their reading – Ghosh deliberately collapses Western linear temporalities, foregrounding the continuity between colonial histories of extraction and present-day capitalist and ecological crises. This narrative structure exemplifies what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a turn toward “deep history” (212) in his influential article, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”: a mode of historical consciousness that situates human activity within planetary time without severing it from the enduring legacies of empire. As Chakrabarty asserts, the climate crisis forces us “to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history” (220), challenging the modernist impulse to isolate historical epochs through rigid temporal demarcations. While the mainstream Anthropocene discourse often positions the climate crisis as a novel rupture in planetary history, Ghosh rejects a rigid timeline and a future-oriented discourse, instead emphasizing a temporal continuum in which environmental degradation is an extension of colonial violence.

In aligning with Chakrabarty’s insistence that climate history cannot be disentangled from colonial-capitalist histories, he also echoes Indigenous climate

justice scholar Kyle Whyte's assertion that the dystopian futures imagined in mainstream climate discourse are, in fact, "conditions that Indigenous peoples have already endured due to different forms of colonialism" (226). For Whyte, and for many Indigenous scholars, time is not a linear sequence progressing toward catastrophe, but a recursive structure in which historical injustices reverberate into the present. Ghosh's narrative similarly urges readers to reconceptualize climate change not as a sudden rupture but as cyclical repetition – part of an ongoing process in which colonial-capitalist logics of domination and accumulation remain structurally intact. In other words, the story of *Mahaparbat* becomes not only a speculative allegory, but a mode of deep historical thinking, one that challenges the reliability of dominant historical frameworks and compels a reckoning with the temporal structures that sustain planetary inequities.

Politics of Vitalist Modes of Thought: Anthropoi vs. Varvaroi

Beyond the material subjugation of land and people, *The Living Mountain* dramatizes an epistemological struggle intimately linked with colonial conquest by contrasting two fundamentally divergent worldviews that remain acutely relevant today. Though the fable is devoid of named characters, it introduces two archetypal groups: on one side are the Anthropoi, the outside invaders whose extractive logic mirrors Western modernity, and, on the other, the Varvaroi, the valley's original inhabitants, who embody a worldview deeply grounded in relationality with the non-human world. Through this symbolic opposition, Ghosh critiques the modern colonial mindset that reduces nature to inert resources, epitomized by the Anthropoi's accusation that the natives failed to exploit the "Mountain's riches" (Ghosh 14). For them, the sacred Mountain "had no meaning except as resources that could be harnessed to generate profit" (Ghosh 36), and this capitalist commodification of nature allowed them to believe that they were "fully justified in seizing them" (14) at the cost of the local environment and people. The Mountain, stripped of all its cultural and spiritual significance, becomes merely a passive object of trade and a product meant to serve the Anthropoi's extractive desires. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh points out how this "mechanistic vision of the world" (37) is central to the Western colonial thought, shaping an understanding of the natural world as objects to be exploited, devoid of intrinsic value. This "colonial envisioning of nature as a vast mass of inert resources" (40), he argues, laid both the material and philosophical groundwork for the Anthropocene long before its formal naming.

Ghosh traces its genealogy to Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon, whose philosophies institutionalized a dualistic ontology that continues to contemporary modes of thought (37). He particularly critiques Descartes' theory of ontological dualism, also known as Cartesian dualism, which

posits a fundamental separation between the rational human mind (*res cogitans*) and the inert material world (*res extensa*), establishing an ontological divide in which human reason legitimizes mastery over a passive nature. Ghosh's fable allegorizes this imposition with the arrival of the Anthropoi, whose rationalist worldview initiates an ontological rupture. Similarly, Bacon's vision of nature as something to be interrogated and mastered through science similarly underpins the logic of conquest foundational to colonialism and capitalist modernity (Ghosh 187). This Enlightenment-driven modernity elevated reason as the basis for civilization, establishing an epistemic hierarchy that continues to shape global thought and delegitimize other modes of knowing (Karmakar and Chetty, "Cognitive (In)justice" 120).

Crucially, these epistemic hierarchies do not merely structure thought but shape material realities that now contribute to contemporary climate instability. Ghosh emphasizes how this hierarchical categorization of "human" and "nonhuman" systematically destroyed "the entire web of nonhuman connection that sustained a certain way of life" (41), illustrating the inextricable link between environmental and epistemic injustices. The consequences of such a view of nature as brute and inert, available for dominion and conquest, are symbolized in the destruction of the Mountain, "highlighting the inherent and apprehensive dangers of an overwhelming capitalist episteme prevalent in the Global South" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Episteme and Ecology 331).

Opposing this worldview, Ghosh foregrounds a radically different epistemology grounded in Indigenous cosmologies. For the Varvaroi, the Mountain is not a site of production but a sentient being integral to their cultural identity and lifeways, a "component of their holistic sense of livelihood" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Cognitive (In)justice" 123). Unlike the Anthropoi's reductive "vision of the world as resources" (Ghosh 76), the natives recognize the Mountain as a metaphysical presence endowed with agency, serving as a temporal conduit between the living, their ancestors, and the nonhuman world. This animistic ontology is vividly expressed during the ceremonial rituals in which the Adepts, female spiritual custodians of Mahaparbat, sense the Mountain "speaking to them through the soles of their feet" (10). The Mountain itself becomes an active agent in the narrative, issuing warnings of colonial incursion through seismic disturbances: it "began to shake and heave" and "rifts opened up in the Valley" (13). The Adepts, who possess the spiritual ability to communicate with the Mountain, warn the natives about the impending destruction: "Strangers are coming from afar, a horde of them, armed with terrible weapons" (13). Such moments underscore a vitalist cosmology in which the Mountain emerges as an active participant in history, challenging the foundational assumptions

of human exceptionalism that underpins modernist thought. This worldview, already practiced in many different epochs and regions of our planet, calls for a fundamental rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature, grounded in intergenerational relationality long eroded by colonial modernity.

Ghosh's representation closely resonates with Vanessa Watts's concept of "Indigenous Place-Thought." In her seminal essay "*Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans*," Watts asserts that land is "alive and thinking," and that both human and nonhuman entities "derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (13). This framework radically departs from Western dualisms, rejecting the ontological severance central to it. Instead, it affirms a relational cosmology in which agency is distributed across a network of animate beings and landscapes. Similarly, departing from the human-nature binaries, Ghosh uses the relationship between the natives and the Mountain to challenge the presumed universality of Western epistemes and reassert the legitimacy of Indigenous modes of knowing that emphasize kinship, reciprocity, and non-exploitative relations with the land. Significantly, this epistemological tension between scientific rationalism and localized, embodied knowledge is also a recurring motif in Ghosh's work. In *The Hungry Tide*, he stages a similar conflict through the figures of Piya, an American cetologist trained in Western science, and Fokir, a local fisherman, whose deep, intuitive understanding of the Sundarbans emerges from lived, intergenerational experience rather than formal education.

For the Anthropoi, however, the notion that the Mountain might possess agency or generate meaning is dismissed outright as "merely superstition," or even "idolatry" (Ghosh 36), as this animist belief transcends the colonial understanding focused on immediate human interests only. Following the subjugation of the Valley people, their cultural practices and ancestral wisdom, "songs, stories, and dances," are derided as "ignorant, pagan superstition," and their "false, local beliefs" (26) are invalidated. The supremacist nature of the Anthropoi is explicit in their claim that "this is the Age of the Anthropoi" and they "always know best" (29). More than a physical occupation, this marks an ontological colonization, one that forcibly displaces their worldview and imposes a new, singular epistemic order anchored in capitalist modernity. As Walter Mignolo argues, the logic of modernity operates as a rhetoric of salvation while concealing coloniality, "the logic of oppression and exploitation" (162). The Anthropoi embody this logic, positing the Indigenous worldview as a hindrance to progress and asserting that only through embracing their own extractive, developmentalist ideologies can the valley be "civilized."

Moreover, this imposition reflects a broader historical pattern of epistemic

violence, wherein Western scientific paradigms are universalized while Indigenous knowledge systems are suppressed. In her groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates how colonial Western systems of knowledge production often served to marginalize and exploit Indigenous peoples and reaffirm their own positions as she states, “Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge, and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge” (63). Like Ghosh, she further demonstrates how colonization has been not only a material process but also an epistemic one:

Colonialism not only meant the imposition of Western authority over Indigenous lands, Indigenous modes of production and Indigenous law and government, but the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultures. (Smith 64)

In *The Living Mountain*, this epistemic subjugation becomes symbolic of the broader erasure of non-mechanistic and vitalist thought systems. Ghosh observes that “over centuries of suppression, non-mechanistic, and vitalist modes of thought were pushed to the margins of Western culture” (38), revealing how colonial modernity constructed the natural world as inert, passive, and exploitable. The denial of nonhuman agency, then, was not incidental but central to legitimizing environmental extraction and conquest.

This critique extends beyond history into the present, where mainstream environmental discourse often privileges technocratic solutions and scientific data, while marginalizing traditional ecological knowledge systems. As Farhana Sultana notes, “coloniality discursively limits the terms of global debate” on climate change, and “hegemonizes knowledge of and about climate change” (6). In this sense, the epistemic and ontological forms of violence perpetuated by the “myth-making of modernity” (Ghosh 19) have erased the very possibility of conceiving of alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating to the nonhuman world. The hegemonization of climate narratives, financing, and solutions effectively forecloses cognitive justice and epistemic decolonization, entrenching a colonial logic that continues to shape global environmental politics. Contemporary initiatives such as carbon offset markets, geoengineering, and techno-fixes often reproduce the Cartesian ontology of a passive, external nature to be managed or manipulated, rather than engaged with as a living system. As such, Ghosh underscores that the Anthropocene, as a scientific concept, must also be understood as a “seismic shift in consciousness (242), one that calls into question the foundational assumptions of Western modernity.

Ghosh’s repudiation of colonial and capitalist frames of thinking reaches its

most poignant expression in the story's final act, where the collapse of the Mountain compels the Anthropoi to confront the profound limitations of their worldview. Redemption, Ghosh asserts, requires that Anthropoi "acknowledge that their stories were false, because their storytellers could not see that trees and Mountains were living beings" (31). This moment of epistemic reckoning subverts the "totality and dominant epistemology of the 'Anthropoi'" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Episteme and Ecology" 327). Once corrupted by the Anthropoi's ideals of rationalism and progress, the natives too must recognize the inadequacy of colonial frameworks to restore their Mountain's ecological balance. In rejecting the path of extractive modernity, they turn to the repressed histories and epistemologies of their "old ways" (Ghosh 35), modes of knowing once delegitimized. Through rituals and reverence, the Adepts catalyze the Mountain's regeneration, reclaiming epistemic authority over their animated world again. The Anthropoi, in turn, are forced to concede to their ecological wisdom of the Mountain's sacredness: "You were right! The Mountain *is* alive!" (35). This admission marks a profound epistemological rupture, dismantling the Anthropoi's "illusion of omnipotence" and the foundations of their Western exploitative attitudes. In this moment lies the potential for what Dipesh Chakrabarty might call "decentering" in his influential work *Provincializing Europe*, shifting the locus of authority from Western rationalism to alternative, situated, relational knowledge systems (6).

The Adepts' final refusal to yield to conquest: "How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it were your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?" (35) as Karmakar and Chetty argue, becomes the narrative's pivotal act of "epistemic disobedience," echoing Walter Mignolo's assertion that decolonial thought must challenge "the foundation and authority of hegemonic knowledge" ("Episteme and Ecology" 327). This moment is not merely a narrative climax but a decisive rupture with the colonial epistemologies that have long framed the natural world as subordinate to human mastery. Through this powerful rejection, Ghosh not only subverts the imperialist dichotomies but also reclaims the ethical imagination needed to radically envision decolonial futures grounded in local knowledges, ontological plurality, and cultural specificity. The Mountain's symbolic refusal to be commodified or controlled illuminates what Ghosh elsewhere terms a "vitalist form of politics" (232), one grounded in the rights of nonhuman beings to exist beyond the instrumentalist imperatives of capitalist extraction. This gesture also mirrors the real-world struggles of Indigenous communities who have steered and sustained the battle for climate justice for centuries, such as the Dongria Kondh's successful resistance against bauxite mining in the sacred Niyamgiri Hills or the Kayapo's ongoing defense of

the Amazon rainforest, whose activism articulates both material resistance and epistemological defiance against the global machinery of neoliberal extractivism.

Importantly, the Mountain's resurgence is not framed as a technocratic solution, but as an epistemic reorientation, rooted in Indigenous worldviews "that have long resisted those systems creating the current crisis" (McEwan 87). This reorientation necessitates "a repoliticization of climate instead of the depoliticized techno-economist utopias that never deliver" (Sultana 2). Through a deceptively simple yet symbolically rich narrative, Ghosh restores voice and agency to nonhuman actors, offering a radical alternative to dominant modes of climate governance. In recognizing the Mountain as a storyteller, the text challenges the hegemonic frameworks that have long excluded the nonhuman world from narrative legitimacy. It is precisely this recovery of these voices that makes possible the epistemic reorientation the story calls for.

Thus, *The Living Mountain* is not only a story about environmental collapse, it is a narrative about epistemic justice where Ghosh reminds us that the struggle against ecological degradation is inseparable from the struggle against colonial ways of knowing. Through the Mountain's parabolic symbolic arc, from desecration to resurgence, Ghosh insists to readers that genuine planetary futures must begin with the decolonization of thought itself, the same colonial thought that not only dismissed colonized peoples as voiceless but also denied history, agency, and voice to the Earth and its nonhuman inhabitants.

Unsettling the Universalizing "Anthropoi" in the Anthropocene

Ghosh deliberately names the invaders "Anthropoi," from the Greek word for "humans," and the Indigenous inhabitants as "Varvaroi," derived from the Greek for "barbarians," which operates as a critical intervention into both epistemological and ontological debates surrounding the Anthropocene even further. The figure of the "Anthropos," which geologists use to define the current epoch, is often presumed to denote a unified, species-level agency. By invoking the same term ironically, Ghosh directly confronts the universalizing assumptions embedded in the very term "Anthropocene," which has been widely critiqued for flattening the historical and geopolitical differences between those who caused environmental destruction and those who suffer its consequences. This literary act stages a powerful counter-discourse: rather than a neutral species category, "Anthropoi" becomes a historically and politically situated figure of imperial violence and epistemic domination.

As Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd argues in "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," the dominant Anthropocene narrative oversimplifies humanity into a singular, undifferentiated subject, as she voices:

The complex and paradoxical experiences of diverse people as humans-in-the world, including the ongoing damage of colonial and imperialist agendas, can be lost when the narrative is collapsed to a universalizing species paradigm. (244)

Similarly, Yusoff contends that the Anthropocene invokes a “universalist geologic common” (14), masking its “politics of denial” (Karmakar and Chetty, “Cognitive (In)justice” 122), which actively erases the stratified histories of dispossession. Ghosh, echoing such critiques, rejects the undifferentiated, seemingly singular figure of the Anthropos, challenges the historical oversight embedded in the Anthropocene, and instead makes visible the deep geopolitical and racialized inequities the term disavows.

In contrast, the term “Varvaroi,” the label imposed on the natives by the Anthropoi, functions as a colonial signifier that positions Indigenous peoples outside the realm of reason, civility, and legitimate knowledge. The *Anthropoi* regard the natives as “credulous and benighted people” (14), wholly lacking the technological and moral “advancements” of the invaders, who are described as “a different species of being” (16). This radical disidentification draws from a long lineage of imperial ideology that framed non-Western peoples as primitive and their lifeways as obstructions to progress. By invoking the language of barbarism, Ghosh unearths the narrative scaffolding of colonial conquest, its myth of civilizational superiority, which transforms dispossession into a moral imperative. As the Anthropoi “conjure up terrifying illusions of omnipotence” (16), the Varvaroi begin to internalize these projections of inferiority:

Our bodies were not suited to the climb, we were not strong enough, our diets were enfeebling, our habits degenerate, our beliefs persevere, our minds weak, and our hearts lacking in courage. (Ghosh 17)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, “Imperialism and colonialism are the specific formations through which the West came to ‘see’, to ‘name’ and to ‘know’ Indigenous communities” (60). Naming here becomes a deliberate act of domination, a way of fixing Indigenous identity within a colonial imaginary that denies its complexity and autonomy. Ghosh extends this critique in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, arguing that “the questions of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis” (195). These distinctions are not merely discursive, they are foundational to the ecological catastrophes of the present. He further elaborates, “our plight is a consequence of the ways in which certain classes of humans – a small minority, in fact – have actively muted others by representing them as brutes, as creatures whose presence on Earth is solely material.” The sacrifice of

landscapes and peoples, especially Indigenous communities who, as in Ghosh's narrative, revere the land as sacred, is not collateral but calculated. Echoing this, Sultana asserts that, "it is indeed through racialized Othering that climate change proceeded and proceeds" (6), marking Indigenous peoples and their lands as expendable in the calculus of capitalist development. Thus, Ghosh's deployment of the term "*Varvaroi*," a fictional yet deeply symbolic category, functions as a powerful allegorical critique of these dehumanizing regimes. It exposes the racialized hierarchies that continue to structure global systems of environmental exploitation. Yet, Ghosh also suggests that it is precisely those marked for sacrifice under Western modernity who hold the epistemic and political resources necessary for enacting decolonial futures.

Conclusion: A Decolonial Turn in an Age of Crisis and Hope

Amid the mounting ecological challenges confronting the world today, the urgency for alternative imaginaries, ones that move beyond hegemonic Western paradigms, has never been more acute. In *The Living Mountain*, Amitav Ghosh mobilizes the haunting parable of Mahaparbat, deeply rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, to reimagine the Anthropocene and envision radical modes of existence beyond the temporal and ideological constraints of the present. Though the singular event in the Himalayan Valley between the Anthropoi and Varvaroi may appear minor in the grand narrative of the world, this literary intervention reminds us that such stories carry profound relevance for our present predicament. Ghosh's insistence on foregrounding culture and cosmology shifts the conversation beyond the narrow confines of technocratic, depoliticized environmental discourse, and instead opens up transdisciplinary spaces of storytelling that engage what Farhana Sultana calls "epistemic and material outcomes" of the climate crisis (3). This transdisciplinary engagement expands the scope beyond the presumed objectivity of scientific and policy debates toward decolonial hope, imagination, and praxis.

Ultimately, Ghosh deploys symbolic landscapes as sites of epistemic contestation, historical reckoning, and speculative reimagination across his literary works, and *The Living Mountain* continues this trajectory. The Mahaparbat is not simply a geographic setting but a storied, sentient being through which histories of conquest, resistance, and ecological violence are told and reinterpreted. Against this backdrop, Ghosh urges us to pay closer attention to disparate voices from within and far beyond the mainstream discourses of Western modernity. It is only by dismantling colonial knowledge systems and reclaiming Indigenous epistemic traditions that we can begin to address the entwined ecological and epistemic injustices that structure the contemporary moment. Most importantly, the narrative symbolic threads of *The Living Mountain* remind us that to rethink

our climate crisis, we must not only rethink the relations between nature and culture but also rethink our very understanding of ourselves as humans, embedded within complex, relational worlds. As Ghosh astutely reminds us, “the fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it” (257).

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George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and 21st-Century Authoritarianism: Surveillance, Propaganda, Truth Control, and Resistance in Israel-Palestine, Bangladesh, and Global Totalitarian States

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Abstract

This article examines 21st-century totalitarianism in the light of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. To understand authoritarian practices, it focuses on Israel's biometric surveillance in occupied lands of Palestine (Weizman 89), Bangladesh's recent past digital repression and "mirror house" prisons (Anbarasan, Hussain), and panoptic states, e.g., China and Russia. The paper explores how Orwellian party control is manifested by propaganda (Said 134) and legal architectures. It cashes in on the theories of panopticon (Foucault 201), hegemony (Gramsci 24), manufacturing consent (Chomsky and Herman 15), and totalitarianism (Arendt 351). It shows how subaltern resistance, also known as "tactics of the weak" (De Certeau 48), goes on via encrypted dissent and blockchain archives. The study employs a combination of legal analysis, digital ethnography, and archival research to connect literary theory and political science. It emphasizes on truth's radical potential. Finally, the paper recommends personal and public privacy, official transparency, and historical accountability as necessary defenses against modern authoritarianism.

Keywords: authoritarianism, manufacturing consent, mirror houses, biometric surveillance, historical accountability

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a groundbreaking novel. It is a classic critique of totalitarianism. It provides a framework for examining contemporary autocratic governments, propaganda, and truth manufacturing (Orwell 3). In 1949, Orwell envisioned more than a bleak future. The novel's Oceania is frequently associated with overt dictatorships. However, Orwell's cautions are also applicable to both liberal democracies and hybrid regimes (Zuboff 205). He presents a dystopian society where fear, language, and technology can ensure that dissent is unthinkable and obedience is internalized. Big Brother in Oceania directly represses the citizens, erodes private thought, manipulates language, and continuously rewrites history (Orwell 45-62). The novel was originally written

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off as a science fiction or a Cold War metaphor. But its universe has become uncomfortably real in the twenty-first century. Oceania's telescreens are now replicated by biometric scanners, smartphones, and security cameras. Algorithmic controlling on social media or digital deletion under cybersecurity laws replaces erasing inconvenient facts and creating a "memory hole," as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The "Thought Police" is a metaphor for authoritarian censorship. Today, it stands for facial recognition technologies, online surveillance, and predictive policing (Orwell 45-62).

At present, the systematic use of digital tools to monitor, anticipate, and quell resistance is all-pervasive. Even space is under threat now. Orwell warns, "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull" (27). Algorithms customize the news we see, facial recognition tracks our movements, and metadata reveals our connections. Nothing is private nowadays. Any possible thinking against the autocrats is dealt with by heavy punishments under pretexts of public law and order situations, anti-terrorism, or cybersecurity.

This article investigates the above aspects through a comparative process, focusing on three regions: Israel-Palestine, Bangladesh, and China-Russia. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives us not only a set of imaginary words but also a critical framework for understanding how totalitarian states reconfigure control in the digital age. Apart from highlighting repression, this paper sheds light on the dialectic between autocratic power and resistance, fear and truth, and erasure of history and memory. Orwell's significance now arises from his predictions and the ongoing scholarly and public investigation into the meaning of freedom in a world increasingly controlled by unseen structures of power.

In reviewing the literature on Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the relevance of his work to modern surveillance, authoritarianism, and truth control are seen. The novel was originally interpreted as a critique of totalitarian regimes in the mid-twentieth century. Even so, contemporary scholars take it as a flexible framework for understanding modern autocratic governance too. Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon conceptually links contemporary surveillance systems like CCTV, GIS, GPS, etc. with Orwell's telescreen. According to Foucault, surveillance serves as an instrument of internal discipline that works best when it is ubiquitous yet invisible (201). Similarly, Shoshana Zuboff examines how state and corporate agencies work together to use data to forecast and influence behavior (315). Now, we police ourselves and each other. It is known as self-surveillance, or internalized surveillance. Next, Noam Chomsky's media control theory and Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony concept are also related to the manipulation of language and memory in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both theorists

claim that autocratic powers not only use force but also narratives and information to influence public opinion (Gramsci 24; Chomsky and Herman 15). Besides, Hannah Arendt proposes that totalitarian authorities utilize bureaucracy and ideology to stifle diversity and obliterate historical responsibility (351).

The above theories have been applied to certain geopolitical circumstances in this article. Israel's massive use of surveillance machinery in occupied Palestine, Bangladesh's former political repression and *aynaghor* detention centers (mirror houses), and China-Russia's repression of political dissension show how contemporary authoritarian regimes reflect the above theories. This essay proceeds on these concepts, keeping Orwell's literary observations at the core in the form of a comparative study to understand modern authoritarian tactics.

The methodology of this paper is interdisciplinary which combines literary study, legal research, and digital ethnography to explore modern authoritarianism in the light of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The novel is not just a closed allegory. It works as a theoretical framework for examining control systems in the real world, particularly those that involve memory erasure, propaganda, and surveillance. Three case studies – Bangladesh, Israel-Palestine, and global surveillance nations like China and Russia – have been selected for analysis. Various issues like their documented use of biometric technologies, restrictive legislation, and media control are studied. Some examples of sources are government laws (such as Bangladesh's Cyber Security Act and Israel's Counter-Terrorism Law), human rights reports (such as those from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), and independent investigative journalism. These are compared to politics, surveillance theory, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In addition, digital ethnography is employed, which tracks censorship trends, VPN use, encrypted communications, and basic archive efforts. Finally, legal ethnography shows how laws serve not only as regulatory mechanisms but also as narrative tools that legitimize state policies. The comparative method is based on identifying four Orwellian mechanisms present in all cases: surveillance, propaganda, truth control, and resistance.

A few theoretical frameworks are employed to understand how surveillance, propaganda, historical revisionism, and psychological control collectively create a country in which dissent is practically impossible. Only coercion cannot hold Orwell's Oceania together. Manipulation and conditioning of truth and belief are also used. The first theory is Michel Foucault's panopticon. It is a prison design in which inmates never know when they are being watched. So, they always behave to conform to prison rules (Foucault 201). Another theory is about surveillance. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff notes

that modern surveillance is often invisible. It is embedded in digital platforms like social media and smart devices (Zuboff 315). These systems gather personal data, monitor habits, and predict actions. In this digital age, the panopticon is implemented through internet monitoring, facial recognition, surveillance cameras, and data tracking. We are not always aware of being watched. But the possibility is enough to mold our behavior ourselves. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the telescreen is a device of continuous surveillance. Everyone knows that “Big Brother” is always watching. Thus, compliance is guaranteed even in the absence of a real observer. Orwell states, “You had to live – did live – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and every movement scrutinized” (5). Now, we internalize control and shape our response according to government laws. Orwell envisioned such a panoptic surveillance prison in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony shows how dominant powers control not only political institutions but also language, culture, and common sense. Authoritarian states govern how things are described and how people interpret them (Gramsci 24). It is argued that thinking is not possible without language. That is, language can be utilized as the most pivotal instrument to manipulate people’s thinking process and capacity. If a country can control the language, it is easy to shape the citizens’ thinking faculty and thereby their allegiance to the government. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we see that “Big Brother” employs a group of linguists to trim the natural language of Oceania and produce a new dystopian language, known as Newspeak, which will have less words “to narrow the range of thought” (Orwell 52). It is the ultimate tool to keep control over the citizens of the country. It will remove the possibility of dissent or blasphemy in the land. Thus, people will have less language to question the authority. In the context of Bangladesh, examples of language control may be the use of words and terms like *spirit of Liberation War*, *development*, *razakar*, *pro-Pakistan*, *pro-India*, *pro-China*, and many others. Unfortunately, the past autocratic governments of Bangladesh often framed and quelled the opposing agencies by calling them *razakars*, *terrorists*, *pro-India*, *pro-Pakistan*, *anti-state*, and *anti-development* elements of the country. They hid their unprecedented and sky-rocketing corruption, coercion, tyranny, exploitation, and abuse of power behind various sugar-coated banners such as democracy, constitution, spirit of Liberation War, development, etc.

Autocratic countries utilize many tactics to make people agree to their policies. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman demonstrate how media, even in democratic countries, filter information to conform to Big Brother’s objectives and manufacture consent of the governed (15). An example

is autocratic regimes utilization of *information management* instead of direct censorship and propaganda. They use algorithms to promote or conceal material and broadcast preferred narratives. For instance, in Bangladesh, laws such as the Digital Security Act or Cyber Security Act were used to criminalize criticism as *anti-state propaganda*. We see a similar aspect in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is called "doublethink." It means simultaneously holding opposing beliefs, such as "war is peace" or "freedom is slavery" (Orwell 80-90).

Regarding totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, explains how totalitarian governments rewrite or erase history to distort reality. They do this with the help of bureaucrats and state-sponsored civil society (Arendt 351). The Orwellian "Ministry of Truth" oversees the modification of historical documents to align with present political situations. Winston Smith's job is to edit newspapers so that the Party's previous forecasts always seem correct. Orwell states, "Who controls the present controls the past," and "Who controls the past controls the future" (35). The motive in both situations is to make the truth unknowable, and not just tell lies. This strategy eliminates the knowledge of facts and history, thereby preventing opposition. For instance, in the real world, Ilan Pappé has demonstrated how the 1948 Nakba has been erased from public knowledge in the Israel-Palestine conflict by being left out of official narratives (115). Public memory of the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh is governed by the state (Ranjan). Similar attempts are China's censorship of the Tiananmen Square massacre and Russia's rewriting of crimes committed during the Soviet era. Psychological control of an individual is the main goal of the dictators. Totalitarianism will be completely successful if a person starts doubting his own memory and rationality, and unquestioningly submits to the official narratives. In Orwell's novel, the Party aims to control the individual's inner world. If the Party asserts that "2 + 2 = 5," Winston cannot but agree. This psychological domination completes dictatorship. The biggest transgression is to place one's own memory or judgment above the Party's, and "the heresy of heresies is common sense" (Orwell 70). In the present time, citizens question their memory and common knowledge because of governmental propaganda and widespread forgery of information. The loss of collective memory and self-confidence makes people obey the authority passively.

The following sections explore three case studies against the above theories and how the proletariats of these regions are resisting the unjust autocrats. The first case study is Israel which employs an all-encompassing biometric monitoring system in the occupied Palestinian territories. They use facial recognition, smartphone apps, and centralized data platforms. The "Blue Wolf" program scans Palestinian faces and rapidly retrieves personal information such as

previous arrests, connections, and movement history. It is called “Facebook for Palestinians” (Mahmoudi). This scanning is used to classify people and manage checkpoint access. Amnesty International has called it a system of “automated apartheid” (“Automated Apartheid” 6). This resembles Orwell’s depiction of the telescreen, where citizens are aware of being watched but powerless to avoid it. People of Oceania internalize this gaze and behave accordingly (Orwell 5). In the name of national security, Israel’s Counter-Terrorism Law 2016 permits the collecting of biometric information. Palestinians are severely impacted by these regulations. There is little judicial supervision in these situations. Military courts, where the conviction rate is above 95% and detainees typically lack access to sufficient legal protection, are commonly used to try Palestinian civilians (B’Tselem). This method has a modern resonance with Orwell’s idea of “vaporization,” in which people vanish from both the public and legal records. The Ministry of Truth manipulates memory and language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to conform to the Party ideology. Israeli discourse presents the Palestinians as terrorists and their freedom movement as a threat to Israel. Public perception is frequently reshaped by terms like “security threats” and “terrorist suspects.” This framing portrays Palestinians as innately aggressive or illogical (Said 134). Media and education play a part in this process. The 1948 Nakba and other Palestinian historical events are seldom ever covered in Israeli curricula or the media. Erasing significant historical events undermines claims for justice or restitution and makes counter-narratives invalid.

Despite this, Palestinian civil society tries to resist systematic monitoring and narrative repression. Journalists and activists are depending more on encrypted messaging apps like Signal and Telegram (Tawil-Souri and Aouragh 106-108). Video evidence of raids, detentions, and demolitions is preserved by secure backups and anonymized cloud storage. Michel de Certeau calls these “tactics of the weak” which are subtle and regular actions that subvert prevailing systems (48). Testimonies and video footage are archived for worldwide examination by grassroots programs like B’Tselem’s video documentation projects and other NGO-led platforms. The above techniques present alternate realities based on lived experience and challenge the official account.

In the case of Bangladesh, in recent years, the political atmosphere has witnessed an increase in official surveillance and imprisonment techniques. Both local and international media and rights organizations have reported on the existence of underground detention centers, known locally as “mirror houses” or *aynaghor*, allegedly run by security forces such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) (Anbarasan; Hussain; “Where No Sun Can Enter”). Survivors and relatives report incidents of

enforced disappearance, often preceded by the tracing of individuals through mobile phone data, internet activity, or social media presence (“Where No Sun Can Enter”). Thus, digital surveillance precedes physical repression. Metadata and geolocation facilities are used to identify and track down critics, particularly activists, student leaders, and journalists. This kind of anticipatory policing is similar to Orwell’s concept of the “Thought Police,” which punishes people not only for their crimes but also for their intentions: “Thoughtcrime does not entail death: thoughtcrime is death” (Orwell 27). Monitoring becomes a technique of changing behavior before opposition can arise.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018 and the Cyber Security Act (CSA) of 2023 in Bangladesh ensured legal grounds for surveillance and online censorship, generating an atmosphere of terror. Almost 7,000 cases were filed under the DSA between 2018 and 2023, with many including ambiguous claims such as “hurting religious sentiment” or “spreading rumors” (“Repackaging Repression: The CSA”). Many organizations like the UN and Clooney Foundation for Justice have expressed concern about the stifling impact of these laws and called on Bangladesh to reform or eliminate them (“OHCHR Technical Note”; “Bangladesh’s Zombie Cyber Security Law”). Journalists and ordinary people frequently self-censor to escape prosecution. Orwell’s concept of being an “unperson” – someone erased from all records for resisting the regime – is reflected by the current risk of disappearance or legal silence (Orwell 52). State-aligned media in Bangladesh, like Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, has been utilized to mold and limit popular narratives. Independent news organizations have faced legal action, censorship, ban, and internet blockades. For example, Diganta TV, Islamic TV, Peace TV Bangla, *Netra News*, and the *Daily Amar Desh* newspaper have been shut down forcefully for a long period of the Awami League regime. Simultaneously, problematic or disturbing instances of state violence are tactfully ignored or minimized in official documents. This narrative control extends to digital domains. Algorithmic filtering encourages pro-government discourse, whereas anything critical of state actors is banned and punished. Winston Smith says, “Everything faded into mist. The past was wiped, forgotten, and the falsehood became the truth” (Orwell 75). In such circumstances, memory itself becomes a contested arena.

To avoid erasure and censorship, Bangladeshi activists and independent media have been using blockchain technology to build safe and indelible records of human rights breaches. These archives work like a decentralized diary and counter enforced disappearances, custodial killings, and media repression. This allows evidence to be preserved even when websites or platforms are shut down (Eron; Hammadi; Shehabuddin). Blockchain provides a technique of resistance against

tampering and government influence. Orwell views truth as a revolutionary act. He said, “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four” (Orwell 84).

The final case study is China and Russia which have been criticized as totalitarian countries for a long time. China has installed systems like the “Sharp Eyes” and “City Brain” programs in recent years for governance (Liyanage; Yueyang). These programs use facial recognition, CCTV footage, and behavioral analytics to track individuals’ movements and behaviors in real time. The “Police Cloud” database aggregates personal information such as medical history, travel records, and financial data, aiming to predict dissent or criminal behavior before it occurs (“China’s Algorithms of Repression”; Zuboff 338). These technologies have changed public life into a zone of perpetual surveillance. Jaywalking alerts, behavioral scoring, and AI-generated cautions are normal in China. All these reflect Orwell’s concept of the telescreen as more than just a camera: “You had to live ... in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and every movement scrutinized” (Orwell 5).

Russia’s surveillance architecture operates through a combination of legal and technical controls. The SORM system (System for Operative Investigative Activities) was originally established in the 1990s. It has been expanded to intercept phone calls, emails, and online activities without court orders (“Disrupted, Throttled, and Blocked”; Terzyan). The 2019 Sovereign Internet Law allows Russia’s Roskomnadzor to route internet traffic through state-controlled infrastructure. Now, the authorities can disconnect from the global internet any time (“Russia Enacts ‘Sovereign Internet’ Law”). Artificial intelligence systems like “Oculus” are reportedly employed to detect and censor so-called “extremist” or “fake” information on social media and prevent VPN access (Tenisheva). Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, rules against “discrediting” the military have resulted in hundreds of convictions for social media posts, memes, and non-violent protest (“Disrupted, Throttled, and Blocked”). Like the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, citizens of Russia are compelled to conform to official narratives or face punishment: “The Party advised you to disregard the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final and most important command” (Orwell 69).

Despite such surveillance, resistance has continued. Chinese activists still use decentralized file sharing, encrypted chat applications, and platforms like “AirDrop” to anonymously distribute information during protests (“Youthquake” 5, 56). Russian dissidents use Telegram, VPNs, and steganography – the process of hiding content beneath memes – to avoid censorship (Khrustaleva). These strategies reflect Orwell’s belief that truth persists through small acts of revolt:

“If there is hope . . . it lies in the proles” (Orwell 60). These actions demonstrate how people modify technologies to thwart control systems.

After comparing the situations of China, Russia, Bangladesh, and Israel-Palestine, we see that authoritarian practices and resistance to them closely resemble the mechanisms portrayed in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The basic tactics – surveillance, propaganda, truth control, and resistance – remain strikingly similar throughout geopolitical contexts. The perils of continuous surveillance were one of Orwell's main cautions: “There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment” (Orwell 5). The telescreen in Oceania in the novel not only watches behavior but also modifies it. These days, digital surveillance equipment replicates this psychological unease. Israel regulates the Palestinians using facial recognition software like Blue Wolf and Red Wolf (“Automated Apartheid” 46-51). Predictive policing is executed by China's “Police Cloud” and “City Brain” initiatives (Liyanage; Yueyang). While the SORM system in Russia furtively gathers communication data, Bangladesh tracks social media activity and phone-call history to hunt down opponents (“Where No Sun Can Enter”). Surveillance is a common factor in all cases. Also, it plays a role in controlling individual behavior by making people used to the possibility of being watched.

Propaganda is used for building public opinion and validating state action. In the novel, the Ministry of Truth constantly rewrites historical records to align with the Party's current interests: “The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth” (Orwell 75). In Bangladesh, state-aligned media and legislative regulations dwarfed independent journalism and erased evidence of extrajudicial violence (I. Ahmed; “Alarming Surge . . . in Bangladesh”). Media monopolies and algorithmic filtering spread official narratives while eliminating opposing viewpoints in China and Russia (Sinkkonen and Lassila). Mainstream Israeli and Western media continuously present Palestinian resistance as radicalism and terrorism (Said 134). Often, propaganda is legitimized by legal processes. Russia's laws prohibit “discrediting” the military, whilst Bangladesh's DSA and CSA considered criticism to be “anti-state” activity (“Bangladesh's Zombie Cyber Security Law”). Such control over the media ensures that citizens have a consistent and one-dimensional perspective of state actions. Orwell talked about “memory hole” in which unfavorable truths are methodically erased. In Bangladesh, it is known as digital censorship and government information management. Any mention of the Tiananmen Square protests are removed from internet platforms in China. In Bangladesh, records of government misrule, killings by pro-government party men, custodial deaths, RAB's crossfire, and instances of political violence were duplicated, banned, or erased from news

sites and social media under cybercrime legislation (K. Ahmed; Shehabuddin). Meanwhile, historical narratives such as “the Nakba” of the Palestinians are generally absent from Israeli official discourse and educational resources (Pappé 115). Digital technologies help with selective memory and making erasure less obvious to the public. In Orwell’s world, forgetting was enforced. But now, it is possible to automate.

In conclusion, we can say that George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is still a relevant novel to understand worldwide tyranny in the 21st century of information technology. Its portrayal of surveillance, propaganda, and truth manipulation is now a blatant reality rather than just an imaginary story. This study explores how modern autocratic regimes replicate Orwellian Big Brother’s tactics to control dissent and alter history using biometric technologies, algorithmic filtering, and legal repression. Oceania’s “telescreen” has now transformed into various digital versions such as China’s “Police Cloud,” Russia’s SORM, “Blue Wolf” and “Red Wolf” in Israel, and metadata tracking in Bangladesh. The authoritarian regimes use such tools not only to observe behavior but also to influence it. The surveillance mechanisms are justified by propaganda and normalized by truth control. The autocrats thereby erase historical accountability and restrict public discourse. These tactics are frequently legalized by claims of national security.

However, Orwell acknowledges the potential of opposition as well. Through data encryption, archival activism, and decentralized documentation, people preserve the truth in all the case studies above (De Certeau 48). In the face of algorithmic deletion and narrative control, any act that preserves facts, no matter how tiny, becomes revolutionary. Defending truth is challenging. International awareness, technological protection of data, freedom of expression, and legal reform are all necessary. Personal and public privacy, official transparency, and historical accountability are essential to fight against modern authoritarianism. And Orwell’s observations remain both cautionary and inspirational to societies where narrative control and surveillance infrastructure threaten to become more pervasive.

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Correlation Between Displacement and Dehumanization in Contemporary Bangladeshi Short Stories from *Our Many Longings*

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Abstract

In an increasingly globalized socio-political and economic system, large populations are often displaced due to political, economic, or environmental reasons. Most of the displaced individuals face severe human rights violations, resulting in a process of dehumanization. Many refugees and migrants are forced to cope with challenges like hunger, slavery, physical torture, sexual violence, genocide, random detention, and human trafficking, leaving them powerless. Such circumstances often take away the dignity of a human being, putting the displaced in a process of dehumanization. *Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction from Bangladesh*, edited by Sohana Manzoor, is a collection of short stories that depicts the enigma of displaced people. Through a close examination of the three stories in *Our Many Longings*, this paper investigates how the displaced people gradually lose their identity, leading to dehumanization, which is the denial of all the positive human qualities of an individual. The paper also uses Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect* to analyze whether dehumanization necessarily transforms an individual into an evil being.

Keywords: displacement, dehumanization, trauma, violence, evil

Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction from Bangladesh is a compilation of twelve short stories in English and English translations from Bangla by Bangladeshi authors. These stories depict a wide range of life experiences of individuals primarily of Bangladeshi descent, spanning the period of the country's liberation war, the aftermath of the war, and the more globalized modern



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world. Many of the characters sketched in the stories represent war trauma, migration issues, forced displacement, and diasporic identity. The authors' consummate projection of Bangladesh through the characters from different times and locations helps to initiate discussions on the psychological impact of displacement and trauma on individuals. The loss of identity, dual identity, violence, and sexual assault can be some of the after-effects of displacement and dislocation, which are directly linked with dehumanizing mechanisms. The short stories from *Our Many Longings*, "The Green Passport," "Nuru," and "Torso" encompass historical events like the 1947 Partition and the Liberation War of 1971, and their impacts on individuals. This paper intentionally highlights these stories as they intricately intertwine the two key concepts: violence rooted in displacement and the mechanisms of dehumanization.

Unlike voluntary migration, which is driven by choice and factors such as economic opportunity, displacement refers to the forced movement of people from one geographical location to another due to external circumstances, including conflict, violence, persecution, or natural disasters. As mentioned by Livia Hazer and Gustaf Gredebäck according to the UNHCR report 2021, more than 100 million people in the world are displaced forcefully and the number is only expected to be doubled (1). Displacement can be both long-term and short-term. On the other hand, dehumanization happens when one group of people considers another group to be inferior or lesser humans and sanctifies the inhuman treatment towards the "other" group and violates their human rights. Michelle Maiese has defined dehumanization as a psychological process that underlines identity politics and self/other dichotomy. According to Haslam, "Dehumanization is arguably most often mentioned in relation to ethnicity, race, and related topics such as immigration and genocide" (252). He points out that, "dehumanization occurs whenever individuals or outgroups are ascribed lesser degrees of the two forms of humanness than the self or ingroup" (Haslam 261). He also conceptualizes the two types of dehumanization: animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization (258). For Helen Fein, dehumanization includes all those stereotypes, metaphors, and forms of defamation and symbolic degradation spread by large-scale propaganda operations that designate the victims as foreign and inferior- whether as sub- or non-human (as insects, parasites, germs, or viruses), or else as superhuman (as satanic, omnipotent figures). Mariot claims that, "Dehumanization is one of the main ways by which perpetrators of genocide attempt to legitimize the elimination of a minority group" (105).

To understand the entire process of why and how a person/group transforms into perpetrators, because of displacement, and dismisses the moral boundary, this

paper uses Philip Zimbardo's Lucifer Effect as a theoretical lens and scrutinizes the stories to identify the social factors that might inspire human beings to engage in evil activities resulting in dehumanization. Zimbardo's experimental theory attempts to shift the attention from humans' inherent quality of being evil to the social factors that provoke the "self" to unleash violence by dehumanizing the "other." Since narrative fictions mirror diverse psychological, philosophical, and moral problems of human beings by creating alternative fictional realities, they open up gateways for extensive exploration of how a certain character acts and makes choices within extreme situational forces. Thus, the fictional realities in the selected short stories echo the experimental settings of Zimbardo's "Stanford prison design" and its effects on individuals' choices.

South Asian writers in English, after the 1980s, share a common trend in their writing where they explore the themes of "colonial encounters, the advent of nationalism, the consequences of partition, and nation-building in the nascent decolonized state" (Alam 43). It is further explored by Fakrul Alam that trauma caused by political unrest and violence along with the challenges of the replacement of the oppressive rulers by another set of oppressors is an "easily identifiable" (43) theme. Besides the persisting themes like "religious, class and caste prejudice as well as patriarchal injustice" (43), projecting trauma of being uprooted and issues of diaspora and hybridity are also recurrent in the writing trends from the seventies onward. Thus, in academia, the major bodies of critical studies and research deploy the questions of identity crisis, hybridity, and diasporic conditions from South Asian literature. As an example, Nair explores the complexity of the identity question in case of migration from the perspective of the Indian diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction focusing on how the issue of "home" has become a concern for these migrants. Speculating on Jhumpa Lahiri's two prominent novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Nair identifies "the feeling of in-betweenness and the psychological trauma faced by the diasporic characters who experience problems like displacement, alienation, feeling of rootlessness, quest for identity and questions of adjustment to the hostland" through Lahiri's fiction (138).

Themes showcasing political unrest, violence and displacement through different historical movements and turning points inevitably raise the question of dehumanization and its psychological after-effects on the victims' minds. But only a handful of studies address the issue. One notable work was undertaken by Navarro-Tejero that studies Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, which explores how female bodies are treated "in the discursive articulation of nationalism" (44). Through the narrative, she examines "dehumanizing sexual violence women suffered" (44) during the 1947 Partition because of the newly drawn border

between India and Pakistan. While looking at the sexual violence against women and female body as a symbol “within the dialectics of patriarchal communalism” (45), through the lens of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, she invests some attention on the perpetrator’s point of view. She addresses Ice Candy man’s transformation into a beast after witnessing the sack full of mutilated breasts, possibly of Muslim women. She analyzes this transformation through the lens of a dehumanizing process that uncovers Ice Candy man’s evil instinct against women from the Hindu community.

Narrowing their focus down to Bangladeshi Anglophone literature, Quayum and Hasan introspect how the language politics embedded in the highly nationalistic feelings hindered the projection of Anglophone literary works in the eighties and nineties in Bangladesh. They also explored the changing trends that started early on in the millennia through the emergence of several promising and prolific writers from both home and abroad. These writers share the same national identity, and they have been representing Bangladeshi historical, political, cultural, and social experiences through their writing in the global sphere. They further discuss the research trends based on the Bangladeshi Anglophone literary work considering four research articles that encompass matters like “postcolonial discourse,” “impact of temporal and cultural homelessness or diaspora,” “environmental degradation and risks to human life that stem from pollution migration from rich (polluting) to poor (polluted) countries – all in the name of development under the aegis of neo-liberal globalization,” and “sensitive nationalist issues” (Quayum and Hasan 740-741). Once again, the question of dehumanizing effects on the human psyche remains unexplored in these articles.

However, Biswas and Tripathi in their paper “The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara’s *Blame*” reinvestigate the intensity of violence, rape, and attribution of blame from the perspective of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. They explore the dehumanization of women in forms of rape and murder and their multifaceted roles in the war, following the theory of blame proposed by Bertram F. Malle et al. The story of *Blame* revolves around Laila and Gita, the two female protagonists, and their dehumanization by the Pakistani army and people, even from their own family. The focus of the article is primarily on societal blame, which changes according to perspectives. In the course of the novel, Laila and Gita’s family move around various places to save their lives “like refugees, imprisoned and abandoned in their own country” (Biswas and Tripathi 46). The family members, though victims themselves, victimized other innocent people like Laila and Gita, where blaming is “one of the most accepted forms of moral criticism” (Malle et al. 171), unlike the dehumanizing acts of “attacking, slandering, and vilifying” (Malle et al. 171), which are least acceptable in society.

The article indicates the covert process of dehumanization through the blame game. The overt dehumanization and how it may foster and give rise to evil remains unnoticed in Bangladeshi literary discourses.

Arup Saha explores the effects of displacement as represented in postcolonial novels and identifies that “when the postcolonial people attempt to enter the centre, they face cultural and psychological displacements. These displacements distort the self of the peripheral individual” (327).

Displacement has a long-term effect on human psychology and might hinder the development of children. Hazer and Gredebäck in their review article examine literature in psychological effects on Syrian refugee children aged between 0-18 years and identify the developmental challenges encountered by these children as they grew up. Among many other difficulties they identify, “in families with moderately secure or insecure attachments, a high level of sibling conflict, and a high level of negative parenting practices, children had symptoms of heightened aggression, anxiety, and depression and had difficulties processing traumatic experiences” (Hazer and Gredebäck 11).

As we come to the question of dehumanization, Nicolas Mariot, in his article “On the Role of Dehumanization of Victims in the Perpetration of Mass Killings: Research Notes,” presents a unique view regarding the connection of mass killings to dehumanization, as it questions dehumanization as a mandatory tool for such violence. Mariot accepts dehumanization as one of the main factors in genocide and extreme violence where the perpetrators intend to “legitimize the elimination of a minority group” (4). He contemplates the degrading conditions of victims which involves acts such as keeping them without food or water, not letting them use toilets, stripping them naked before stripping them of their lives and abandoning their bodies “removing the final traits of their personhood during a massacre” (5). Mariot takes into account Michael Mann’s view that dehumanization helps executioners to overcome their moral inhibitions about taking the lives of defenseless human beings. It is the killer’s defense mechanism for avoiding responsibility, which makes them believe in the righteousness of their actions. While Mariot’s paper closely examines the violence and dehumanization, it does not explore the deeper psychological causes behind such behavior, focusing instead primarily on the war itself rather than the mental and emotional states of the soldiers involved in killing and massacres.

Besides blatant or overt dehumanization, there can be ways of dehumanizing others that imply “subtle and implicit racism,” which is addressed in modern dehumanization research. Using innovative approaches, these studies investigate a “variety of subtle ways in which we can deprive others of full humanity in more “everyday” settings” (Kteily and Bruneau 488).

Thus, addressing the gaps, our research article attempts to further investigate the psychology behind the act of dehumanization committed by people, in relation to displacement, through the short stories “Nuru,” “Torso,” and “The Green Passport,” and how the victims react to the dehumanizing process, focusing on two primary research questions: how do the displaced people lose their identity gradually and fall victim to dehumanization, and does the process of dehumanization necessarily transform the victims into evil beings?

This study employs a qualitative text analysis methodology, using the psychoanalytic theoretical framework of Zimbardo’s Lucifer Effect as its primary theoretical framework. The three stories are selected on the basis of the shared traces of historical and geographical settings and thematic resemblance. An exclusive psychological dimension related to the act of violence both from doers and receivers’ end is available in all the stories. Moreover, the interconnections of the stories to the concept of dislocation made the choice of the texts possible. The stories are studied and analyzed based on the compare-contrast and cause-effect method. To understand the socio-psychological dimension that controls and influences the internal workings of evil actions and choices of human kind, the Lucifer Effect framework is chosen as the experimental approach to shed light on the factors that guard the evil instincts of every normal individual. This approach identifies how those factors become dysfunctional in the shifts of situations, environments, and self-identification:

People can become evil when they are enmeshed in situations where the cognitive controls that usually guide their behaviour in socially desirable and personally acceptable ways are blocked, suspended, or distorted. The suspension of cognitive control has multiple consequences, among them the suspension of: conscience, self-awareness, sense of personal responsibility, obligation, commitment, liability, morality, guilt, shame, fear, and analysis of one’s action is cost-benefit calculations. (Zimbardo 305)

Zimbardo, an American psychologist, posits that evil is not genetic or innate, but rather a product of outer factors like surroundings, society, and politics. In his analysis of the process of human transformation from good to evil, external processes serve as focal points. He relies on specific literary (*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding) and historical (the incident of Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq in 2003) examples of violence and aggression to provide a foundation to his theory, the Lucifer Effect. He ran a test at Stanford University in 1971, which is called the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE).

To gain a clear understanding of evil, it is necessary to examine the process

of dehumanization. According to Zimbardo, “Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others – or using one’s authority and systematic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf” (5). He further states, “Dehumanization occurs whenever some human beings consider other human beings to be excluded from the moral order of being a human person” (307).

Being evil is not something inherent; rather, people can learn to become evil regardless of their “genetic inheritance, personality, or family legacy” (7). Often, the intention of doing evil is less important, and the process of reducing evil unleashes greater evil. To do evil things, people must go through certain processes. One is to create “the enemy” in the mind. To destroy certain opposition, the people in power spread “hostile imagination” (11) in the minds of the people who become victimizers over time. Such propaganda stereotypes and dehumanizes others. War generates cruelty and barbaric behavior against anyone considered “the Enemy, as the dehumanized, demonic Other” (17).

Another measure for doing evil things is deindividuation. People engage in destructive behavior when they work in a group and their individual identity is hidden. Situations where people feel anonymous reduce their sense for personal accountability, so the potential for evil actions increases. Moreover, if the situation or people in power gives them agency to engage in antisocial or violent behavior, people lose all sense of morality and embark on cruel actions.

The most important way of engaging in evil is moral disengagement as human beings. People often tarnish the identity of others to make them less of a human being, and it is easier to treat them brutally as they view them as objects. Their pain can, thus, be disregarded and justified by blaming those others for the consequences. There are other ways of disengagement such as using euphemistic language to sanitize the reality, minimizing any direct link between the cruel actions and their outcome, creating the moral justification for the cruelty, distorting the negative impacts, and so on.

This study applies Zimbardo’s framework to analyze the subtle character changes brought about by displacement and encountering dehumanizing situations in the selected stories. The study also considers the blurring of the victim-victimizer binary, recognizing the situational construction of these roles. The three selected short stories illustrate the act of violence of the oppressor group/individual unleashing the evil upon the other group participating in either “blatant dehumanization” or “subtle dehumanization” (Kteily and Bruneau 488). Displacement from home, deindividuation, authorization, and outgroup enemy image projection are the common catalysts in all three stories that help to lay bare the socio-psychological influences that provoke the evil actions.

The short story “Nuru” by Hasan Al Zayed is centered on an evil act of the protagonist Nuru, a displaced individual who once brutally beat another displaced, hunger-stricken woman. The site of the displaced homeless immigrants taking shelter in a park of Washington DC reminds the narrator of the time when the people of a newborn Bangladesh were struggling with poverty, hunger, joblessness, and insecurities. The flood of 1988, which serves as the backdrop of the story, left a huge number of people homeless and displaced. These people came to Dhaka in search of a job or food:

Nuru Bhai came to the city when he was still an adolescent. He was trying to escape the dreadful flood that swallowed his ancestral home and took in his father. He followed those who came to the city at the wake of the famine, in search of food and life, and settled down near the stairwell. (Zayed 220)

This illustrates how Nuru was displaced from his home due to a natural disaster and was living in Dhaka under dehumanizing conditions without proper food, shelter, and work, at the mercy of the local people. Nuru’s insecurity as a displaced person is symbolized through his *paajon*, a stick to “goat cattle home” (Zayed 213) which he would carry all the time, ending up using it on another victim of the flood.

As a stairwell resident himself, Nuru became like a member of the narrator’s family, taking on trivial tasks like a caretaker for the home. When a woman, possibly another displaced flood victim, came to the building area, almost naked and hungry, demanding food, the people there reacted shamefully. Nuru, as a displaced person himself, should have understood her situation better but he behaved erratically, beating her with his stick. He later started behaving rudely with other displaced individuals: “He, with his *paajon*, assaulted her with all the brute force anguish of his young body He became irascible and restless, fretting over everything, even the smallest of things. He could be heard arguing with other occupants of the stairwell” (222). For Nuru, multiple social factors can be traced in light of the Lucifer Effect that provoked him to act so brutally. One main reason is he did not have any fixed responsibility or identity: he remained at the stairwell as a parasite and followed all the instructions of the host family. Living in the shadow of others, he gradually might have lost his own purpose of living, although at the beginning it was mentioned that he used to be a craftsman, making beautiful things out of bamboo. The day the woman intruded into the colony and threatened the residents with her horrific appearance and desperate cry for food, Nuru was asked to take care of the matter. According to Zimbardo, if people in power allocate agency to engage in violent behavior, people lose sense of moral strictures and engage in cruel actions. In Nuru’s case, his own

displacement and vulnerability resulted in his disengagement with other victims where he only had to mechanically follow the instructions of his host/employer. The harshness he had to face because of his migration from his home also made him crude and competitive for a better position.

In the short story “The Green Passport,” Shaheen Akhtar, translated by Arifa Ghani Rahman, encapsulates rather a complex situation and vision of Rahmatullah, a 1971 war criminal, trodden with age and caught in a vacuum where he cannot own or disown the country he lives in. During the communal riots in Bihar, India in 1946, Rahmatullah’s father, the great grandfather of Ahmed, had been killed: “The shop was looted during the riot of 1946. Great-grandfather’s body had rotted among the sacks of sweetmeats. He had been stuffed into one of those sacks and buried in the family graveyard” (Akhtar 31). This incident triggered the migration of their family from India to East Pakistan. Their displacement made them angry or frustrated and, in some aspects, insensitive and often cruel.

The depiction of Old Delhi during the time of Partition uncovers the dehumanizing condition of people: “Old Delhi. 1947. Even the dogs wouldn’t take a bite out of the human corpses” (Akhtar 32). Rahmatullah surely carried the trauma and angst throughout his life and, being a “stranded Pakistani,” spent his entire life fighting the cause for Pakistan, yet was betrayed by the newly emerged state as Pakistan was not ready to accept the Biharis as Pakistani citizens. During 1971, his son was trained as Al Shams and as he died during the war, Rahmatullah considers his son a martyr. This infuriates his granddaughter Kaniz Fatima: “Who put a dummy wooden rifle in his son’s hands? Who had him trained? Who made him a part of Al-Shams?” (Akhtar 34). She accuses his grandfather and his family members because, living in East Pakistan, they could not accept it as their own land and took terrible measures like letting their son be a puppet of the then rulers, which made their lives more miserable.

Dislocated and dehumanized, several members of Rahmatullah’s family unleashed their rage at the betrayal, against the Bengalis, because the latter rejected those of Pakistani origin:

Rahmatullah’s wife had tucked her dupatta around her waist and, from behind the scene, had supplied the knives, swords, and bombs during the Bengali-Bihari riots. Kaniz Fatima’s mother spoke of only of one thing: “If any Bengali lies foaming at the mouth and dying at your doorstep, swear to Allah that none of you will give him a drop of water or a handful of alms.” (Akhtar 34)

At this point, Rahmatullah reminisces about when even the women of his family were so engrossed in enmity against the Bengalis that they assisted in

dehumanizing activities themselves. The root cause of such behavior is their own trauma of brutal treatment by the Hindus during the communal riots of 1946 in their original homeland of Chhapra, Bihar. They thought if they did not claim this new territory, they would be uprooted again from their “home”: “When we saw that Pakistan was breaking in two ... we thought if we didn’t make the right moves, our clans would be wiped out” (Akhtar 38). Their deeds were based on survival instincts and the fear of being displaced. Additionally, despite all these years of living in Bangladesh, the family suffers humiliation as they are not accepted by the locals because of their language differences. As evidence, Ahmed, the grandson of Rahmatullah, reiterates his memory of visiting India: “No one insulted me for my Urdu tongue or called me ‘Bhaira!’ ... I felt like a king in his castle ... I have found my own place, Dada” (Akhtar 32). Ahmed tries to get over the displacement by going back to his roots whereas his sister Kaniz dreams of adopting the Bangladeshi identity and getting past the dark memories of her family. Through the paradoxical desires of Rahmatullah’s two grandchildren, the pangs of displaced refugees can be traced. The author’s deliberate blurring of the boundary between traitor and martyr leaves the question open once again of whether victims become victimizers themselves? The answer is, possibly, yes.

Rahmatullah and his family’s displacement made them act cruel and they did the same dehumanizing things with other Bengalis which they themselves suffered as they feared being victims of the same situation again in Bangladesh: “We would have been killed in India as Muslims. And we’d be killed as refugees in Pakistan’s Sindh or Punjab” (37). This again shows the floating condition of refugees. It indicates the instability such people have to face. Like Nuru, Rahmatullah’s own insecurity and displacement made him engage in the inhuman acts like shoving “the Bangaillas off their seats in the train,” kicking “them in the marketplace, in the factories” and during the war, acting “as friends of the Pakistan Army and slit[ting] their throats” (Akhtar 37). Rahmatullah acted with hostility as he could never consider Bengalis as part of his own group, a mindset cultivated by the ruling party of West Pakistan, which spread antagonistic thinking among marginal figures like him.

Afsan Chowdhury’s “Torso,” translated by Shamsad Mortuza, set in 1971, captures a nightmarish dehumanizing event experienced by Malati, a Hindu woman, mother of two children, whose husband was killed by Pakistani soldiers during the 1971 Liberation War. She struggled to cremate the severed head and torso of her dead husband as she wanted to pay the last tribute to her partner following the Hindu rituals as a sign of love. But the process of dehumanization enacted by the perpetrators becomes evident. The gruesome image of genocide, committed by the Pakistani Army, is visible as Kanai reports to Malati, “all the

bodies are piled up near the PTI Office. It has become a bazaar; people are coming to get bodies of their own family members. You still have time to get yours” (Chowdhury 60).

Through the enigma of Shankar and Malati, the story unlocks the extreme barbarity of the Pakistani Army soldiers who themselves were commanded to leave their own land and fight miles away because of political issues. Any soldier fighting in a war zone is also marked as displaced and whose individual identity is violated under the military identity as it happens in case of mechanistic dehumanization. Soldiers are trained to be inert and machine-like. As a result, they often reach such levels of cruelty that they torture and kill other human beings in inhumane ways: “The cremation site had been burnt down. The city now belonged to a different group of people. Outsiders had come with their guns, with hope of change of power” (Chowdhury 65).

Malati’s husband, Shankar Das, was killed by the Pakistani military in 1971 during the fight between Bengalis and Pakistanis. When Kanai brings the news, he reports, “They were even taking away girls of Bimala’s age. When the soldiers get tired of fighting, they need to rest with the girls, you see!” (64). It is evident that due to living in a warzone far away from home, the displaced soldiers’ mentality has deteriorated to such an extent that they were raping young children for their entertainment. The portrayal of the barbarity that took place in East Bengal by the Pakistani Army evidently lays bare the dehumanizing acts of the Army. Such massacres were enabled and authorized by those in positions of power. Their anonymity made it easier to commit violence against Bengalis, especially the Hindu minority.

Shanker is dehumanized twice, first when the Pakistani Army severed his head from his torso and, second, when his dead body was searched by a group of people who wanted to confirm if the dead body was of a Hindu or a Muslim. The group’s actual identity is not mentioned clearly but the dialogue and presence of a rifle indicate that they might be members of the Pakistani Army who actively participated in genocide. Though no physical torture was deployed, their verbal insult and inspection left Malati and the children shuddering in fear and profound shock. With extreme disrespect towards the corpse of a human, they said, “No, we’d like to see his willy. We need to see if he had been circumcised or not?” (67). Then they dragged the dead body out of the sack carried by Malati who was in search of a funeral pyre:

By then two of the men had pulled the body out of the bag. The hustle caused the head of Shankar to roll down and come to the feet of Malati outside the range of the torch light. (Chowdhury 67)

This is peak inhumanity when people do not honor the dead body of a person. In 1971, many people were killed in the name of religion. The soldiers here wanted to confirm the religion of the dead body. They removed the body from the sack to examine it, showing no concern even as the head rolled away. They were even laughing at the distressed family, ignoring their mental condition, thus dehumanizing them. This group, on the basis of religious identity, othered the Hindus and sanctioned the act of violence against them as the ruling people again successfully projected the hostile image of the religiously different group in the minds of pro-Pakistanis. Interestingly, Malati's unequivocal affection even towards the severed head of Shankar, and later, Malati's determination to return the torso of the Muslim man to the PTI office as a note of gratitude (as the circumscribed torso saved Malati and the children from being the targeted victims due to their Hindu identity) contrast the brutal acts of the victimizers.

A comparative analysis of the three short stories from Sohana Manzoor's *Our Many Longings* reveals recurring thematic patterns, which we coded and interpreted through Zimbardo's Lucifer Effect framework. Textual moments were examined and grouped under four analytical categories: crisis of identity, instability and insecurity, authorization, and deindividuation. Each of these categories corresponds to mechanisms of moral disengagement and dehumanization as outlined by Zimbardo.

A key theme in the three short stories is the crisis of identity, which influences character motivations and conflicts. In "Nuru," the protagonist's feelings of alienation and his struggle to assert agency are central to his quest for a sense of self. Similarly, in "The Green Passport," Rahmatullah and his family experience deep grief over their lost identity, and this frustration shows through hostility toward others. In "Torso," the Pakistani Army perpetrators fail to see the Hindu minority as part of their ingroup, which allows them to justify committing atrocities in the name of defending their national identity. Therefore, the characters' unstable or threatened identities emerge as a major factor shaping their actions.

The characters in these short stories also demonstrate the profound psychological impact of instability and insecurity. For example, Nuru exhibits inner turmoil in response to his precarious environment, while Rahmatullah and Ahmed express dissatisfaction with their lives, prompting Ahmed to migrate to India in search of belonging. Displacement plays a key role in provoking the sense of instability and insecurity in these characters. Similarly, Malati's family experiences displacement, paralleling the mobility of the Pakistani Army perpetrators. The soldiers' involvement in atrocities, such as tormenting civilians and assaulting women, can be understood as a consequence of their instability and sense of

dislocation. This psychological and social instability fosters moral disengagement, leading individuals to commit acts of violence and degrade others.

The concept of authorization is a recurring theme across the texts. In “Nuru,” the protagonist feels empowered enough to confront the hungry woman, while in “Torso,” the Pakistani Army is formally sanctioned to execute orders, committing atrocities against civilians. Similarly, in “The Green Passport,” the Biharis are supported by the Pakistani authorities during the riots, which enables them to engage in inhumane acts against the Bengali population. In each case, formal or perceived authorization provides individuals with the social and institutional backing to participate in morally harmful actions.

The theme of deindividuation is similarly illustrated in group behavior of the Biharis in “The Green Passport” and the Pakistani soldiers in “Torso,” where collective actions lead to reduction in personal accountability, which, in turn, facilitates immoral actions.

This coding process explicitly links textual evidence with theoretical categories, thereby clarifying how Zimbardo’s framework illuminates the psychological and social dimensions of dehumanization in these stories.

This study acknowledges two main limitations. First, applying an experimental psychology framework such as Zimbardo’s Lucifer Effect to literary narratives inevitably involves a degree of abstraction. Unlike controlled experiments, fiction does not generate empirical data; instead, it presents imagined realities that reflect, distort, or symbolically represent social and psychological processes. While this may reduce the precision of analysis, it also opens up interpretive possibilities to explore how displacement and dehumanization are culturally imagined and narrated.

Second, emphasizing situational forces risks the unintended impression of justifying or excusing acts of violence. To address this, we underline Zimbardo’s own caveat: identifying mechanisms of moral disengagement is not meant to legitimize cruelty but to expose how ordinary individuals may be drawn into it. By foregrounding these dynamics in fiction, our study does not seek to generalize psychological claims but rather to open a dialogue about the complex intersections of displacement, dehumanization, and moral choice.

This paper has examined the socio-psychological dimensions of displacement and dehumanization in Bangladeshi short fiction, drawing on Philip Zimbardo’s Lucifer Effect as a guiding framework. Through the stories “Nuru,” “The Green Passport,” and “Torso” in Manzoor’s collection, *Our Many Longings*, the study has shown how characters who experience displacement are vulnerable

to dehumanization and, in certain cases, may themselves participate in dehumanizing practices. At the same time, these narratives underscore the blurred lines between victim and perpetrator, demonstrating how situational forces, insecurity, and authorization can provoke destructive behavior.

Importantly, the analysis highlights variation in outcomes: while some displaced figures act with hostility and violence, others, like Malati in “Torso,” resist cruelty and embody empathy even in the face of profound trauma. This indicates that displacement and dehumanization do not deterministically lead to evil but interact with broader political, social, and cultural conditions.

By applying an experimental psychology framework to literary narratives, the study does not claim to produce empirical proof. Rather, it contributes to an interdisciplinary dialogue, using fiction as a space to reflect on the mechanisms of moral disengagement, hostile imagination, and the fragility of human dignity under displacement. In doing so, the paper underscores the importance of understanding literature not only as an artistic expression but also as a site where the psychological and social consequences of displacement and dehumanization are imaginatively explored.

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An Ecocritical Examination of Ray Bradbury’s “The Fog Horn” and “Here There Be Tygers”

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Abstract

Ecological concerns have been a significant theme in works of science fiction across various media. Juxtaposed against technological advancements and the overall progress of humanity are the horrors of ecological destruction, scarcity of resources, environmental exploitation, etc., found in novels like *Dune* by Frank Herbert (1965), films like *Avatar* (2009), and television series like *Doctor Who* (1963) or *Star Trek* (1966). Similar contrasts can be found in Ray Bradbury’s science fiction and/or speculative fiction. This paper is an ecocritical exploration of two of Bradbury’s short stories: “The Fog Horn” (1951) and “Here There Be Tygers” (1968). It will employ textual analysis as well as ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches to examine Bradbury’s portrayal of the relationships between humans and nature in the two short stories, and what this portrayal reveals about Bradbury’s perspective on modernity and progress. The findings show that these short stories reveal humanity as a dominating force that exploits and alienates nature as they seek to take all they can from there without considering the effect this can have on others. Ultimately, his works reveal that while nature may be threatening at times, the truly frightening and consistent forces of destruction are modernity and its anthropocentrism.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Bradbury, environment, modernity, science fiction

Science fiction frequently utilizes the convention of duality and contrasts, as seen in classic texts like Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and timeless television series like *Doctor Who* (1963). On the one hand, there are fascinating planets to explore and colonize, and on the other, a dying planet Earth whose ecosystem has been annihilated by human activity. Gleaming futuristic technology is used in a world where nature has been exploited to its limits. Human progress is foregrounded at the expense of exterminating nearly all other nonhuman organic existence.

This “biotic invasion,” as denoted by Rob Latham, does not just extend to ecological devastation on Earth in some other pieces of science fiction such as

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Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1976), where humans colonize another planet to exploit its resources and inhabitants (114). Latham's idea of an "ecological imperialism" maintained by humankind can also be found in lesser-known works of science fiction. While Ray Bradbury's texts like *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) are his more popular works, his anxieties regarding modernity and the treatment of nature also appear in his short stories, many of which lack the popularity of his novels. This paper will, therefore, examine two of Bradbury's short stories titled "The Fog Horn" (1951) and "Here There Be Tygers" (1968). While his writing style tends to be much more poetic (and often, even lyrical), there is no mistaking that these texts belong to the tradition of speculative and/or science fiction. The issues of environmental degradation, the exploitation of natural resources by capitalistic endeavors, and a relationship between humans and the natural world defined by greed and commodification make for an interesting ecocritical exploration of these texts. They portray the tendency of humans to dominate and destroy nature and all things natural in the name of modernity without considering the ramifications this may have on the balance in the natural world, the well-being of nature, the long-term effect environmental destruction may have on humanity's future, or even the psychological impact this legacy of biotic colonization may have on human beings. Instead of balance and coexistence, humanity has chosen a mode of unilateral domination to exploit Mother Nature's resources. As depicted in "Here There Be Tygers," once there is nothing left on Earth to utilize, humankind will simply move on to other planets, and eventually, other galaxies and solar systems. Moreover, both stories depict nature with anthropomorphic traits: curious and playful in its interactions with others, but also angry and vengeful when scorned or attacked. Nature is aware of its position in the anthropocentric hierarchy and the mistreatment by humans, and can mete out retribution in both texts. However, Bradbury also emphasizes that modern humans are relentless in their pursuit of progress and will find alternative means to exploit the natural world if necessary.

By examining "The Fog Horn" and "Here There Be Tygers" through an ecocritical lens, this paper will explore Bradbury's portrayal of the relationships between humans and nature, and analyze what this portrayal reveals about his perspective on modernity. The paper will attempt to establish that Bradbury's texts depict the relationship between nature and humans as one of exploitation and domination, where nature exists for humans to degrade, utilize, and enjoy in the name of progress, exploration, and profit in the modern age, without any consideration for the wellbeing of nonhuman species and ecological balance, thus showing that modernity is the monster that destroys nature and the environment without restraint. The significance of this paper lies in the insight it provides when

reevaluating the ecocritical elements in lesser-known science fiction works and what they reveal about our attitudes towards nature and the relationship we have with our environment while highlighting the exploitation of nature as parallel to the treatment of women in a patriarchal society, and the ethical and environmental concerns that arise from modernity are allowed to go unchecked. It also bridges the gap between literature and real-world environmental concerns, revealing how literature critiques anthropocentric attitudes and warns against the exploitation of nature, making Bradbury's works relevant in contemporary discussions on resource depletion and ecological destruction. Thus, this paper expands and adds to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting two lesser-known short stories, examining them from an ecocritical and ecofeminist perspective. It also examines aspects of these stories that connect to trans-speciesism, with a focus on the dynamic between humans and nonhuman nature, and the role that modernity plays in the relationship portrayed.

The first section clarifies the background and context of the paper and introduces the subject matter and texts used. The second section examines the existing literature on Bradbury's works and ecocriticism, identifying the research gap while placing this paper in the context of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. The following section discusses and analyzes the texts in question from an ecocritical perspective, and the fourth section connects the texts to concepts of ecofeminism and trans-speciesism to prove that Bradbury's portrayal of the human-nature relationship foregrounds modernity as a malignant force opposing ecological harmony between mankind and nature. The final section summarizes the findings and inferences drawn from the paper.

Ecocriticism is a literary movement that studies the relationship between nature, environmental concerns and literature. Focusing on how literature portrays nature, it is rooted in late 20th-century American scholarship, due to the focus on the natural world and the environment in the American literary canon. According to Lawrence Buell, "pastoral, frontier, and wilderness" themes are significant in American literary-cultural tradition due to the ample representation of rustic living in prominent authors from Emerson to Faulkner (15). Ecocritical approaches are therefore relevant when examining the American literary canon, including works by Ray Bradbury. The theme of wilderness and the cosmic frontier can also be found in *The Illustrated Man* (1951) and *The Martian Chronicles* (1951). Moreover, the connection between humanity and the natural world plays a major role in his writing. The positioning of the destruction of nature versus advanced technology, both originating from human activity, can be found in various short stories of the two aforementioned collections. Nature is often foregrounded in Bradbury's works, even more so than the conventional

features of science fiction like futuristic technology, because he “never loses sight of the organic and the natural” (Bonati 4). Thus, his works are more than adequately suited for various angles of ecocritical exploration.

Buell traces this focus on nature and the pastoral in American literature to Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), contending that Thoreau’s position as one of the first members of America’s literary pantheon, as well as his posthumous canonization as an “environmental saint” (24) in both popular and high culture contributed to a tradition of American ecocentric literature. Buell also argues that “environmental texts” like *Walden* are significant because they encourage ecocentric perspectives and function as “agents of ecocentricity” (143). Instead of an anthropocentric focus where nature is a passive backdrop, Buell advocates for environmental literature and perspectives that “suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7) that foreground nature and depict it as a dynamic force that actively engages with human actions (8). Most significantly, he states that accountability from humans should be a part of the text’s “ethical orientation” with an egalitarian perspective where there are no fixed boundaries between humans and nature, so there is no mastery of humans over nature (7-8). In other words, Buell’s concept of ecocriticism emphasizes the need for environmental literature that decenters humans and showcases nature as autonomous and dynamic with human accountability.

Building upon Buell’s idea of an egalitarian connection between man and dynamic nature, Cheryll Glotfelty echoes this emphasis on the relationship between human and nonhuman nature; she defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii) with an emphasis on the interrelation between nature and culture, including the “cultural artefacts of language and literature” (xix) where scholars study the “reciprocal” relationships between people and the land, where nature is an actor involved in the story and not merely the stage where the story is enacted (xxi). Glotfelty also highlights the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism, which she calls “an earth-centered approach to literary studies,” comparing it to feminist and Marxist interpretations of literature (xix).

William Howarth takes Buell and Glotfelty’s ideas of criticizing human-centered perspectives of nature a step further and asserts that Western progress has been directed by the belief that “culture will always master nature,” which ultimately led to overcrowding and scarcity of resources on Earth (77), expanding Glotfelty’s concept of the bilateral connection between nature and culture. He also posits that human existence and well-being are interlinked with that of nature; that the “nonhuman creatures, physical forces, and biological processes” that humans

share the planet with live in "biosocial communities" and that these relationships are reflected in literature (77).

While Buell, Glotfelty, and Howarth discuss the relationships between humans and the environment and the role of literature in examining these connections, other scholars focus on particular aspects of ecocriticism. Amongst these, ecofeminism is relevant to this paper, which connects feminist issues with ecological concerns, drawing parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. According to Val Plumwood, there is a connection between the "domination of women and the domination of nature as part of a larger system of oppression" (15). Thus, ecofeminist critics argue that ecofeminism "synthesizes the feminist movement and the ecological movement" as nonhuman nature and sexual and social minorities like women are exploited and dominated in the same manner (Schultermandl 173). This concept of a parallel between the exploitative treatment of nature and women by dominating patriarchal powers appears in Bradbury's "Here There Be Tygers," which is set on a planet that is presented as feminine, as well as nurturing and welcoming to visitors, but fiercely protective when threatened or scorned. The text highlights nature's "cosmological otherness" (Pak 66) while presenting a homocentric angle of the story and characters who display a "masculinist orientation to the pastoral utopia," contrasting the planet and its ecosystem, which is portrayed as feminine.

Trans-speciesism, which is linked to posthumanism, explores the idea of cognitive and biological intersections between humans and animals and is also pertinent to the theoretical framework of this paper. This movement also focuses on animal ethics and "a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication," as stated by Cary Wolfe (*Posthumanism* 141). Like ecocriticism, trans-speciesism challenges the hierarchy that places humans at the top as the master. Instead of a structure that centers humans, this movement prefers a "continuum of sentience and subjectivity between species" (LaCapra 92) and calls for reevaluating the conventional anthropocentric notions of intelligence and agency. Wolfe also advocates for "not just a pragmatic and functional shift but a philosophical one as well" when it comes to the binary of human and nonhuman, critiquing the "rigid, uncrossable ontological boundary between two sides of the distinction—between nature and culture, between the biological and the mechanical" (*Posthumanism* 206). The idea of sentience and cognition of nonhuman nature is echoed in "The Fog Horn," where the sea monster is depicted as feeling emotions typically attributed to people: loneliness, curiosity, sorrow, and anger.

Certain ecocritical approaches have been utilized in some of Bradbury's more popular works, such as his most famous work, the novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953),

which has also been the subject of much research. Matarazzo examines the themes of “overconsumption and overpopulation, and the degradation and disappearance of non-human nature” (ii) and how this novel intersects aspects like power, totalitarianism, and ecological exploitation, all of which corresponded to the social and political concerns prevalent during the time of its publication. Furthermore, Sabine Höhler refers to the premise of Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*, where the indiscriminate exploitation of nonhuman nature and depletion of resources have destroyed Earth, leading to the colonization of Mars to continue humanity’s existence (83-100). While the scholarship on Bradbury generally focuses on his contributions to science fiction and dystopian literature, his works also provide material for ecocritical exploration, particularly in their portrayal of environmental degradation, human exploitation of natural resources, and the implications of modern and futuristic technological advancements.

However, in-depth research on Bradbury’s short stories through an ecocritical perspective is quite limited, and except for “A Sound of Thunder,” little to no work in this area has been done on *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, the collection of short stories to which “The Fog Horn” and “Here There Be Tygers” belong. The aspects of capitalist exploitation and destruction, as well as the ecofeminist undertones in these two stories, tend to have been overlooked, and this paper aims to address these aspects and fill the existing gap in the research.

Following is a discussion of Bradbury’s “The Fog Horn” and “Here There Be Tygers” from his collection *Golden Apples of the Sun*. “The Fog Horn” is a short, emotionally charged story with vivid descriptions depicting an encounter two men working on a lighthouse have with a mysterious monster-like sea creature, possibly related to prehistoric dinosaurs. The narrator, Johnny, recounts the experience of being one of the lighthouse-keepers on Lonesome Bay, a hundred miles from the nearest town. The story is set on a cold November night, and the narrator only has his older, more experienced coworker, McDunn, for company. It is McDunn’s perspective that leads the narrative, while Johnny, who appears to be a stand-in for the reader, is a passive listener for the most part. As the men settle in for what is the last night before the narrator takes his turn to return to the mainland, McDunn describes a night in the past when he was working alone, when all of the fish came to the surface to watch the tower’s light blinking. The fish remained there until midnight before the “million of them” (4) slipped away together. McDunn tries to hypothesize why the fish behaved that way and thinks that they must have thought the giant lighthouse with its “God-light” and “monster voice” (4) to be some kind of deity that made them feel like they were in a sort of divine presence. McDunn then tells Johnny that around this time of the year, “something comes to visit the lighthouse” (4). After

a long wait, the men see a giant sea creature swimming towards the lighthouse. The creature makes it clear *why* it chose to come to the lighthouse: when the fog horn blew, it responded; the two sounded almost exactly alike. For millions of years, the monster had been alone, the last of its kind and had to hide away in what McDunn calls "the Deeps" (6). As the creature and the Fog horn cry out at each other in a kind of conversation, it swims closer and closer to the lighthouse. McDunn then switches off the horn to see how the creature would react. Realizing the fog horn is no longer calling to it, the anguished and enraged creature attacks the lighthouse, even after McDunn turns the horn back on. The monster strikes at the lighthouse repeatedly, and as the fog horn and the monster roar at each other, the tower begins to collapse. In the ensuing silence, they listen to "the lament, the bewilderment, the loneliness" (9) of the creature as it cries out, heartbroken that the tower that called out to it is now gone. The creature never returned to the lighthouse, and according to McDunn, it swam back to "the deepest Deeps to wait another million years" (10).

A complex relationship between nature and humans is depicted in this text. Humans and nonhuman nature are portrayed as two separate spheres, where the lighthouse is far from civilization, connected by a long and desolate road. The name Lonesome Bay is quite fitting, the town being miles away, the road connecting the sea and the town coming through barren country with just a few passing cars, and the rock on which the lighthouse is located is separated from the mainland by two miles of cold water, with just the "rare few" ships that pass by (3). Surrounding the men on the lighthouse is the sea, which McDunn makes clear is unfathomable. He points out that despite mankind's progress, it would take "ten thousand centuries" before humans reached the bottom of the ocean, where time has not passed. While modernity and progress have swept through the land, McDunn believed it was still "the year 300,000 Before Christ down under there" and compares the time at the bottom of the ocean to the beard of a comet (4). In this setting, the man-made lighthouse is an intruder infringing upon the nonhuman nature. The lighthouse and its Fog horn serve as a metaphorical "metabolic rift" (Moore 295) of sorts, as together they disrupt the balance and ecology of the sea. Also, both iterations of the lighthouse (the original at the start of the story and the indestructible concrete structure at the end) represent human desire, "desire to conquer nature and remake the physical environment" (Parry 155). However, the rift between the two is artificial, and this is highlighted when the sea monster confronts the tower. The monster destroys the lighthouse, attempting to break the barrier between man and nature. The breakdown of binaries is both literal and metaphorical, as McDunn and the narrator get to understand and empathize with the heartbreak the creature experiences. The interactions between the two men and the mysterious

sea creature, as well as McDunn's previous encounters with the inhabitants of the sea, align with Howarth's idea of "biosocial communities" (77) and how relationships between humans and nonhuman nature are reflected in literature.

The lighthouse itself tends to have multidimensional associations. Blake claims that the landscapes of lighthouses contain the "melding of people and the environment," further arguing that for many, lighthouses are "national achievement, dependability under duress, hope, and even religious faith," and function as a metaphor for guidance and safety (9). In "The Fog Horn" the lighthouse has a similar function of guidance as the flashing light and sound of the horn not only guide the ships at sea, but also lead the giant swarms of fish from McDunn's story and the sea monster to the tower. Lighthouses also act as an emblem of modernity, as according to Schiffer, they used the first installed electric lights and always played a significant role in trade and military activities (275-278). Thus, for people, the lighthouse symbolizes human progress and modernization. In "The Fog Horn," the lighthouse is not an inherent representation of monstrous modernity; it is more ambiguous, as it is first the source of comfort and companionship for the creature, and later the cause of its pain and anger.

While modernity may not be portrayed as overtly monstrous in "The Fog Horn," the depiction in "Here There Be Tygers" is more explicit. The text begins with a character stating that the only way to treat a planet is to "beat [it] at its own game," and "Drag out the minerals and run away before the nightmare world explodes in your face" (Bradbury 214). The characters are men sent to explore seventh planet of the star system 84. These missions are necessary because, in that future time, Earth is no longer sustainable for life: "her system and her sun forgotten, her system settled and investigated and profited on, and other systems rummaged through and milked and tidied up" (214). Due to this, humans explore other universes and their planets, stripping them of their resources. These expeditions are financed by companies with a simple policy: everything that can be used by Earth should be taken, and rockets that never return to Earth are simply forgotten, as the planets are assumed to be inhospitable or hostile.

The story has several characters: Captain Forester is the rocket man who respects the alien planets and is a "looker" who simply observes, while Chatterton is the "anthropologist-mineralogist" who obsesses over taking the planet's wealth with his "Earth Drill" and admits that he is "out for the money" (215), and Driscoll is the younger crewman who quickly develops an affinity with the planet. The planet itself is a character that dominates the narrative. It has a lush and temperate environment, the "freshest green color" (215) the men had

seen since their childhood. The story is set on the planet, which is beautiful and uninhabited, with clear lakes and endless green fields. The planet seems welcoming and has "croquet weather," so the men explore the meadows, hills, and valleys. Captain Forester exclaims, "If ever a planet was a woman, this one is" (215). In addition, the planet has a psychic connection with those who walk upon it and can read the minds of men and respond accordingly. When the antagonistic Chatterton (who intends to plunder the planet's resources) steps down from the rocket, the ground shakes and trembles (216). When Driscoll comments that it would be nice to fly through the air, the planet lifts him and allows him to fly (217). When Chatterton attempts to drill into the planet for its resources, the planet sinks the machine into a tar pit (221). Chatterton claims that the planet is plotting to kill them and there are threats hidden: "Here there be tygers" (220). After his drilling equipment is swallowed by the ground, he attempts to destroy the planet with an A-bomb. However, he does not return, and the other men find a "few drops of blood," "marks of great claws," "a heavy smell of some feline," and hear the "roar of a tiger" (223). Reluctantly, the men leave the planet, which reacts in anger, as one scorned: "The face of the world was changed. Tigers, dinosaurs, mammoths appeared. Volcanoes erupted, cyclones and hurricanes tore over the hills in a welter and fury of weather" (225).

The story relates to several ideas of ecofeminism and delivers a scathing critique of modernity through the portrayal of Chatterton. He represents the shadowy, unnamed company that funds these expeditions and is in control of the operation. Chatterton and the company are exploiting other planets, plundering their resources until nothing is left, and moving to the next one. Chatterton represents the company with a single goal: to exploit planets for their resources to sell on Earth, profiting from metals and minerals, depleting natural resources, and leaving behind bare and barren solar systems once there is nothing left to use. He embodies modernity and how it is driven by capitalistic greed, the results of which destroyed Earth, eventually destroying other planets with no regard for their delicate ecosystems, or any thought about what will happen to everyone once the last planet is destroyed. This echoes capitalist sentiments on space exploration, viewing it as a means to primarily "protect Earth-bound political and economic interests" (Valentine 1047). Moore posits, "Human exemptionalism allows one to speak of modernity as a set of social relations that act upon, rather than develop through, the web of life," (290) and Chatterton embodies both human exceptionalism and the human exemptionalism in Moore's concept of world-ecology, where capitalist systems are not forces beyond nature, but instead intrude into it, reshaping, and dismantling it to sustain themselves. By depicting the company's cycle of

plunder across star systems, “Here There Be Tygers” emphasizes modernity’s paradox where technological advancement is framed as progress, while it must rely on ecological devastation, which is impossible to sustain indefinitely.

“Here There Be Tygers” portrays the planet as not just a setting, but a sentient character representing natural abundance and femininity, and at the same time, resisting human exploitation. It is not just fertile and beautiful, the alien planet also behaves as a gracious hostess, welcoming the men and giving them everything they wish for. However, she is also a fierce guardian, protecting herself from the threat Chatterton brings. This story depicts the planet as feminine, nurturing and resilient at the same time, aligning with the ecofeminist approach of Sulagna Sengupta similarly portrays Earth as “a living, breathing entity capable of resistance, resilience, and renewal,” a perspective that resonates in the story’s portrayal of the planet as a responsive being. The planet’s ability to retaliate when threatened, such as when it sinks Chatterton’s drill into a tar pit (Bradbury 221), reflects Sengupta’s idea of the earth as an active participant in its own protection, capable of subverting exploitative forces and displaying agency. Through Chatterton’s disappearance and the implications of his violent death, the planet asserts itself as a force that will not passively accept exploitation.

In addition, the story’s narrative sets a dichotomy between respect for the natural world, embodied by Captain Forester and Driscoll, and the exploitative, destructive drive of Chatterton, who personifies capitalist and industrial motives and depicts modernity’s ecological insensitivity. Chatterton’s eagerness to plunder planetary resources would result in what Merchant (43) describes as “manipulated nature [that] undermined the organic model”, which exemplifies “capitalist control for the purpose of profit”. Thus, Chatterton and the company demonstrate the dangers of the mindset rooted in modernity that prioritizes profit and control over the intrinsic value of nature leading to a “disenchantment of the world that rationalization brings” (Baehr and Wells 40), where modernity’s focus on rationalization and economic utility leads to a loss of reverence for nature, potentially risking irreversible consequences for both humanity and the environment. Moreover, the planet is rich in resources, particularly crude oil, and can be likened to a “commodity frontier” invaded by humans in order to “reorganize ... biophysical nature” and send the resources “into the capitalist world-economy” (Niblett 3). Even though Chatterton is killed and this particular planet is spared, the expeditions will continue, and other planets will be successfully exploited. Thus, while Chatterton is the antagonist, modernity is the true monstrosity in this story –deadlier than any tiger or storm the planet can conjure.

Both “The Fog Horn” and “Here There Be Tygers” depict the complicated

relationship between nature and modernity-driven humans. In "The Fog Horn," modernity is symbolized by the lighthouse with the fog horn, and while there appears to be no malicious intent, there is still a clear encroachment of human civilization into nature's domain. The lonely setting and the unease of the two human characters reflect a fundamental disconnect, a characteristic of modernity. Johnny and McDunn are both quite passive: they do not harm the sea monster, but the curious McDunn attempts to empathize with the creature's loneliness while also toying with it to see its reaction. Therefore, there is a significant emotional and spiritual detachment from nature expressed in this story. The fog horn represents modernity and industrial progress and is the antithesis of the existence of the possibly pre-historic sea creature. Yet, it is this fog horn that first entices the sea monster and then causes it pain through McDunn's actions. Ultimately, this leads the monster to destroy the lighthouse and the fog horn within it.

Just as the lighthouse in "The Fog Horn" can be seen as an intruder in nature's domain, the rocket in "Here There Be Tygers" similarly encroaches on the planet and the natural ecosystem it contains. Latham's "ecological imperialism" is in full swing as the men are essentially there to colonize and exploit the planet by destroying its ecological balance and taking its resources. Even though characters like Captain Forester, Driscoll, and Koestler are sympathetic and respectful towards it, they never do anything to stop Chatterton. They represent the idea that complete environmental destruction occurs once people become complacent and allow it to happen (Mitchell 273-280). Chatterton intimidates and bullies the captain in an exercise of corporate power, showing that modernity is rooted in a capitalistic ethos, operating solely on greed and profit, eschewing a balanced and symbiotic coexistence with nature. Furthermore, when the planet responds to the characters' fear or greed (manifested in the tiger's appearance), it underscores a central ecocritical theme: nature is not just a backdrop but an active force. Through this lens, Bradbury critiques humanity's tendency to treat nature as a resource, highlighting nature's right to exist free from human manipulation. Also, through Chatterton's character, the author critiques the exploitative aspects of modernity, driven and blinded by profit, echoing Nandrajog's claim that instead of celebrating technological advancements, Bradbury focuses on "the potentially dangerous effects that such an interference with nature can have" (36-38). Moreover, they claim that Bradbury is more concerned with what humanity loses through extensive reliance on technology, rather than what is gained from it.

Eventually, the men leave the planet as they are required to continue their responsibilities to the company. This angers the planet, as it feels rejected after

all it has done to keep them happy. It provides the men with all their hearts' desires and even spares them when it kills Chatterton, proving that it has no malicious intent toward the would-be colonizers. Thus, both the sea creature and the planet's initial actions reveal a longing for communication and kinship with humans and their world, suggesting that despite modernity's alienating effects, there exists a potential for understanding between nature and man.

However, Bradbury portrays this connection as tragic: the creature's destruction of the fog horn is a response to humanity's disconnect from nature. When the creature, driven by loneliness and confusion, attacks the lighthouse, it underscores a larger theme: the destruction wrought by modernity affects both the natural world and human relationships with it. The collapse of the lighthouse and the angry storms summoned by the planet symbolize the loss of a potential connection with sentient nonhuman nature. Their reactions also reflect Buell's "ethical orientation" of human accountability (7-8) and question human mastery over nature.

While the ecofeminist aspects are less pronounced in "The Fog Horn," some underlying echoes persist. The creature's response to the fog horn evokes a sense of intimacy reminiscent of a maternal connection as it seeks connection and recognition in a world that has marginalized its existence. McDunn describes their kinship to Johnny, and it appears as an offspring seeking its mother: "the lighthouse calling to you, with a long neck like your neck sticking way up out of the water, and a body like your body, and most important of all, a voice like your voice" (Bradbury 7). Also, the repeated call-and-response between the fog horn and creature is similar to how maternal figures and offspring communicate and bond in nature, documented in primates, birds, and cetaceans.

The vulnerability of the sea creature as the last of its kind can be seen through its portrayal as a form of minority, making McDunn's toying with it appear cruel when the power imbalance between the two is considered. In other words, it shows a "larger patriarchal hierarchical system" placing man over land, water, and animals to "monopolize" knowledge and power (Ruether 22). The ecofeminist perspective is more apparent in "Here There Be Tygers." The planet itself is personified as feminine in multiple dimensions. At times, the planet is maternal; it keeps all the men except Chatterton safe, even granting them their every wish. At other times, it appears coquettish, showing off its beauty and charm. It is also referred to as fertile because of the abundance of its greenery. It is angered and insulted by the men leaving the planet, seeing it as a rejection. Moreover, Chatterton's treatment of the planet is more than exploitative; it borders on misogyny and belligerence. Chatterton rejects the very notion of the planet's femininity, dismissing the natural beauty as "cosmetics" meant to fool men

because the planet was "woman on the outside, man on the inside" (Bradbury 215). Furthermore, Chatterton's Earth Drill is the deadliest threat to the planet's femininity: ready to drill seventy feet into the heart of the planet. The imagery of the Drill plunging into the planet as the skies tremble is reminiscent of forceful penetration, with connotations of sexual assault. This echoes Plumwood's parallels between the domination of women and the domination of nature (15). Thus, there is a direct association between raping a woman and drilling into the planet, furthering the idea that the "rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked both metaphorically ... and materially" (Mies and Shiva, xvi). Moreover, this embodies Warren's concept of ecological feminism, where "the conceptual connections between the dual dominations of women and nature are located in an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework [are] characterized by a logic of domination" (125). Benita Parry argues "Raymond Williams's observation that the basic concepts of capitalist and imperialist ideology, 'limitless and conquering expansion ... , repeat the triumphalist version of 'man's conquest of nature', an analogy to which he returns when identifying the capitalist drive to mastery over nature as the foundation of the dominative tendencies pervading bourgeois social relations from labour to sexuality" (35). Her materialist critique resonates with Chatterton (and his company's) capitalist and imperialist ideology of limitless expansion and exploitation, as well as how he feminizes, then attempts to plunder the planet in an act of patriarchal domination. This can be linked back to the idea of Michael Niblett's concept of commodity frontiers and the capitalist world-economy, as "(p)ropelled by capitalism's endless quest for profit, however, they also tend to rapidly exhaust the socioecological conditions upon which their productivity depends" (3). From this perspective, the story highlights how capitalist expansion is undoubtedly linked to ecological violence and the destructive downward spiral of modernity.

"The Fog Horn" conveys a trans-species narrative through the sea creature and its behavior. The fog horn's call resonates with the creature, signifying a shared existence that transcends species boundaries, challenging anthropocentrism by portraying the creature as sentient and capable of experiencing loneliness and longing. As it identifies the sound as akin to its own voice, it underscores a potential for empathy and connection between humans and nonhumans. In light of Wolfe's idea of inclusivity through a recognition of shared sentience and vulnerabilities (45), one can view the text as challenging an anthropocentric hierarchy. By highlighting the sentience of the creature and its tragic fate, Bradbury highlights the ethical implications of how we treat nonhuman entities, urging a re-evaluation of human-centered narratives as argued by LaCapra (92). The creature is shattered by its desire for connection with humans, highlighting the damage that results from the exploitation and commodification of nature.

This critiques modernity, which views nonhuman entities as mere resources rather than beings worthy of respect and empathy. In this sense, Bradbury's portrayal of the relationships between humans and nature challenges readers to reconsider their ethical obligations to the natural world and to recognize the intrinsic value of all sentient beings.

Similarly, "Here There Be Tygers" provides a narrative where the sentient planet is capable of experiencing emotions associated with humans and behaves according to those emotions. It is welcoming, nurturing, and caring when treated with respect, but can also respond with violence when threatened or angered, corresponding with LaCapra's concept of sentience and subjectivity (92) that the planet shares with humans. The human-like qualities of the planet underscore "hypercapitalist exploitation" of the company, which "transforms the human into the inhuman" (Schmeink 79), turning Chatterton into a belligerent predator. Moreover, the planet embodies nonhuman agency as the tiger that kills Chatterton is not a mere animal, but a manifestation of the sentient and intelligent planet acting as a defense mechanism, challenging the anthropocentric mindset by demonstrating nonhuman intelligence and intent. It reflects Glotfelty's idea of a more reciprocal relationship between man and nature, where nature is an involved character and not just a setting for a particular narrative (xxi). This perspective invites readers to consider the sentience and autonomy of the nonhuman world, portraying the planet as a being with awareness and intellect capable of judging and punishing humans who attempt to exploit or disrespect it. The planet itself may be viewed as an interconnected ecosystem that resists human belief in dominance.

Together, these perspectives show how both "The Fog Horn" and "Here There Be Tygers" serve as cautionary tales that challenge human-centric ideologies, suggesting that respecting nature's autonomy and seeing it as an active participant may be essential for coexistence. They exhibit complex emotions and display refined cognitive abilities, and interactions with humans are colored with what Wolfe describes as speciesism, which "discriminates against an other based only on a generic description and not on what we actually know about its needs, interests, and capabilities" (*Animal Rites* 34). In addition, it highlights a binary with modernity-driven mankind on one side and the "othered" nature in opposition.

Bradbury's works often serve as an exploration on two fronts: the outward exploration into time and space, and an inward exploration of human nature. "The Hog Horn" and "Here There Be Tygers" exemplify this dual exploration: while modern man has achieved progress, the valuable link to nature has been diminished greatly, revealing a callous attitude towards nature

and the nonhuman animals that inhabit our world. Bradbury questions "the hierarchical relation ... of master and slave" (Wolfe 183) that enables humans to exploit nature for economic gains. By questioning the myth of modernity and progress, he reveals deeply ingrained patterns of dominance and destruction. From McDunn's empathetic yet careless curiosity to Chatterton's antagonistic pillaging, compounded by the culpability of well-meaning men like Driscoll and Forrester, it becomes evident that modernity has nurtured an anthropocentric and exploitative attitude towards nature. However, the texts also show that nature is not without agency and can feel emotions and fight back when hurt or threatened.

This perspective reveals the cost of technological progress on real-world environmental crises. Bradbury's views align with contemporary ecological concerns, such as climate change, global warming, and resource depletion, compelling us to re-examine not only our treatment of the natural world but also the definitions of modern progress. Ultimately, Bradbury informs us that by alienating nature in pursuit of modernity, humankind is alienating itself from nature, becoming a more ferocious monster than the sea creature of "The Fog Horn" or the tiger of "Here There Be Tygers." In other words, Bradbury's stories warn us against the dangers of unchecked progress and humanity's detachment from the natural world. As Buell as well as Glotfelty emphasize, nature is not merely a passive backdrop to human achievement or intellectual curiosity but a being with agency, capable of both suffering and retaliation. This comparative exploration of Bradbury's two short stories suggests that his work contributes significantly to ecocritical discourse by highlighting the dynamics between modernity, capitalism, exploitation, and the agency of the nonhuman world. Through his portrayal of the monstrous consequences of exploitation and alienation, Bradbury urges us to reconsider our relationship with nature, advocating for a more harmonious co-existence. This resonates with the post-humanist view that the "flourishing of the human species depends upon embracing its nonhumanity, including the sensitive mechanisms of its organism and the fragile ecosystems of human and nonhuman existence on which human life depends" (Ellis 139). The lighthouse's rubble and Chatterton's death warn that if humankind continues on a path of unbridled exploitation, it may find itself not the master of nature, but the adversary in a conflict that may lead to its undoing.

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The *Homo Sacer* in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* may have Roman genesis but its modern and postmodern connotation is far more consequential. Since the present world is a cauldron of biopolitical activities, its effect on the general populace, especially after the Second World War and the cold war, is self-evident. The nation-states have been acting like sovereign powers in the name of security and democracy. The common citizenry, both willingly and involuntarily, is compelled to give up its basic rights and empower the sovereign powers to subjugate it for moderately trivial comforts. Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* epitomizes the predicament of the common person in the form of its characters, Vladimir, Estragon, and Lucky. The former two forgo their daily activities in exchange for a meeting with a person named Godot who keeps them in a perpetual state of exception that places them outside spatial-temporal reality. Lucky, on the other hand, self-subjugates to elucidate the dehumanizing effect on the populace because of the biopolitical nature of the world. Hence, this paper aims to encapsulate the Roman and ancient connotation of the term *homo sacer* in the context of Beckett's play.

Keywords: *homo sacer*, sovereign power, state of exception, biopolitics

Introduction

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has reintroduced the term *homo sacer* in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* to decode the biopolitical nature of the present world where the commoners are relegated to bare existence, stripped of their political identity, by sovereign powers. This relegation is not forceful. Rather, in most cases, this is a voluntary subjugation on the part of the commoners for immediate inconsequential satisfactions. On the other hand, etymologically, *homo sacer* is a person who has failed to comply with the



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contract he has signed – *patronus si clienti fraudem fecerit, sacer esto* – “If a patron defrauds a client he shall be accursed” (Warmington 490). An accursed person, according to Roman law, is thrown outside the Roman society and is deprived of all constitutional rights and legal protections an ordinary citizen enjoys.

What is common and significant in Roman law and Agamben's latest connotation of the term is the presence of a contract in different forms. Legally speaking, a contract is an agreement between two or more parties that create legal obligations to fulfill it. A contract has certain characteristics – it is a promise of exchange, it is executory in nature, it must be enforced by law, the court will be the arbitrator in case of breach from any of the participating parties, and lastly, it should be discrete. According to Richard Stone,

“Freedom of contract” ... has two main aspects. The first is that it is the individual's choice whether or not to enter into a contract, and if so with whom – in other words, the freedom *to* contract, or “party freedom”. The second is the freedom to decide on the content of the contractual obligations undertaken, or “term freedom”. This allows parties to make unwise, and even unfair, bargains – it is their decision, and the courts will not generally intervene to protect them from their own foolishness.
(2)

Although the Romans did not have any generalized concept of “contract,” they used the concept of contract in case of individual financial transactions, and the origins of all modern laws can be traced back to *The Laws of the Twelve Tables* (*lex duodecim tabularum*) where fundamentals like a contract law can be found in its Table 8, under the title “Torts and Delicts.” Under this section, numerous offences had been set down categorically – from public and personal slander to assault and battery, from theft to murder, from arson to vandalism, and from fraud to false witnessing. All of these offences had been classified as civil crimes loosely connected with the concept of contract, especially article twenty-one of this section where a fraudster is deemed *homo sacer*, and can be regarded as the pioneer of the law of contract we use today.

While the Roman *homo sacer* is a criminal who has broken a contract, the modern *homo sacer* becomes one through entering a contract with the sovereign power. The modern *homo sacer* surrenders their basic rights to sovereign power mostly in exchange for protection. At the hand of the sovereign power the accursed person becomes a biopolitical tool wielded on a whim. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we find three such characters – Vladimir, Estragon, and Lucky, who enter contracts with other characters – Godot, Pozzo, in exchange for something they deem important and substantial. This paper will try to determine how these

contracts exclude these three characters from the political and legal realms, relegate them to bare existence, and dehumanize their existence by abandoning them which has become “the *nomos* of the earth” (Schmitt, *Nomos* 48) at present.

Godot as a Sovereign

The characters of Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, have “no rights any more” (54), they “got rid of them” (54). They are very discretionary about it, as if they are “tied” (56) to someone through a contract. This display of submission is pervasive throughout the play. What binds Lucky and Pozzo together is also a mutual contract that they both feel the need to carry out sincerely. But Vladimir and Estragon are not as fortunate as Lucky. Unlike Pozzo, Godot does not honor the contract. Although, according to Roman law, that makes Godot a fraudster, it does not make him a *homo sacer* since Godot as a sovereign entity “stands outside the normally valid legal system” (Schmitt, *Theology* 7) and has the power to suspend the law and “legally place[s] himself outside the law” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 15). That does not absolve Godot from retaining the status quo he enjoys in Vladimir and Estragon’s predicament. In fact, Godot must keep them in a perpetual “state of exception” (Agamben, *Exception* 1) in order to practice biopolitical stratagem upon them. Their bare existence is the sole purpose of the sovereign or Godot in the play.

Garner, before Schmitt, had made distinctions between two sovereigns – the first one is legal, “that determinate authority which is able to express in a legal formula the highest commands of the state” (240), and the second one is political, “a power to whose mandates the legal sovereign must in practice bow and whose will must ultimately prevail in the state” (240). Beckett’s Godot is not a legal sovereign, for Vladimir and Estragon cannot drag him to the court for the breach of contract or agreement. Neither is he a political sovereign in reference to Garner’s definition since he is not the embodiment of the people’s opinion and selection. James Bryce’s definition of sovereign comes close though: “An ordinary layman would call that person (or body of persons) Sovereign in a state who is obeyed because he is acknowledged to stand at the top, whose will must be expected to prevail, who can get his own way, and make others go his” (505). Austin, on the other hand, has made distinctions between mortal and immortal sovereigns. The immortal is, of course, god, as “God is emphatically the *superior* of man. For his power of affecting us with pain, and of forcing us to comply with his will, is unbounded and resistless” (Austin 30). If we are to understand from the play that Beckett has portrayed Godot as god then Austin’s claim justifies Godot’s action. In fact, Austin’s definition of immortal sovereign substantiates Garner’s definition in the sense that God’s authority is supreme in every sense and all other sovereigns must bow before God. It reiterates Bryce’s definition as

well, for Godot can exert his will on Vladimir and Estragon and make them go his way. Vladimir and Estragon have acknowledged his superiority over them without any question –

Vladimir: We have to come back tomorrow.

Estragon: What for?

Vladimir: To wait for Godot.

Estragon: Ah!

(Beckett 150)

On the other hand, Austin's mortal sovereign is "... the master, of the slave or servant ..." (30). In such a case, the superior-inferior dynamic is defined by the ability to force someone into submission. However, there is no reference in the play whether Vladimir and Estragon are forced to wait for him; their wait seems, quite, voluntary. They are bound by "a vague supplication" (Beckett 53) that Godot is not morally or legally obliged to fulfill; rather they feel obligated to wait for him despite his continued non-appearance at the designated place. Although the word non-appearance has a legal connotation, it is nonetheless appropriate since before *The Law of Twelve Tablets* all the Roman laws were unwritten and mutual. They followed *mancipatio*, a legal procedure they used to draw up wills, adoption papers and emancipation of children from parents. The procedure needed at least five witnesses, requiring, of course, that they should be adult Roman citizens, and a sixth person who will hold a scale – "It is thus that both servile and free persons are mancipated, as also such animals as are *mancipi* (mancipable) ..." (Zulueta 39). Unlike Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon are not *mancipi* of Godot. They do not have a master-slave relation with Godot. So, the rule of *mancipatio* cannot be applied to their contract, and Godot cannot be held accountable for the breach of contract or maltreatment, otherwise he would be subjected to legal ramifications – "Be it noted finally that we are not allowed to behave insultingly to those whom we hold in *mancipio*; if we do, we shall be legally liable for the insult" (Zulueta 47). Therefore, Austin's concept of mortal sovereign power does not fit in their case as well.

The closest association one can make between Godot and a definition of the sovereign is that of Schmitt's. Schmitt's sovereign is the one "who decides on the exception" (5). Exception, for Schmitt, is an extra-judicial order where normal law and order is suspended. And it is the sole prerogative of the sovereign to declare that exception: "The exception ... can best be characterized as a case of extreme peril ... or the like" (Schmitt, *Theology* 06). So the question might arise about what peril the characters of the play find themselves in. The play portrays several perils – religious, existential, psychological, philosophical, social, and moral. It is not clear which of these problems Vladimir and Estragon need for

Godot to address; but there is one, though it is not “very definite” (Beckett 53) but it might have a connection with their salvation – “we’ll be saved” (Beckett 152). That is why Godot can exert “unlimited authority” (Schmitt, *Theology* 12) over Vladimir and Estragon, because they have accepted him as their sovereign and done away with their rights, transferring all of them to Godot –

What shall we say then of someone who has absolute power from the people for as long as he shall live? Here one must distinguish. If the absolute power is given to him pure and simple without the style of a magistrate or commissioner, and not in the form of a grant on sufferance (*precaire*). Then he surely is, and has a right to call himself, a sovereign ... For the people has here dispossessed and stripped itself of its sovereign power in order to put him in possession of it and vest it in him. It has transferred all of its power, authority, prerogatives, and sovereign rights to him and [placed them] in him, in the same way as someone who has given up the possession of, and property in, something that belonged to him. (Bodin 7)

Thus, he can forevermore make them wait for him. Agamben has borrowed the concept of sovereign from Schmitt and added some criteria to the definition. One of them is the normalization of the exceptional situation for perpetuity. For example, waiting becomes a normal routine for them. The reason Agamben gives for this endless situation is the making of a “zone of indistinction” (*Exception* 26) where juridical and political distinction gets blurred in the sense that it makes provision for a repressive order where the inhabitants are stripped of their legal and political rights. That is why Estragon is subjected to beating without any capacity to protest the act. And Vladimir considers the beating justified because he thinks it is very natural since Estragon must have done something to deserve that – “I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing” (Beckett 106). In addition to that, Agamben incorporates Foucault’s concept of discipline and surveillance that fairly corresponds to their predicament – they are afraid of non-appearance because Godot might punish them for it – “There can be no doubt that, ‘the exercise of the sovereign power in the punishment of crime is one of the essential parts of the administrative justice’” (Foucault, *Discipline* 48). That is why they have made sure that the messenger boy has seen them and they have not failed to comply with their part of the bargain. The boy functions as a surveillance system for Godot who ensures that his will has prevailed and he has made others, Vladimir and Estragon, go his way.

Therefore, Godot is of course a sovereign. But his sovereignty is neither legal nor political; rather it is beyond both and is a foundation of a modern state of affairs

that is the *nomos* of the current world order. Godot as a sovereign places himself outside the juridical-political reality he puts Vladimir and Estragon in. He exerts his authority as a sovereign and, “to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 15). Thus, the law of contract is not applicable to him; he cannot be held accountable for the breach of contract, either in regular law or in *mancipatio* according to *The Law of the Twelve Tablets*. He does not become accursed through breaching, rather through his authority as a sovereign makes Vladimir and Estragon *homo sacer* or the accursed persons and perpetually places them in an extra juridical-political reality to retain his status quo as one.

The State of Exception in the Play

According to Schmitt, “In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (*Theology* 15). In a sense, exception never comes to the characters of the play. They engage themselves in seemingly repetitive nonsenses to pass their time while waiting for Godot to come and save them. Even the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky is also repetitive. Vladimir notices some changes in Pozzo and Lucky even in the first act. We, the readers, are not aware of their previous meeting, neither are Estragon nor Lucky nor Pozzo. Only Vladimir is aware of the changes of his surroundings only to notice gravely their unvarying predicament in contrast – “They all change. Only we can’t” (Beckett 93).

But this ceaseless waiting or deferment is the core characteristic of a “state of exception” (Agamben, *Exception* 1). The characters, like the residents of a refugee camp, wait for someone to show up and help them in crisis. Like refugees, they have been abandoned by society and refused basic human rights. That is why Estragon seems like a fair game to the people who beat him on a regular basis. This modern reality deprives its denizens of any kind of normalcy – political, social, psychological, judicial, and physical. Regular spatial-temporal reality has been suspended for them indefinitely. They inhabit a liminal space both during the course of the play and off stage – an unspecified tree and a ditch, which are difficult to determine since these places are extraterritorial –

Like the fence of the camp, the interval between death sentence and execution delimits an extratemporal and extraterritorial threshold in which the human body is separated from its normal political status and abandoned, in a state of exception, to the most extreme misfortunes. (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 91)

Bryce’s aforementioned definition of the sovereign reflects some aspects of sovereignty yet it fails in this particular aspect since it “declined to recognise

the principle of extraterritoriality” (Garner 249). But the setting of *Waiting for Godot* is itself extraterritorial. The setting of the play is an ambiguous country road where spatial-temporal sensibility gets blurred easily since the characters who traverse the road on a daily basis cannot distinguish between day and night. In addition to that, although Pozzo claims that Vladimir and Estragon are on his land, he does not make distinct demarcation regarding the area of his property. If we are to borrow Agamben’s term “space of exception” (19) then the setting of the play renders some meaning other than being just an absurd setting in an absurd play. The unnamed tree in the play becomes Agamben’s “space of exception” (*Homo Sacer* 19) which is a zone of exclusion – individuals’ existence becomes a mere physical one without political capacity and legal rights. Agamben refers to Greek philosophy to elucidate different connotations of the concept “life.” Greeks had two words that both meant life but they differed in quality. *Zoē* refers to “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men or gods)” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 1). On the other hand, *bios* means proper way of living with group identity. Aristotle endorses this way of living in his *Politics*: “a man is by nature a political animal” (59). But neither Vladimir nor Estragon has any political identity, or even a group identity, in the play. They exist outside a judicial-political sphere where their existence has been relegated to mere *zoē*. There is not ample reference in the play as to determine whether they have been expelled, but their peripheral existence is text-evident – “Hand in hand from the top of the Eifel Tower, among the first. We were presentable in those days. Now it’s too late. They wouldn’t even let us up” (Beckett 42). That might be one of the reasons why Godot can exercise his power over them and make them tools for biopolitical practice.

Among other things that stipulate a state of exception is the concentration of power. To Schmitt, in a state of emergency the sovereign has the ultimate authority to decide “what must be done to eliminate it” (7) along with his prerogative to decide on the exception. The role of legal order or constitution does not exceed beyond the suggestion on the selection of a sovereign. When the constitution has decided on a sovereign he becomes the sole arbitrator to handle the exception or emergency however he sees fit. Power is concentrated in him until the emergency has been moderately extenuated or properly handled. In Beckett’s play, as discussed earlier, the emergency is not clearly stated. Yet, the situation that circumscribes the play emanates a sense of emergency through the characters which endows Godot with complete authority over Vladimir and Estragon that resultantly generates a state of exception particularly for them as “What characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority” (Schmitt, *Theology* 12). Schmitt’s state of exception is not a personal affair, rather it is a state emergency. Schmitt is referring to the validity of Weimar Constitution

as example which was a state emergency. This is hardly relevant to Beckett's play, the exception is neither common nor national, not even local or territorial; rather it is extraterritorial and personal. It is personal because no one except them knows who Godot is. Yet it is baffling that Pozzo should know the reason of their waiting for Godot – “what happens in that case to your appointment with this... Godet... Godot... Godin... anyhow you see I mean, who has your future in his hands... (*pause*) ... at least your immediate future” (Beckett 67-68), although they have not discussed the matter with him. When Vladimir charges him with it, he diverts the discussion to a different topic. Pozzo's knowledge, or at least his idea, about the predicament of Vladimir and Estragon and his treatment and relationship to Lucky normalizes the fact that they, Vladimir, Estragon and Lucky, have chosen others, Godot and Pozzo, to act as sovereign over them. They have forfeited their liberty as individuals and surrendered their body and soul to their chosen sovereigns. Liberty requires individuality – “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill 13). But they willingly got rid of it for some immediate gains. Pozzo clarifies Lucky's intention – “He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him” (Beckett 70). But the intentions of the pair are not clear enough. But it is clear that they too have some motives. So, the state of exception they inhibit is clearly engineered by them for personal reasons. This personal deification of the individuals by persons or groups for immediate benefits justifies sovereigns' wish to concentrate power in them at the expense of the bare life of the people who voluntarily subjugates themselves to them.

Agamben has borrowed a lot from Schmitt's definition of the state of exception and added some modern connotations to it. Whereas Schmitt's state of exception is a temporary measure, Agamben sees it an opportunity for authoritarianism – “the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” (Agamben, *Exception* 3). This is true in case of Beckett's play. Despite the uncertainty of the pairs' intentions, Godot's practice of authoritarianism is evident from the text itself. The presence of the messenger boys is clear indication of the panoptic compound that exists to regulate their lives. Vladimir repeatedly confirms with the messenger boys of their appearance at the designated place – “Tell him ... (*he hesitates*) ... tell him you saw us. (*Pause.*) You did see us, didn't you?” (Beckett 98). Additionally, their daily return to that particular place reflects normalization of the institutionalized human behaviors for authoritative control – “All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constraint us to beguile them with proceedings which – how shall I say – which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit” (Beckett 133). Foucault complements the normalization of such behaviors in his book *Security, Territory, Population*:

I think it is indisputable, or hardly disputable, that discipline normalizes. Again we must be clear about the specificity of disciplinary normalization Discipline, of course, analyzes and breaks down; it breaks down individuals, places, time, movements, actions, and operations. It breaks them down into components such that they can be seen, on the one hand, and modified on the other Second, discipline classifies the components thus identified according to definitive objectives Third, discipline establishes optimal sequences or co-ordinations.... Fourth, discipline fixes the processes of progressive training (*dressage*) and permanent control, and finally, on the basis of this, it establishes the division those considered unsuitable or incapable and the others. (56-57)

Vladimir and Estragon's daily drill at a specific country road encapsulates the same procedure. They have been broken down, modified – “habit is a great deadener” (Beckett 148), compartmentalized – “In another compartment. There's no lack of void” (Beckett 114), from the society, classified as other and *homo sacer*, trained to wait for Godot perpetually that signify Godot's permanent control over them – “Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand” (Beckett 53). Foucault further supplements the status quo of sovereign power, in this case of Godot, through his book *Society Must Be Defended*. In the eleventh lecture given on 17 March 1976, Foucault discusses sovereign control over life. He notes this feature of sovereign power as the distinctive mark of modern life:

It seems to me that one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century was what might be called power's hold over life. What I mean is the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological. (Foucault 239-240)

It is apparent that Greek demarcation of life between *bios* and *zoē* is present in Foucault's understanding of power exercise as well. Central to this particular lecture was the normalization of this particular shift making – biopolitics, a new order of the world that still exists. Foucault argues that this ultimately results in the formation of a constitutionalized autocracy that the nation-states have been practicing in the name of security in a post-9/11 world. This practice also depends upon a contract between the state sovereign and those who it has promised to protect. Foucault calls it biopolitics. In Beckett's play what we see is the culmination of biopolitics practiced upon the pair by Godot. He has taken hold over the body that is drilled to endure the physical pain of the body

in waiting and trained the soul for perpetuity although “he couldn't promise anything” (Beckett 53).

Like Foucault's biopolitics, Agamben's state of exception is permanent. It is a permanent mode of government that the sovereign perpetuates to retain its present state of affairs. This is done through the normalization of the exception – “One of the essential characteristics of the state of exception – the provisional abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers – here shows its tendency to become a lasting practice of government” (Agamben, *Exception* 7). This undeniably corresponds to Foucault's process of normalization. For Agamben, what starts as an emergency measure, unlike Schmitt, prolongs forevermore – “The state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (*Exception* 2). If Godot were a Schmittian sovereign he would have addressed their issue as early as possible and relieved them from waiting for him. But Godot, as a modern or Agambenian sovereign power, makes them perpetually wait for him and their salvation at his hands never eventuates. There is only a little textual reference as to assuredly determine Godot's behavior as voluntary procrastination except the information they get from a messenger boy that “He does nothing” (Beckett 149). In fact, it does not really seem to indicate Godot's incapacity to help them; rather it is a clear indication of Godot's exercise of biopolitical control over the pair. The whole mechanism of control starts when the pair self-subjugates themselves to Godot for seeming salvation just as the modern citizenry self-subjugates itself in the name of security or some other trivial issues which is supposed to be “an equal exchange” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 220) but in reality paves the way for biopolitics and in the making of bare life “to make bare life as such the preeminent object of politics” (Agamben, *Bodies* 225).

The Bare Life of Vladimir and Estragon

Self-subjugation is one of the prominent aspects of Agamben's *homo sacer*. This is where Agamben is different from Foucault and Schmitt. For Schmitt, the exception is a temporary emergency where the sovereign “decides ... what must be done to eliminate it” (Schmitt, *Theology* 7). On the other hand, Agamben's sovereign keeps the emergency sustained for biopolitical reasons. The subjects too concede to the sovereign for the resolution of the emergency. In exchange they agree to part ways with their rights until their predicament has been addressed properly –

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot.

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

Vladimir: I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

(Beckett 53)

Such a predicament is not peculiar to Beckett's play only. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* also depicts a similar scenario where Faustus accepts the authority of Lucifer over him for living "in all voluptuousness" (Marlowe 63) for twenty-four years. Whatever grand plans Faustus had never materialized. His right to call on god was also taken away from him. But Faustus too admits that it was he who was to blame for his predicament since Mephistopheles never forced him to sign the contract. In this sense he becomes the subject of biopolitics in the hands of evil. As discussed earlier, it is not evident whether Godot has forcefully ordered Vladimir and Estragon to wait for him. They choose to do so on their own – "What exactly did we ask him for?" (Beckett 53) to which Godot answered vaguely, "That he'd see ... That he couldn't promise anything" (Beckett 53). As a result they do not remain equal to Godot which in case of a contract is a precondition. And "since no man has a natural authority over his fellow, and since strength does not confer any right, it follows that the basis remaining for all legitimate authority among men must be agreed convention" (Rousseau 49). So, they agreed to yield to Godot in exchange for "a kind of prayer" (Beckett 53) and got rid of or transfer their right as a legally discriminated party in the contract with Godot, thus becoming slaves for him like Lucky does for Pozzo – "To transfer is to give or to sell. Now a man who becomes the slave of another does not give himself: he sells himself, in exchange, at the very least, for his subsistence" (Rousseau 49). And when Estragon asks Vladimir whether they are tied to Godot, Vladimir confirms their predicament "To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it (*Pause*). For the moment" (Beckett 56).

But Godot, like Lucifer, takes the opportunity to exercise biopolitical power over them after they surrender to him. His deliberate prolonging creates a state of exception for them. It puts them in a grey zone or "zone of indistinction" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 4) where the body of the sovereign and the body of *homo sacer* "can no longer be told apart" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 59). Therefore, as long as Vladimir and Estragon exist, Godot exists as a sovereign. Or alternatively, as long as they allow themselves to be hegemonized by Godot he can keep practicing biopolitics upon them. Had they "dropped him" (Beckett 150) without fearing the punishment he can unleash upon them Godot might have lost his authority upon them. But the fear of punishment stops them from

doing so – “He’d punish us” (Beckett 150), consequently providing Godot with docile bodies which is the prerequisite for biopolitics – “The general form of an apparatus intended to render individuals docile and useful, by means of precise work upon their bodies, indicated the prison institution, before the law ever defined it as the penalty *par excellence*” (Foucault, *Discipline* 231).

This “state of exception” (Agamben, *Exception* 1) is also distinctively characterized by ban. But this ban does not absolve them from law and politics, rather for them it “institutes a paradoxical threshold of indistinction between the two” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 18). The pair is put outside a socio-political reality where they can no longer expect humane behavior – “Certainly they beat me” (Beckett 41) – from the rest of the society. That is why they can casually talk about the beating they get from others as if it were a normal phenomenon. They become *homo sacer* in the real sense of the word –

What is captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: *homo sacer* The life caught in a sovereign ban is the life that is originally sacred – that is, that may be killed but not sacrificed – and, in this sense, the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty. The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment. (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 53)

This clearly alludes to Foucault’s biopolitics, and for Foucault it is one of the constituents of governmentality of the contemporary age which functions as an opportunity for sovereign power to introduce certain regulatory mechanisms – “the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (*Sexuality* 139). Although both Agamben and Foucault emphasize the normalization of regulatory process, the latter’s biopolitics does not include self-subjugation as one of the mechanisms of control. Still, what binds Agamben’s “state of exception” (*Exception* 1) and Foucault’s biopolitics is their tendency to present the exceptions as normal world order – “A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 144). Like Godot has been using the messenger boys to keep the pair under constant surveillance to ensure that they come at the designated place without fail – “Tell him ... (*he hesitates*) ... tell him you saw me and that ... (*he hesitates*) ... that you saw me ... You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!” (Beckett 149).

Agamben uses the concept of camp to illustrate the similarity between these two diverge issues. Modern camps allow the sovereign power to treat them as exceptional spaces where judicial-political rights are suspended *in toto*. The entry in the refugee camps is voluntary. People who seek refuge in a foreign country voluntarily subjugate their rights in exchange for shelter and better life. The camps become a place for perpetual waiting like the country road in the play. The unspecified tree becomes a refugee camp for them since it is here they must wait for Godot, for their seeming salvation at the hands of Godot like the refugees who allow the sovereign power, the host countries in this context, to exert power over them. Modern politics has been considering camps as the *nomos* of the world, normalizing their existence in the changing political paradigm of the new world order:

The supreme goal of all totalitarian governments is not only the freely admitted, long-range ambition to global rule but also the never-admitted and immediately realized attempt at the total domination of man. The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination Total domination is achieved when the human person, who somehow is always a specific mixture of spontaneity and being conditioned, has been transformed into completely conditioned being The disintegration of personality is carried through in different stages, the first ... when the judicial person is being destroyed The second stage of destruction concerns moral personality and is achieved through the separation of concentration camps from the rest of the world, a separation which makes martyrdom senseless, empty, and ridiculous. The last stage is the destruction of individuality itself and is brought about through the permanence and institutionalizing of torture. The end result is the reduction of human beings to the lowest possible denominator (Arendt 240)

“Total domination,” “conditioned being,” destruction of “the judicial person,” destruction of morality, “senseless, empty and ridiculous” martyrdom, destruction of individuality, perpetual institutionalized torture, and “lowest possible denominator” – all of these clearly refer to the making of a *homo sacer* in both the ancient and modern sense. Arendt is just repeating what Agamben has been saying in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and Foucault’s theory of normalization in *Security, Territory, Population*. Beckett’s characters in the play are truly relegated to the “lowest denominator,” biopolitical subjects or *homo sacer* – all of these terms almost synonymously expressing the same idea.

Conclusion

It is evident that Godot is certainly a sovereign, in fact, he is a modern sovereign

who perpetually prolongs the state of exception created for whatever reason, yet remains outside it: “The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order ... the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of law, legally places himself outside the law” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 17). Therefore, the legality of any contract does not hold them accountable for breaching it, rather it empowers him to set the condition of the contract – for Godot has instructed where and when the pair should wait upon him. He also engages messenger boys to monitor their appearance at the designated place and time. And he has clearly proclaimed that non-appearance will be met with punishment. On the other hand, Vladimir and Estragon, by entering into a contract with Godot, has transferred all their rights, even their right to laugh – “You’d make me laugh, if it wasn’t prohibited” (Beckett 54). The play continuously portrays the limit of their dehumanization at the hands of their sovereign, Godot. They have even given up thinking – “We’re in no danger of ever thinking any more” (Beckett 112), which is a stark contrast to Lucky because, despite all the ill-treatment he receives from Pozzo, he still thinks.

All three of them – Vladimir, Estragon, and Lucky, are modern *homo sacer*. Their differences lie in their limit of dehumanization and their comprehension of their respective conditions. Whereas Lucky is clear about his predicament and his need, the pair are somehow oblivious of their situation. Between the pair, Vladimir is more perceptive of their predicament. Nonetheless, that does not change their condition at all. They are all discarded from society – “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” (Beckett 134) and relegated to the bare minimum, happy only to remain alive – “To have lived is not enough for them” (Beckett 108). Although they have kept their part of the contract – “We have kept our appointment, and that’s an end to that ... how many people can boast as much” (Beckett 133) – they remain accursed because of the changed connotation of the term *homo sacer*.

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Reconceptualizing “Ugliness”: A Genealogical Deconstruction of the Eurocentric Normative Concept of “Ugly”

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Abstract

The socio-cultural construction of beauty simultaneously generates a normative understanding of unattractiveness as well, since these properties exist in binary within popular perceptions. However, since beauty itself is a construct, its binary counterpart (unattractiveness) must similarly be understood as a construct as well. While existing studies have traced the origin and continual re/construction of beauty, the current research seeks to conduct a genealogical study of the concept of “ugliness.” By tracing the historical and socio-cultural evolution of these concepts and perceptions through paintings and visual oeuvre, the research endeavors to suggest that perceptions of unattractiveness, though ingrained, are not natural and are instead rooted in socio-cultural dynamics with a solid political foundation. The research traces the origin of the Eurocentric normative concept of beauty and examines the construction of “ugliness” pertaining to the development of the notion of beauty to reveal the dimensions embedded in this process from its inception to the present situation. In this context, theoretical insights from scholarship on gaze, beauty, and disability provide a conceptual framework to interpret the political underpinnings of the construction of the notion of “ugliness.” In capital-driven societies, those who defy beauty standards face dehumanization, harassment, and systemic barriers, harming self-worth, and limiting opportunities and relationships. By establishing “ugliness” as a socio-cultural construct rather than a biological reality through a genealogical deconstruction of the concept, this research aims to normalize being “unattractive,” dismantling the aura that contributes to its undesirable and stigmatized status, which often results in psychological harm to individuals not aligning with the normative beauty standards.

Keywords: beauty, ugliness, cultural construct, normativity, visual arts

Not meeting the beauty norms set by society has a significant impact on an individual’s overall wellbeing. Being normatively “ugly” can make an individual



a victim of dehumanization, abuse, harassment, and systemic challenges that can eventually lead to insecurity, anxiety, and even clinical depression (Spiegel 56). Thus, it is important to address and deconstruct this normative concept of “ugliness” as it causes such distress. However, though extensive research and literature on the construction of “beauty” exist, discourses on “ugliness” are noticeably limited. The current study attempts to review relevant existing works on normative beauty and, by exploring the concept of ugliness as a counterpart of the discussions on beauty (Rosenkranz 32), attempts to establish “ugliness” as a constructed norm similar to the constructed norm of “beauty” that is established without any rational foundation. The genealogy of ugliness has its own trajectory in the Western episteme. Classical sources such as Plato and Aristotle occasionally framed ugliness as deviation from proportion and harmony. The category, with time, evolved into a complex cultural signifier. The medieval theology linked ugliness to sin and moral decay. Early modern physiognomy used the notion of ugliness in order to justify social hierarchies. The romantic aesthetics embraced forms of the grotesque and the sublime-ugly. These shifts in meanings of “ugliness” as an individual concept has been traced in detail in literatures like Umberto Eco’s *On Ugliness*. Eco, in his work, shows the way ugliness, as a distinct notion, functions as a dynamic tool for artistic expression, moral instruction, and social exclusion. While philosophical works on ugliness such as Eco’s have treated ugliness as an autonomous aesthetic category with its own history, symbolism, and typology, the current study takes a different approach. Eco’s work traces ugliness across myth, religion, literature, and visual culture. It shows that ugliness can be culturally codified independent of the notion of beauty. However, the current research does not seek to produce a stand-alone genealogy of ugliness. Rather, it examines how ugliness has been constructed and circulated largely as a secondary effect or a byproduct of beauty’s elevation to normative status in its modern Eurocentric form. This framing of ugliness foregrounds the interdependence of the two concepts that emphasizes that ugliness, rather than being a separate and a self-sustaining category, often functions in practice as the inverse condition that beauty’s cultural and political production requires in order to define, defend, and perpetuate itself. It argues that the notion of ugliness is contingent upon the concept of beauty rather than being individually constructed.

To elucidate these arguments, this study traces the origin of the Eurocentric normative concept of beauty and then, through this lens, analyzes certain paintings to demonstrate how the normative concept of beauty was established and circulated to eventually argue how our current understanding of “ugliness” originated. Then, by drawing on relevant scholarly works on normative beauty, the study will try to show how the construction of “beauty” constructs and

circulates “ugliness” in parallel as well. Eventually, the argument will stand that the construction and circulation of “ugliness” is a completely arbitrary process that is contingent upon the construction of beauty and is pregnant with “othering” and capitalist agenda. Considering the arbitrary nature of the concept of ugliness, the study will conclude with a proposal of how the significance of this concept can be diminished to nullify the detrimental effect it has on individuals. In the context of this study, it is imperative to clarify the definition of “Eurocentrism.”

Both Amin and Quijano explain Eurocentrism as a worldview that positions the history, culture, and aesthetic values of Europe as the universal norm while marginalizing or erasing non-European systems of knowledge and representation. In the realm of aesthetics, Eurocentrism manifests in the valorization of the Greco-Roman ideals of symmetry, proportion, and “perfection” as inherently superior, while dismissing alternative aesthetic traditions as lesser, primitive, or irrelevant (such as the Indian aesthetic appreciation of body hair on the female body). This dynamic is not only cultural, but extends to the political paradigm. This emerges from and is sustained by histories of colonial expansion and global media flows that prioritizes Western visual codes over others. This definition frames the subsequent genealogical tracing of beauty and ugliness as an inquiry into how such Eurocentric ideals became naturalized as universal standards. For example, as discussed later in this essay, Plato’s association of symmetry with beauty, while influential, originated and is influenced by distinctly Hellenic philosophical tradition that later became central to Eurocentric aesthetic hierarchies. These classical ideals were disseminated globally through colonial expansion and European art academies. This practice framed European proportion systems as universal while devaluing other aesthetic logic. The current study attempts to critique this Eurocentric approach to beauty.

To do that, the study adopts a genealogical approach as genealogy “investigates how certain ... truths are historical constructs that have their roots in specific social and political agendas” (Saukko 115). In addition, as Saukko explains, this approach exposes how certain constructs establish themselves as the truth. Genealogy “is a method that helps to dismantle authoritative forms of knowledge” (116). It is also effective in evaluating the “political and personal repercussions of ... discourse[s]” (125). Thus, in understanding the underlying cultural and political implications of beauty and “ugliness,” genealogy, as a method, can function as a potent tool. This genealogical study involves analyzing dominant discourses, epistemes, and visual arts related to beauty. By examining the historically initial conception of beauty as understood and represented in dominant discourses, established epistemes, and popular visual arts, this study identifies the root of this

concept in “social and political agenda” (115) and evaluates the “repercussions of [the] discourse” (125) of “beauty.” The current study deploys genealogy not merely as a metaphorical tracing of ideas but rather as a methodological practice that uncovers the contingent, non-linear, and politically invested formation of concepts. In Foucauldian vernacular, genealogy resists origins and essences, and instead maps the discursive struggles, ruptures, and power relations through which, in this current context, “truths” of beauty and ugliness have become naturalized. In this sense, genealogy here entails destabilizing the assumption that beauty or ugliness are timeless categories, demonstrating the way visual and philosophical traditions sediment these categories into norms, and exposing the manner in which these norms serve capitalist and disciplinary agenda. Thus, in the context of the current study, genealogy is the central analytic that the paper utilizes to interrogate the arbitrariness of aesthetic hierarchies.

In order to analyze the art works, the study employs the Loomis framework as a methodological tool to show that the visages that are normatively considered beautiful in Western tradition are geometrically symmetrical. The Loomis method establishes a vertical center line (midline) on a spherical base, representing the head’s bilateral symmetry (Loomis 22). Thus, a face fitting within the Loomis framework must be symmetrical. By employing the Loomis framework, this study analyzes the symmetrical value of faces considered beautiful within the Western aesthetic tradition, thereby demonstrating a connection between symmetry and the Western construction of beauty. This Loomis framework itself is not neutral. American illustrator Andrew Loomis developed this framework in the mid-20th century. The framework draws on Euro-American academic art traditions that prioritizes Greco-Roman proportional ideals. The Loomis framework establishes itself as a “scientific” drawing method and this epistemic establishment is what the genealogical study of the current research aims to critique. In the Loomis framework, the culturally specific visual codes become naturalized as universal standards through pedagogical and artistic institutions. Learners approach the Loomis framework as standards of drawing. Genealogy, in the current study, does not validate this standard, but rather reveals how such tools operationalize and perpetuate Eurocentric aesthetic norms.

The current study, drawing on theoretical contributions of Mulvey, Bordo, Nixon, and Davis, attempts to establish that beauty and ugliness are interdependent cultural constructions. Mulvey theorizes beauty as a gendered modality of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” situating it within the visual economy of the gaze, while Bordo elucidates the mechanism by which media manufactures and sustains this desirability through stylized aesthetic codes like youth and symmetry. Nixon extends this critique and situates these codes within institutionalized gendered

and capitalist systems that compel identity formation through normative conformity. Davis further demonstrates how this process pathologizes difference, thereby constituting ugliness as a counterpart of beauty. Overall, these insights indicate that media’s fetishization of perfection confers legitimacy upon identities through systems of visibility, while simultaneously excluding bodies that fall outside the normative boundaries, rendering beauty and ugliness contingent products of socio-political agendas.

Tracing the origin of the concept of beauty finds its genesis in the inception of human civilization. Humans developed a cognitive preference for symmetry because early humans tended to perceive symmetrical items, such as healthy crops, plants, leaves, and trees, as beneficial, while the infected items were often structurally asymmetrical (Freeman et al. 115). Later, with the emergence of intellectual communities, the concept of beauty was systematically conceptualized. As Aristotle expounded, the popularly acknowledged universal system, mathematics, was the standard system in conceptualizing the systemic notion of beauty along with many other similar abstract notions. Mathematically, as Rotman posits, “symmetry” is ideally “perfect” as mathematics strives to establish an equivalent relation between two objects that are equal but appear to be distinct (46). Livio further adds, the material expression of math, that is geometry, also finds perfection in symmetry (4). Symmetrical geometric shapes are deemed perfect (Jayadevan et al. 16). This perception of associating perfection with symmetry solidified the conceptualization of symmetry as an inherent part of beauty as beauty too is closely attributed to the notion of perfection (Hagman 661). Aristotle notes this idea in *Metaphysics* as, “[t]he chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree” (1705).

Philosophers of the classical era intellectualized and epistemologized this idea of normative beauty, conceptualizing and establishing the norms of beauty as inherently about symmetry. Plato was one of the first to conceptualize symmetry as beauty. In his book *Timaeus*, Plato recorded, “[t]he good is the beautiful, and the beautiful is the symmetrical. ... A leg or an arm too long or too short is at once ugly and unserviceable” (36). Here, by directly implying symmetry as beautiful or asymmetry as “ugly,” Plato creates a concrete definition of what is beautiful and what is not. Aquinas also makes a similar remark while describing the requirements for beauty. He delineates three requirements for beauty, the first requirement is “perfectness” and the second of which is “due proportion or consonance” (39). This “consonance” is basically symmetry as the human body is deemed harmoniously proportionate when its sides are visually equal or have harmonious order. Aristotle talks about this order in *Poetics* where he

says, “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (2322). Thus, the contrary of it, or visible objects that are asymmetrical or disproportionate, are not deemed beautiful. Similarly, Vitruvius posited that one can “attain beauty by pursuing symmetry” (5). Thus, it implies that asymmetry is the opposite of beauty. Plotinus summarizes this entire paradigm of beauty and non-beauty in *Enneads* as, “in regard to the objects of sight and all other things, their beauty consists in their symmetry. [If something] does not have proportion ... [it] will be excluded from being beautiful” (93).

The gradual promotion and popular circulation of this perception established the normative notion of beauty that is based on symmetry. This notion of associating beauty with symmetry made the attributes featuring asymmetry like dark spots, freckles, and other forms of skin markers, an indication of “ugliness” as any spot on the skin is never symmetrically identical. Even if the spots are identical, creating symmetry of both sides of the face, such faces with spots are still not considered “beautiful” because it lacks “due proportion” (Aquinas 39), “definiteness” (Aristotle 1705), and “perfection” (Aquinas 39). “Perfection,” by definition, means “the state of being complete” (“Perfection”). For a face to be “complete,” it must be devoid of features that either augment or detract from its fundamental components, which essentially consists of skin along with eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, and chin (Jefferson 12). Thus, facial completion, for example, means it should only have these aforementioned essential items and anything additional to it, such as freckles, dark spots, or any form of marks, or lack of an item, such as loss of eyelashes due to alopecia areata, results in imperfection, making the face incomplete. Similarly, as “proportion” is an essential part of beauty (Aquinas 39) and disproportionate body parts are deemed “ugly” (Plato 36), the incompleteness of the body is also not beautiful. In short, according to the classical doctrine of beauty, incompleteness due to disability and imperfection due to any lack or excess has an equally significant role in making a face “ugly.”

These classical notions of beauty are significant as they conceptualized symmetry and completeness as beauty and these perceptions were established as standards to be later reflected and implemented in media representations that eventually constructed and circulated a constricted idea of beauty to ultimately normalize it. Among the classical media that constructed and circulated the norms of beauty, such as literature, theatre, etc., visual art played a pivotal role. The current study deals with such visual arts, specifically painting, to trace the construction and circulation of these beauty norms to infer the concept of “ugliness” these conceptions of beauty imply.

Initially, to establish the argument that symmetry and completeness of body were considered to be the normative standard of beauty throughout centuries, this study will analyze Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, Jean-Simon Berthélemy’s *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, and Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys’ painting *Helen of Troy*. These particular paintings are relevant for examining normative standards of beauty as the figures in these paintings, Venus (Barolsky 105), Callisto (Wall 111), and Helen of Troy (Maguire 31), are conventionally acknowledged as “beautiful” figures. Moreover, the fact that these works span several centuries provides valuable insight into the perceptions of beauty across time. Here, by highlighting the visible symmetry in these paintings through anthropometric measurements and the Loomis framework, the study argues that the established norm of symmetry and completeness as beauty was constructed by widely implying such facial features as exemplars of beauty in arts and similar visual media.

The frame of the Loomis method and the anthropometric measurement of the faces in these paintings that are considered beautiful or the epitome of beauty shows the clear underlying criterion for normative beauty.

For example, the following portrayal of Callisto from *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto* (Berthélemy) aligns with the perfect Loomis framework:



Figure 1: Berthélemy, *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, Paris: Louvre, 1763.



Figure 2: Berthélemy, *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, Paris: Louvre, 1763 (within the Loomis framework).

Similarly, the portrayal of Aphrodite in *The Birth of Venus* (Botticelli) accords with this Loomis framework with precision. The following depiction clarifies the symmetry:

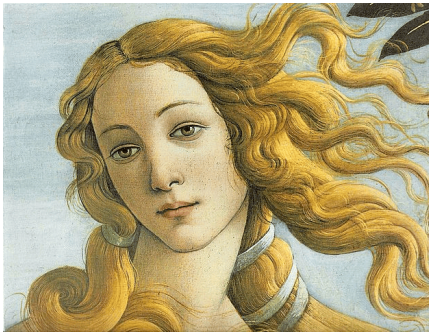


Figure 3: Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, Florence: Uffizi Gallery, 1486.

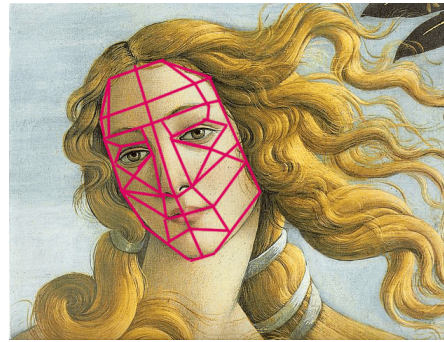


Figure 4: Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, Florence: Uffizi Gallery, 1486 (within the Loomis framework).

The depiction of Helen from Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys' painting *Helen of Troy* not only aligns with the Loomis framework, but within the anthropometric frame of drawing as well because of her completely front-facing posture. Below is the depiction of Helen of Troy within these frameworks:

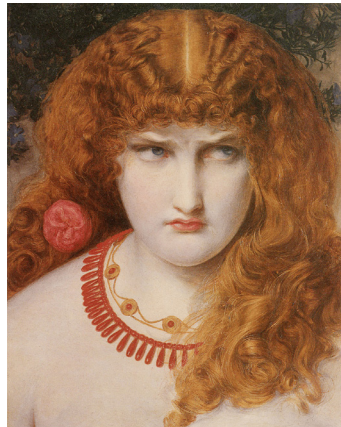


Figure 5: Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867.

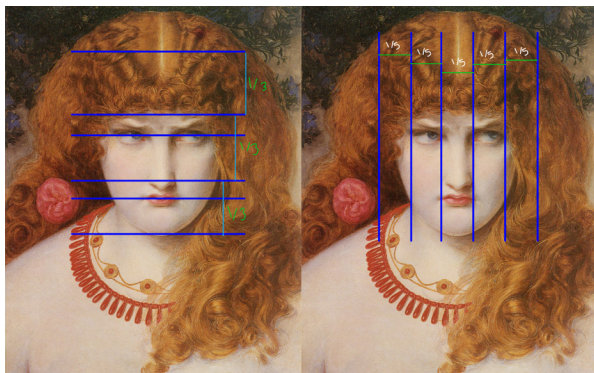


Figure 6: Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867 (within the anthropometric frame).

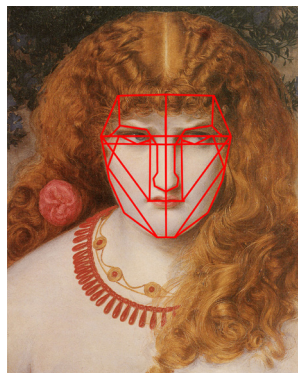


Figure 7: Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867 (within the Loomis framework).

The Loomis framework is a methodical technique used in visual arts to draw symmetrical items, such as faces (Loomis 25). Similarly, standard anthropometric frames support the idea that “an aesthetically pleasing face can be separated into three equal vertical thirds and five equal horizontal fifths” (Armengou et al. 352). These divisions create a framework of symmetry, as the distances between these lines constituting the complete face are defined as “equal.” Consequently, faces that align with the anthropometric frame are considered “aesthetically pleasing” because they are measured as symmetrical.

It is noticeable that the faces that are widely deemed beautiful under Eurocentric standards, such as those of Venus (Aphrodite), Callisto, and Helen of Troy, align perfectly with these metrics of symmetrical facial structure. This suggests that Eurocentric beauty norms fundamentally prioritize visual symmetry as a defining characteristic of beauty. These paintings thus conform to the beauty norm of symmetry and completeness as propounded by classical scholars. Such conformity established and reinforced the norms of beauty suggested by the Western classical scholars while also circulating this beauty standard as the prevailing norm. This occurred due to widespread recognition, acknowledgement, and appreciation of these paintings. In the following years, the concept of beauty is further subjected to the methodical principle of scientific approach. For example, in recent times, a viral news story about actress Amber Heard having the most “scientifically” beautiful face took over the internet. The articles (*The Daily Star*; *New York Post*) reported that a research conducted by Dr. Julian De

Silva developed a face mapping technique to discover the most beautiful face. According to the report, Dr. Silva utilized the Greek golden ratio of beauty, which is also referred to as “Phi.” In the context of this research, this ratio supposedly determines the “perfect” proportion of facial features. It is safe to assume that this notion of “perfect” is based on the premise of symmetry as the golden ratio is characterized by symmetrical forms (Prokopakis et al. 18). The implication here is that the notion of beauty is still methodologized through the borrowing of scientific rationality, thereby ignoring the arbitrary nature of the assumed connection between beauty and science, beauty and symmetry, and beauty and perfection. However, such perceptions of beauty as implied by Dr. Silva further contributes to the practice of associating perfectness or symmetry with the construction of the concept of beauty. The popular media, by portraying such “scientifically perfect” facial features as “attractive,” “attainable,” and “beautiful” through representational practices, further solidifies this implication, eventually transforming it into a norm despite its irrational and arbitrary nature. This, yet again, in turn constitutes the notion of “ugliness” as well where any facial feature that is not “perfect” or “symmetrical” falls out of the category of beauty, thus out of the category of “attractive” and “attainable.”

From a Foucauldian perspective, both the Loomis framework and the modern revival of the golden ratio of beauty as utilized by Dr. Silva exemplify the way disciplinary techniques produce beauty as scientific truth while simultaneously marginalizing alternative epistemes of aesthetics. Foucault terms these suppressed and devalued perspectives as “subjugated knowledges” (7). The notion of “subjugated knowledges” entail forms of understanding that are dismissed as they do not conform to the dominant regimes of truth. The Loomis method naturalizes the Greco-Roman proportional ideals through technical grids. It codifies symmetry as the universal criterion of beauty. In the same manner, the golden ratio establishes itself as an objective mathematical formula of assessing beauty. It lends the authority of science to what is in fact a culturally specific ideal of proportion. In both instances, alternative aesthetic traditions, such as that of South Asian valorization of ornamentation and body hair, or the medieval grotesque aesthetics, or the indigenous practices of scarification or bodily modifications, are relegated to the margins as primitive, absurd, and “unaesthetic.” These perceptions of beauty are overshadowed by the dominant Western episteme of beauty and are thus made, what Foucault calls, “subjugated knowledges.” In this context, the comprehension that appears to be neutral and universal are in fact normative apparatuses that discipline both artistic practice and spectatorship. The dominant epistemes of the Loomis framework and golden ratio of beauty that emerged from the Greco-Roman traditions do not merely describe beauty, but rather they actively generate a hierarchical system

of aesthetic values that establishes a rigid binary where asymmetry, and thus the constructed category of “ugliness,” is codified as repulsive.

As it becomes apparent by this point, the notion of beauty is not an inherent quality but is rather a construct that circulates and becomes ingrained through cultural systems, media representations, and institutional practices. Scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Susan Bordo, Sean Nixon, and Lennard J. Davis have offered insights that can be engaged to examine how beauty is manufactured, disseminated, and normalized, ultimately shaping societal ideals and reinforcing the rejection of bodies that deviate from these standards. This essay examines their arguments to demonstrate how the normative understanding of beauty is constructed, perpetuated, and institutionalized, creating a rigid binary between the desirable and the undesirable.

Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” highlights how the perception of beauty is rooted in the concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Beauty is positioned as a quality that invites the gaze, often presented in media through images coded for visual and erotic impact. Mulvey explains such bodies and appearances as, “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). This framing creates a normative standard of beauty that places individuals in the position of objects to be viewed and assessed. The act of spectatorship becomes an active process in constructing beauty, wherein the media positions certain bodies as ideal through visual codes, simultaneously marginalizing individuals who do not conform to these constructed parameters. In this process, these others who fall outside these ideals are constituted as the very negation of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” rendered instead as forms of “not-to-be-looked-at-ness.” By creating a fetishized preference for those “to-be-looked-at” bodies, a contrast is perpetuated that vivifies the visibility of features that make a body opposite of “to-be-looked-at,” that is “not-to-be-looked-at.”

Building on this, Susan Bordo’s “Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body” argues that media not only reflects but actively constructs these desirability that Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Through the posing and styling of bodies, media representation signals what is desirable and sensual, reinforcing specific aesthetics as beautiful. Bordo notes, in media representations, bodies are “posed and styled to signify desirability and sensuality” (196), showing how beauty is manufactured by associating particular physical traits and appearances with sensuality. Bordo’s framework is particularly relevant to this essay in understanding the mechanism that manufactures and circulates beauty standards. According to Bordo’s speculations, the media, in this process, becomes a powerful agent in circulating and establishing a rigid idea of beauty, training

viewers to internalize these representations as norms. Over time, this consistent framing solidifies the perception of beauty within culture, creating aspirational ideals that shape individual and collective desirability. However, this formation of desirability resulting from media representation simultaneously implies the formation of undesirability or repulsion for features that are not circulated as beautiful, eventually causing those features to be deemed “ugly.”

Sean Nixon extends this argument in “Exhibiting Masculinity,” emphasizing that beauty is a product of cultural systems and practices that circulate through media and institutionalized forms of representation. He explains, “cultural languages or systems of representation ... actively construct the cultural meanings we give to masculinities” (301). These cultural languages define what beauty is and establish its meaning as something that is desirable and acceptable, linking it to wider gender scripts and sexual identities. Thus, as the standard beauty becomes desirable, the opposite of it, that is “ugliness,” becomes undesirable in this process. Nixon further elaborates, “the visual pleasures coded in the representations are connected to wider gender scripts and sexual identities – in other words, who looks at whom and in what way” (314). This coding positions beauty as an aspirational quality tied to identity formation, where spectators are invited to view themselves in relation to the models they consume in media. This system perpetuates binaries, casting beauty as an ideal while creating a corresponding rejection of bodies that do not conform. Through media, beauty becomes institutionalized, and individuals are subtly encouraged to conform to these ideals as a means of belonging and identity validation. Nixon underscores the structural nature of this process that “forces us to be alert to the particular forms of knowledge and expertise which are associated with the representations at each of these sites” (304). This system compels us to acknowledge the constructed value that is arbitrarily associated with “beauty.” In this process, Nixon explains, “[t]he images invite an imagined male viewer to invest himself in the ‘look’ being presented by the model” (314). Thus, this process of spectatorship positions beauty as an aspirational quality tied to consumption and identity formation, which, automatically in the binary process, creates a repulsion, that is, the opposite of aspiration, for “ugliness.” As, according to Nixon, the institutionalization of beauty contributes to identity validation, not conforming to such beauty norm may not validate one’s identity to the broader society, which can be thought of as one of the reasons why individuals not conforming to the beauty standards may have negative and even derogatory experiences of associating with the self. This also highlights the notion of how, because of capitalist strategies, individuals positioned outside of the beauty standards often endure distress while negotiating with their sense of self, as they are deviated from the category of the normative beauty expectations of the culture they are a part of.

The connection between beauty and cultural expectations of perfection is further analyzed by Lennard J. Davis in “Visualizing the Disabled Body.” Though Davis talks about the othering of disabled bodies, his framework of approaching the issue is relevant in understanding the manner in which “ugliness” too eventually becomes subjected to othering. However, Davis’ definition of “disability” equates “ugliness” with a form of disability as well, thereby explaining its societal othering. Both the categories of disability and ugliness function as social disruptions to normative expectations of the body. Similar to the way disability is read as a deviation from able-bodied completeness, ugliness is understood as a deviation from aesthetic completeness. Davis’ emphasis on the notion of gaze and agency is particularly instrumental in explaining this translation that argues that bodies marked as “ugly” disrupt the visual field in manners analogous to the disruption produced by disabled bodies. Considering Davis’ framework of disability, “ugliness” too triggers the same cultural mechanisms of regulation, containment, and exclusion. Thus, Davis’ work does not only inform disability studies but also offers a conceptual vocabulary to theorize ugliness as a form of socially constructed deviance that emerges as a counterpart of beauty.

Davis defines disability as “a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field as it relates to the power of the gaze” (168). As “ugliness” too disrupts societal standards of appearance and challenges the “power of the gaze,” it can be perceived as a form of disability. Davis further explains, “the disruption, the rebellion of the visual, must be regulated, rationalized, contained” (168). In the normative societal landscape, “ugliness” too is “regulated, rationalized, contained” through enforcement of beauty standards. In this process, those who do not conform to this category face exclusion and discrimination. This dynamic put “ugliness” within the category of disability. In addition, it can be argued that similar to the notion of disability as Davis puts it, the concept of “ugliness” too is pathologized, offering various “remedies” for certain perceived aesthetic deficiencies termed as “ugliness” such as hair loss, acne, pimples, rough or dry skin, body parts that are considered “too large” or “too small,” excessively bright or dark skin among others. Science contributes to this pathologization by providing “solutions” in the form of creams, lotions, and other “skincare” products as well as medical procedures for the augmentation or reduction of body parts such as breasts and buttocks. This pathologization is facilitated by promoting a narrowly defined category of “beauty,” which immediately renders the rest of the physical appearances as “undesirable,” “unattainable,” and “unworthy of appreciation,” or, yet again, “not-to-be-looked-at.” The underlying motivation for this pathologized construction appears to be capitalist in nature. The continued reinforcement of a singular, narrow category of “beautiful” serves to exploit those who fall into its counterpart category, which is “ugliness.” The

implications of the capitalist agenda explain why these constructed binaries of beauty and ugliness visibly persist within popular cultural products, and consequently in broader socio-cultural praxis with unignorable vividness. Davis' approach underscores how the consumption of these cultural products create normative understanding of symmetry and completeness as defining markers of "normal," which, according to the initial arguments of this research in reference to classical philosophy, are also features that define "beauty." Davis writes,

[C]ulture tends to split bodies into good and bad parts. Some cultural norms are considered good and others bad. Everyone is familiar with the "bad" body: too short or tall, too fat or thin, not masculine or feminine enough, not enough or too much hair (169)

The attributes "too much" and "not enough" both refer to asymmetry as these attributes suggest imbalance in reference to "expected norm." Asymmetry, by definition, is lack of equality or proportion in a system or object (Amrein and Peña 5). Thus, when something is excessive (or "too much") or is insufficient (or "not enough"), it is asymmetrical. Media representations teach viewers, much like the classical standards as discussed before, to associate beauty with wholeness, "perfection," and symmetry. This doctrine of beauty marginalizes bodies that deviate from these standards. Davis contrasts the compensatory imagination applied in the process of interacting with art with the perception of real-life bodies. For example, viewers can idealize the incomplete figure of the *Venus de Milo* as beautiful, but in real life, physical impairments or imperfections provoke horror, pity, and even repulsion for features that lack erotic allure unlike the armless sculpture of *Venus de Milo*. He asks,

The living woman might be considered by many "normal" people to be physically repulsive, and certainly without erotic allure. The question I wish to ask is why does the impairment of the *Venus de Milo* in no way prevent "normal" people from considering her beauty, while Pam Herbert's disability becomes the focal point for horror and pity? (168)

This discrepancy reveals how our perception of beauty, conditioned by media and art, is tied to our ability to conceptualize completeness. In case of certain artworks, viewers compensate for absent or imperfect elements, thereby perceiving all figures and subjects as beautiful despite their defects because the viewers are culturally conditioned to interpret such artworks as "beautiful" (Kant 111). While perceiving art, the viewer "does not see the absence and so fills the absence with a presence" (171). In this "reception of disability . . . , the 'normal' observer compensates or defends against the presence of difference" (171). While viewing the art, Davis wrote, the viewer's "aim is to restore the damage, bring

back the limbs, through an act of imagination” (171). However, real bodies do not allow for this imaginative compensation, leading to a heightened perception of “ugliness” in imperfect bodies.

This process reveals a more profound underlying issue with normative perception toward beauty and “ugliness.” The habitual consumption of media normalizes and perpetuates the idea of beauty as tied to perfection. The association between beauty and perfection is so intrinsically embedded within cultural perceptions that viewers often imagine compensation for defects to sustain the ideal of beauty as “perfection” (e.g., imaginatively reconstructing the absent limbs of *Venus de Milo*) (Davis 171). Over time, this habituation magnifies the rejection of real bodies that deviate from these constructed ideals. Davis argues that this tendency stems from the cultural training provided by media, which teaches viewers to perceive beauty in a specific, rigid way. In this habitual process, the viewer’s perception of disability or defect while encountering non-normative bodies in media gets repressed. Davis argues,

[i]n imagining the broken statues, the critic must mentally replace the arms and the head The point here is that the attempt of the critic to keep the body in some systematic whole is really based on a repression of the fragmentary nature of the body. (173)

When confronted with real bodies that deviate from the normative expectations, the perception of defect that was suppressed by our tendency of perceiving media representation as perfect, even if it is through imaginative compensation, resurfaces. This intensifies the rejection of real bodies that do not conform to normative ideals of perfection or beauty. Thus, the process of defining beauty not only creates aspirational ideals but also reinforces stigmatized evaluation of imperfection.

Overall, the arguments of Mulvey, Bordo, Nixon, and Davis demonstrate how beauty is constructed and circulated through cultural products and cultural practices. Mulvey illustrates how representation shapes perception of beauty, while Bordo highlights how media further solidifies beauty as a desirable construct. Nixon shows that this constructed beauty is institutionalized through cultural systems, linking it to consumption and identity formation. Davis examines the consequences of this process, emphasizing the exclusion and marginalization of imperfect bodies or the “ugly” bodies. These scholars collectively reveal that the perceptions of “ugliness,” much like beauty, are not innate but a socially and culturally influenced construct, reproduced through media representations. By creating aspirational ideals and rejecting deviations, the circulation of “normative beauty” becomes a powerful force that shapes broader societal norms

and individual desires. In this system, “ugliness” is structurally produced at every stage of the cultural process. Mulvey shows that certain bodies are constructed as desirable objects of the gaze and Bordo demonstrates how those aesthetics are manufactured and are circulated. These arguments implicitly indicate how ugliness too is being created and circulated along with the dynamic of beauty or desirable bodies. Nixon illustrates how the beauty standards become institutionalized within systems of representation and identity. This argument, despite being about beauty, offers a hint at how, along with beauty, ugliness too becomes institutionalized but in a manner that is not apparent or explicit due to the fact that ugliness is not as celebrated or highlighted as beauty is. Finally, Davis clarifies the way the bodies that deviate from the standard norms are pathologized as defective and undesirable, thereby establishing “ugliness” as something to “cure” or “fix.” Overall, their works converge to support the claim that ugliness, like beauty, is not a natural quality, but is rather an arbitrarily constructed cultural and political product that develops along with the notion of beauty, but in a less visible and less explicitly articulated form.

By putting the concept of “ugliness” against the idea of “beauty,” the current study attempted to trace the cultural and social influence in constructing these concepts. The research focused on “ugliness” as a construct that is, in its functionality, contingent upon the notion of “beauty.” By demonstrating that the standards and norms of beauty are arbitrarily created, that is by conceptualizing symmetry as beauty whereas no such connection between beauty and symmetry is apparent, the current study argued that this must mean “ugliness” too is conceptualized in a similar manner in the process of creating beauty norms. In addition, the study showed that the concept of beauty has been made an aspiring and appreciative quality by the normative able-bodied, capital-driven culture to promote certain standards to undergird industries both in terms of production and consumption. This process, while exalting beauty, simultaneously encodes “ugliness” as a repulsive quality. While the concept of beauty is established to inspire individuals to engage in certain modes of Foucauldian biopower (Paudel 87), such as to participate in beauty trends and impose insecurity to keep individuals within certain regulations, the concept of “ugliness” is made to be repulsive to inspire those normatively perceived as “not-beautiful,” such as those individuals lacking normative completeness, to attempt to reach the status of “beautiful” as it is an “aspiring quality.” In other words, beauty norms act as biopolitical tools to regulate bodies and sustain consumer markets. This simply means that the concept of “ugliness” is also a construct, created and circulated for particular agenda. Overall, just like beauty, “ugliness” too is an arbitrary concept without any natural and/or essential meaning to it. If that is the case, the current study argues that “ugliness” should be normalized

just as “beauty” should be normalized. This analysis elucidates that if “beauty” is de-fetishized and/or is stripped of its exalted aura, then “ugliness” would likewise lose the repulsive charge attributed to it, as neither of these concepts is essentially natural, and both are inter-constructive and arbitrary in nature. Consequently, the stigmatization of “ugliness” would no longer function as a catalyst for adverse societal repercussions, thereby neutralizing the detrimental effects historically perpetuated by such arbitrary constructs.

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Waiting with the Void: Baradian Temporality in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* questions the idea of time as a straight line, much like quantum physics views time as something that arises from connections, emerges through actions, and unfolds in real ways. In the play, Beckett's repeating scenes of waiting and emptiness turn the void into a lively space where things take shape and change. This study examines how the play's repeating scenes, significant silences, and connections between characters and objects – like the tree, boots, and empty space – can be read through Karen Barad's ideas that differences emerge through interactions (diffraction), things shape each other (intra-action), and time forms through relationships (time-becoming). As the theater of the absurd, this play has an idiosyncratic style of waiting that avoids neat endings. It portrays time as repeating, endless, and deeply intertwined with nature's web. Here, the empty stage becomes a place of possibilities, where ruin and rebirth coexist. It may not resolve the crises of the Anthropocene, but it mirrors the challenges of our time. In the end, Beckett's open setting offers a connected way of seeing that rethinks time as intertwined, encouraging fresh approaches to handle doubt, show care, and take action in a wounded world.

Keywords: *Waiting for Godot*, agential realism (Karen Barad), intra-action, nonlinear temporality

Though Karen Barad's work focuses on science studies and feminist theory, it is highly relevant to analyzing Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, because it offers tools to rethink time, objects, and relationships in theater, bridging science and humanities (Barad, *Meeting* 3-38). Barad applies their ideas to performance, such as in their exploration of quantum entanglements and nonlinear time, which they see as ways to stage ethical questions about history and responsibility, like the lasting effects of nuclear events (Barad, "TransMaterialities" 387-412). These concepts fit Beckett's play, where waiting, silences, and objects like the tree or boots create a sense of time that emerges through interactions, echoing quantum ideas and reflecting environmental crises like those in the Anthropocene (Barad, "Troubling" 56-86). Scholars in literary and performance studies have used



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Barad's frameworks to analyze plays. By applying Barad's concepts, this study sees Beckett's void not as empty but as a lively space of potential, encouraging new ways to think about care, uncertainty, and action in a world facing environmental and existential challenges (Barad, *Meeting* 353-96).

In *Waiting for Godot*, time does not progress in a linear fashion, nor does it remain entirely static. Instead, it unfolds through a state of suspended repetition – what might be called a recursive stasis. It means time in here feels stuck in repeating actions, like waiting, yet subtly changes, like the tree's new leaves. This quality of time challenges conventional, chronological understandings of temporality. Rather than presenting time as a neutral backdrop, Beckett's staging suggests that time is emergent, relational, and entangled with both human and nonhuman elements. This reading proposes that Beckett's theatrical world invites us to reconsider our temporal assumptions: our usual beliefs about time, like expecting it to move in a straight line from past to future. The play disrupts the human-centered view of agency and control, revealing instead how human existence is deeply dependent on nonhuman systems. In doing so, the play critiques modern views that treat nature as a resource to control, showing instead how humans are deeply tied to their environment, a perspective echoed by Barad's idea of interconnected existence (Barad, *Meeting* 353-96).

Beckett's stage, though minimal, is rich with meaning. Its few elements – such as the solitary tree, extended silences, and the looming presence of the void – act as more than passive scenery. These nonhuman elements can be understood as actants, a term from actor-network theory by Bruno Latour that suggests they have agency in shaping the play's world. Vladimir and Estragon's repeated acts – tying shoes, debating Godot's arrival, or saying "Nothing happens" (Act I, 26, 27) – create a looping time that feels stuck yet shifts slightly. These actions, alongside silences and the bare stage, make time feel alive, not a fixed line, showing humans as part of their environment, not above it (Barad, *Meeting* 55).

To illustrate, time can be considered in this context as ripples in water. Act II echoes Act I, but the tree grows "four or five leaves" (Act II, 37), and Vladimir and Estragon's talks shift slightly, like when they debate Godot's arrival differently compared to the first Act. Barad's idea of diffraction – where small changes in repeating patterns, like waves bending around obstacles, create new meanings – helps explain this (Barad, *Meeting* 71-96). The tree's change is not just scenery; it is a sign that time moves through connections between characters and objects, mixing hope and despair without a clear end. Barad's relational vacuum also fits here: what seems empty, like the stage's silences, is alive with potential, like tiny energy sparks in physics that can shift reality (Barad, "Troubling" 76). Godot and the play's silences act like Timothy Morton's hyperobjects – vast entities like

nuclear radiation, which lingers invisibly across time and space, shaping how characters act and feel without being fully seen, just as radiation from a bomb affects lives long after without being touched (Morton 1-12). For example, Godot's absence controls Vladimir and Estragon's waiting, and silences carry a heavy, unseen weight, guiding the play's mood. Godot's absence drives every action, and silences carry deep emotion, making time feel open and uncertain.

In this interplay of presence and absence, Lucky's fragmented and disjointed monologue embodies the disruptive energy of Beckett's void. Its refusal to offer coherence amplifies the entanglement of space, time, and language. The bare stage itself operates on multiple registers. Existentially, it dramatizes the paradox of presence through absence. Ecologically, it challenges human-centered notions of nature by placing human and nonhuman elements – like the tree, the stage, and silence – into a shared web of interdependence. On a quantum level, the pause mirrors Barad's vacuum, which is not truly empty but a lively space buzzing with potential, like tiny energy sparks (what physicists call virtual fluctuations) that appear and disappear, constantly reshaping matter and time in unpredictable ways – just as the play's silences are not dead air but moments full of tension where past regrets, present waiting, and uncertain futures mix without resolution (Barad, "Troubling" 76).

Vladimir's question, "Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?" (Act II, 58), shows time as uncertain, like Barad's quantum indeterminacy, where the future stays open with many possibilities, not locked into one outcome, much like a coin toss that hasn't landed yet (Barad, *Meeting* 247-352). The bare stage, with its repeating silences and sparse objects like the tree, if read through the lens of Barad's intra-action – where people and things, like Estragon's boots or the tree's new leaves, shape each other's meaning through their connections, not as separate pieces (Barad, *Meeting* 132-88). These interactions – such as Vladimir and Estragon's endless waiting – turn the stage's emptiness into a space buzzing with potential, which Barad calls a void full of "indeterminate yearnings," like invisible sparks of energy that keep possibilities alive (Barad, "Troubling" 77). By focusing on the tree and silences, not human control, the play challenges the modern idea that nature is just a tool to use, showing instead a world where humans and nature are deeply linked (Lepenies 590).

This play challenges the modern view that nature is a resource for humans to control, a mindset Philipp Lepenies traces to Renaissance inventions like linear perspective, which made the world seem measurable and manipulable (Lepenies 590). For example, the bare stage, with its lone tree and heavy silences, puts objects and people on equal footing, unlike the human-centered idea that

nature exists for our benefit. The tree's subtle growth of leaves (Act II, 50) shows nature's unpredictability, not something fixed or dead as Vladimir first thinks ("It must be dead," Act I, 12), while Lucky's chaotic monologue, a jumble of words like "the skull, the skull" (Act I, 33), mimics nature's resistance to tidy logic, as his incoherent speech defies categorization or control, much like how real ecosystems evade human measurement.

Beckett uses disruption to show a world where uncertainty fosters care, not control, over nature. For example, when Vladimir and Estragon try to hang themselves but the belt breaks (Act II 59), their failure opens a space for waiting, not resolution. Estragon's quip, "We are all born mad. Some remain so" (Act II, 52), reflects a chaotic yet shared existence where Vladimir, Estragon, and the stage's silences, like a quiet forest, form a fragile, living space. Laura Salisbury's "in the meanwhile" describes this slow, unresolved waiting that avoids neat endings, capturing the play's blurry mix of loss and possibility (Salisbury 16, 36). Karen Barad's intra-actions show how this "madness" keeps futures open, like a dice roll with no fixed result (Barad, *Meeting* 132-88). Anna Tsing's disturbance, where disruptions like a forest fire spark new ties, such as fungi aiding pines, extends this idea: the play's chaotic moments, like Estragon's line, act like a fire, creating a "latent commons" – a messy, shared survival space where humans and nonhumans, like silences, collaborate without a plan (Tsing 255). Unlike Barad's focus on physical interactions, Tsing's reformation of assemblages – new, fragile connections after disruption – suggests Beckett's stage is a living patchwork, not just a void, advancing a vision of theater as a space where damaged worlds can still nurture care (Tsing 161).

The absent Godot epitomizes the elusiveness of hyperobjects, "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's silence further illustrate the interference of hyperobjects with agency. Their deteriorating states reflect the entanglement of human and nonhuman beings in what Morton describes as "simply too vast to be ignored" (Morton 145). This entanglement extends to Beckett's sparse stage, where nonhuman actants such as the tree, boots, and silence disrupt anthropocentric hierarchies and demand attention to shared vulnerabilities. Beneath the surface of apparent stasis, deterioration occurs – Pozzo goes blind, Lucky becomes mute, and the characters' routines fray – revealing how iterative temporality can still accommodate gradual destruction.

Estragon and Vladimir's repetitive actions – tying their shoes, and debating Godot's arrival – may seem meaningless, but they mark time in a world where change is slow, ambiguous, and unsettling. These small routines reveal how people endure uncertainty, holding onto a kind of faith – not in resolution, but

in the act of continuing, a Kierkegaardian process of becoming:

If thinking disdains imagination, then imagination in turn disdains thinking, and the same with feeling. The task is not to elevate the one at the cost of the other; the task is equal proportions, simultaneity, and the medium in which they are united is in existing.

(Kierkegaard 292)

Beckett's work aligns with the ecological crises of the Anthropocene by rejecting dramatic narratives of sudden collapse. Instead, his aesthetics embrace what Salisbury calls "grey time" – a temporality marked by slow deterioration, where the boundaries between life and non-life blur, and decay unfolds gradually rather than catastrophically (Salisbury 22). The repeated assertion that "time has stopped" (Vladimir, Act I, 25) foregrounds waiting for itself as an action that resists closure. The absence of resolution speaks for the void's generative potential, where silence, sound, and repetition produce a dynamic interplay of presence and absence. The pauses and silences work like punctuation in this play, where these voids invite spectators, viewers, and readers for interpretive engagement (Dobkowska 7). Lucky's monologue, with its fragmented and incoherent torrent, materializes the void's disruptive energy, transforming language into an open site for multiplicity rather than coherence. This linguistic breakdown not only critiques the anthropocentric compulsion for meaning but also reflects how the past, present, and future collapse into incoherent simultaneity.

In Act I, Lucky performs a chaotic monologue that resists comprehension, highlighting the play's commitment to uncertainty over clarity. This breakdown of meaning challenges teleological storytelling and reinforces the unresolved nature of Beckett's void (Goebbels 98). In Act II, the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky shifts – Pozzo is now blind, and Lucky is mute. While this reversal does not entirely dissolve their hierarchical dynamic, it does destabilize it. Pozzo, once dominant, becomes dependent; Lucky, once voiceless through over-speech, now embodies silence. These changes suggest not the full collapse of hierarchy, but its transformation into a more ambiguous, co-dependent relation. The void thus becomes a space where roles are unsettled, and power is redistributed in unpredictable ways (Malabou 36-38). This shifting dynamic resonates with ecological thought, particularly in the Anthropocene, where dominant systems of control and extraction show signs of erosion and internal contradiction (Wood 42-43).

Lucky's chaotic speech, sparked by his hat being placed and removed (Act I, 28-30), shows thought as a messy dance between body and object, not a human-controlled act, suggesting a shared reliance. This echoes Karen Barad's void – a

space that seems empty but hums with possibilities, like a quiet room sparking new ideas, as Lucky's words disrupt the stage's silence. Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics, which sees humans, animals, and objects as connected in a web where all depend on each other, like a forest where trees, fungi, and animals thrive together, helps explain this (Braidotti 49-50). Unlike Braidotti's broad vision, Beckett's stage creates a theatrical commons, where Pozzo's failed commands (Act I) and pauses (Act II) build a fragile space of mutual need, not control. In this commons, props like the hat and silences shape the scene as much as characters, challenging human dominance and fostering care in an uncertain world.

"Nature is not just what is real, what is out there; it is culturally constructed, riddled with narrative" (Wood 33). This statement reflects eco-deconstruction's critique of nature as a fixed or self-evident truth. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tree – bare in Act I and sprouting leaves in Act II – serves as a powerful visual signifier that resists fixed meaning. Rather than standing solely for life or death, it simultaneously gestures toward both, embodying cycles of decay and renewal. In this sense, the tree becomes a symbol of indeterminacy, reflecting ecological processes that unfold beyond human perception and control.

Derrida's concept of messianic time – "a time of hope ... marked by impossibility and openness" (Wood 37) – resonates with the endless waiting at the heart of *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon's futile anticipation mirrors an Anthropocenic condition, in which human behavior is caught between foreknowledge of ecological collapse and a lingering desire for redemption. Walter Benjamin rejects the idea of history as a continuous, empty timeline and instead proposes "Jetztzeit" – a charged "now-time" capable of interrupting the flow of progress (Benjamin 197). Beckett's staging similarly suspends forward motion, holding time in a state of charged indeterminacy. The characters' anticipation of Godot becomes a placeholder for this interruption – an elusive promise that never arrives, but nonetheless structures their relation to time, responsibility, and the possibility of transformation.

Derrida's call to include nonhuman entities in a "democracy-to-come" (Wood 37) also speaks with the notion of "waiting." The Anthropocene exposes the "collapse of oppositional logic" (Wood 37), wherein actions aimed at sustaining human life simultaneously degrade ecological systems. With a similar paradox – in Pozzo's decline and Lucky's silence – entropic consequences of human domination and exploitation are brought into light. Beckett's stage becomes a site of ecological ethics, embodying Derrida's notion of "hyperbolic responsibility" – a call to embrace accountability for others, including nonhuman entities (Wood 42). This paper reads *Waiting for Godot* to rethink all these entanglements with

human and nonhuman systems in the Anthropocene. This void is fertile ground for eco-deconstructive inquiry (Wood 34-36).

Becoming, as Ilya Prigogine argues, is the condition of knowledge itself – a dialogue where the knower and the known interact, creating an irreducible difference between the past and the future (153). In Beckett’s theatrical minimalism, through moments of “becoming,” silence, repetition, and the decay of certainty reveal the constructive role of temporal disintegration. The absence of narrative finality in the play is not a deficiency but a reflection of time’s irreversibility. Beckett’s empty spaces – stark and minimal – can be understood through Prigogine’s theory of far-from-equilibrium systems, where disorder and instability are not signs of collapse but conditions for transformation. Similarly, the play’s desolate stage is not static; it holds the potential for change, however minimal or uncertain (153). The universe’s heterogeneity prevents equilibrium, making stasis a mere illusion. Energy flows from irreversible processes, and life itself arises from this asymmetry – matter’s unfolding dialogue with time (Prigogine 158). In Beckett’s fragmented worlds, objects are not mute props; rather, they enact meaning through their exposure to time and decay. The crumbling of stones, the immobility of trees and stones, the cyclical drudgery of characters – “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Act I, 28) – becomes an expression of material temporality, where entropy is not death but a form of becoming.

VLADIMIR, “Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (Pause. Vehemently.) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears!

(Act II, 51)

Gilles Deleuze’s view of time as open and unpredictable, not a straight line, fits *Waiting for Godot*, where moments like Vladimir’s plea, “Let us do something while we have the chance” (Act II, 51), break the routine of waiting, like a spark igniting new possibilities. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze’s third synthesis of time is a moment where time splits, like a river forking, freeing actions from a fixed path and letting chance shape what’s next, much like a dice roll with no set outcome (Williams 98-102). For example, Vladimir and Estragon’s repeated waiting shifts slightly each time, as when they debate leaving but stay, showing time as broken into unpredictable pieces, not a predictable loop. Deleuze’s “eternal return of difference” means these repeats create fresh meanings, not copies, as seen in Estragon’s line, “Either I forget immediately, or I never forget”

(Act II, 39), which muddles their identities over time (Williams 103). Unlike neat stories with clear endings, Beckett's bare stage and "selves are larval subjects" – characters as unfinished, shifting fragments, like caterpillars before becoming butterflies – reject fixed identities, echoing Deleuze's idea that time constantly reshapes who we are (Williams 93). This makes the play a space where time's wildness challenges human control, showing life as always open and uncertain.

Prigogine sees the world as a lively process full of unpredictable possibilities, not a fixed, certain system (4-7). In *Waiting for Godot*, this fits the way time unfolds through Vladimir and Estragon's aimless waiting, like when they debate leaving but stay put, saying, "We're waiting for Godot" (Act I, 10), showing a future that is open, not set. Prigogine's "arrow of time" means time moves forward with chance, like a river carrying surprises, not a clock ticking predictably (4). This matches the play's silences, which feel heavy with potential, as when Vladimir and Estragon fall silent, unsure of what's next. Unlike science's old view of a certain world, Prigogine's idea highlights uncertainty, showing Beckett's bare stage as a space where characters and objects, like the lone tree, create meaning together in a fragile, ever-changing present, inviting us to embrace life's unpredictability.

An attempt to fit Estragon's boots, like their perpetual waiting for Godot, mirrors a performance of activity without a linear advancement. "Mine were black. These are brown," followed by, "Well, they're a kind of gray" (Act II, 44), says Estragon, where we see the impossibility of anchoring objects in a coherent identity. Estragon's opening words, "Nothing to be done," are resistance to linear temporality and critique of time as a fixed continuum. Instead of progressing chronologically, time in the play emerges relationally, shaped by the characters' iterative interactions and rituals. Vladimir's reflective musings – "What did we do yesterday?" (Act I, 11) "It's already tomorrow." (Act II, 50) – unsettle chronological certainty, suggesting a temporal framework where past, present, and future intra-act rather than unfold sequentially (Barad *Meeting* 815). The temporal instability is reinforced by Estragon's question, "Is it not rather Sunday? Or Monday? Or Friday?" (Act I, 11). The tree, dead or dormant, resists stable classification – shrub or bush (Act I, 10), life or non-life.

Beckett's stage directions – "A country road. A tree." – make the empty stage a lively part of *Waiting for Godot*, not just a blank backdrop. Karen Barad calls this void a "field of possibilities," meaning it is buzzing with potential, like a quiet room full of unspoken ideas, ready to spark new meanings (Barad, *Meeting* 147). For example, Estragon's question, "Where are the leaves?" (Act I, 10), and Vladimir's reply, "It must be dead" (Act I, 10), highlight the tree's mix of lifelessness and potential life. Similarly, Vladimir's fidgeting with his hat – shaking and knocking it: "peers inside it, feels about inside it, knocks on the

crowns, blows into it, puts it on again” (Beckett 8, 41, 47, 60) – shows it as more than a prop; it shapes the waiting by drawing attention to his restless actions. Like the tree and silences, the hat and Estragon’s boot resist being mere objects, driving the play’s uncertain rhythm as they pull the characters into repeated routines.

About the performative and material dimensions of cognition, Pozzo directly asserts about Lucky that “he can’t think without his hat” (Act I, 27). The act of placing the hat on Lucky’s head to trigger his thinking is a dramatic strategy by Beckett that makes Lucky a machine-like being, and there is an externalization of thought. This absurdist ritual does not assume thought as an autonomous and purely human faculty. Instead, it reveals thought as contingent on material conditions. Lucky’s chaotic and fragmented monologue, beginning with an ironic invocation of a “personal God ... outside time without extension who ... loves us dearly” (Act I, 27), parodies theological and philosophical systems that attempt to rationalize an incoherent world. His speech exposes the inadequacy of such frameworks to address the chaos and entropy that define existence. The frenetic cadence of Lucky’s monologue mirrors the disorder it describes, with its references to “labors left unfinished” and “labors lost” punctuated by comically named figures such as “Puncher and Wattmann” (Act I, 27). These unfinished projects manifest humanity’s repeated failures to impose order on a resistant world, resonating with the Anthropocene’s struggle to reconcile its extractive legacies with ecological collapse. Lucky’s recursive structure – marked by refrains such as “in a word I resume” – emphasizes the futility of returning to a central logic. The monologue collapses under the weight of its absurdity, enacting the intellectual systems it critiques.

Disjointed phrases such as “in spite of the tennis” and “in the plains in the mountains by the seas” (Act I, 29) introduce fragmented images that resist narrative continuity. The repeated invocation of “the skull, the skull, the skull” (Act I, 29) underscores both the inevitability of death and the cyclical nature of humanity’s attempts to transcend it. Lucky’s chaotic references to “the air, the earth, the sea” and “abode of stones” (Act I, 29) further situate human existence within the broader ecological systems that sustain it.

“Avenged!” said Estragon, upon silencing Lucky by removing his hat. (Act I, 29). Pozzo’s response to Lucky’s collapse is: “He can walk” (Act I, 30). Beckett’s nonhuman agents seem to disrupt anthropocentric notions of temporality and suggest new ways of being in the Anthropocene. Pozzo’s fleeting recognition of this shared fragility – “I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine” – offers a momentary destabilization of power hierarchies (Act I, 21).

The ethical dimensions of waiting emerge through Vladimir and Estragon's shared persistence despite Godot's absence. Their refrain, "We'll come back tomorrow," reflects a mode of attending to uncertainty that parallels Anthropocene ethics, where survival necessitates an embrace of limitation and relational vulnerability. The play refuses to resolve the temporal ambiguities and chooses to be in this "grey time" (Salisbury 19). The circular debates – "You're sure it was here?" "He said by the tree" (Act I, 10) – are Beckett's aesthetics of nothingness and waiting as a relational and iterative act where time is an open-ended process, inviting an ethical engagement with the unknown. Lucky's "bags," are those objects which are active participants in intra-active processes. Estragon's repeated query, "Why doesn't he put down his bags?" foregrounds the entanglement of burden and agency. It reflects the Anthropocene's material complexities. Pozzo's lament, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity," – highlights a shared vulnerability that transcends individual suffering (Act I, 22). This redistribution of suffering challenges anthropocentric perspectives; the interdependence of all beings becomes the Beckettian ecological framework.

Vladimir's astonishment, "But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves" (Act II, 42), contrasts with Estragon's dismissal, "I tell you we weren't here yesterday – another of your nightmares" (Act II, 42). Here, the tree's transformation resists human-centered narratives of cause and effect. Material objects such as boots, radishes, and turnips further embody the entangled materiality of existence in *Waiting for Godot*. The paradoxical relationship between survival and constraint is everywhere such as in Estragon's interactions with the boots – abandoning them and ultimately reclaiming them, "Because they were hurting me!" (Act II, 44). Similarly, the radishes and turnips operate as Deleuzian mediators, coupling the characters' raw forces of scarcity and bodily need to the play's iterative rhythms, where creation emerges "in-between" movements rather than fixed origins (Deleuze, *Negotiations* 122-24). As in Estragon's rejection of a black radish in favor of pink ones, "I only like the pink ones!" (Act II, 44) – thereby human and nonhuman actors co-constitute meaning and agency through relational mutual shaping.

Estragon's admission, "Either I forget immediately, or I never forget" (Act II, 39), contrasts with Vladimir's repeated attempts to reconstruct their shared past, such as their consideration of hanging themselves from the tree. This tension between memory and forgetting reveals their existence as unanchored and cyclical, where temporal coherence is supplanted by performative reenactments of the present. Vladimir's frustration, "Where else do you think? Do you not recognize the place?" (Act II, 39), hints at the absence of spatial and temporal fixity, resonating with Barad's assertion that time and space are not passive backdrops but active participants in the emergence of phenomena.

The motif of “dead voices” that “make a noise like wings” (Act II, 40) speaks of the entanglement of past and present, living and dead. These spectral presences, which “talk about their lives” because “to be dead is not enough for them” (Act II, 40), evoke the persistence of memory and history as burdensome traces that shape the characters’ experience. This interplay of presence and absence mirrors the Anthropocene’s material residues, where the remnants of human activity persist as disruptive forces. Vladimir and Estragon’s dialogue about waiting – “We always find something ... to give us the impression we exist” (Act II, 44) – epitomizes the absurdity of their condition, as their actions serve only to prolong a deferred resolution.

The repetitive rhythms of the hat-swapping sequence seem like Beckett’s critique of human attempts to impose meaning on seemingly “meaningless” acts. Vladimir’s frustrated rejection of the hat signifies the collapse of this illusion, as the futility of their actions becomes inescapable. Similarly, the reenactment of Pozzo and Lucky’s dynamic, where Estragon commands Vladimir to “Curse me!” and Vladimir responds with nonsensical insults (Act II, 47), exposes power as a performative construct devoid of inherent significance. The cyclical temporality of Act II stands out as the characters’ inability to leave, encapsulated in the final stage direction, “They do not move” (Act I, 35 and Act II, 60). They appear to be anchored in an entropic loop. Vladimir’s existential reflection, “What are we doing here, that is the question” (Act II, 52), captures the paradox of their condition, where recognition of absurdity coexists with paralysis.

In Beckett’s minimalist staging, the tree oscillates between presence and absence, bareness and growth, defying the stability and upward movement traditionally associated with tree metaphors. Beckett’s tree resists association with progress or a teleological endpoint, instead embodying an iterative and non-hierarchical temporality. Beckett’s tree disrupts anthropocentric narratives of mastery over nature. It resists being a passive backdrop and becomes an active participant in the unfolding of Beckett’s world. It is a reference to a radical way of perceiving evolutionary reversals. Evolution, here, is non-linear and unpredictable, challenging traditional hierarchical narratives that privilege human-centric notions of complexity (Hejnal 93-96). Thus, Beckett’s tree enacts relationality and the unpredictability of life’s processes. Its presence foregrounds a non-anthropocentric temporality and gestures toward a radical ecological ethics that calls for new conceptual framings to engage with life’s complexity.

Each tree that falls, each flood that ravages, or each nematode that infects a pine alters the landscape, initiating sequences of coordination or collapse. These shifting patches reflect “ecosystems engineering” (Tsing 161), where the deliberate or incidental acts of organisms redesign the environment. This sense

of instability, constantly “in the middle of things” (Tsing 160), evokes Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where the barren tree, the shifting silences, and the small disturbances create fragile conditions for existence.

The human-animal relationship in Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open: Man and Animal* is a tense push-pull, where humans define themselves by constantly separating from animals while still depending on that divide. Agamben calls this separation a “caesura” – a cut that both divides and connects, like a door that is half-open, half-shut. This process, “anthropogenesis,” shapes what it means to be human not as a fixed thing, but as an ongoing effort to suppress our animal side, capturing it to create identity (Agamben 79). He draws from philosopher Martin Heidegger’s “clearing” (*Lichtung*) – an open space where existence becomes visible – but ties it to “negation” (*Nichtung*), meaning human openness relies on denying or hiding nothingness, like building a house by ignoring the empty foundation (Agamben 80). This ties into Agamben’s “anthropological machine,” a way of thinking that enforces the human-animal split, turning human life into a “biopolitical zone of exception” – a special area where animal traits are excluded yet controlled, much like a law that suspends rules in emergencies (Agamben 37-38). In *Waiting for Godot*, the tree embodies this tension: bare and lifeless in Act I, it sprouts leaves in Act II, blending inertness (animal-like stillness) with vitality (human potential for change), without resolving the divide. Agamben’s ideas fit here because they explain the tree not as passive scenery but as a symbol of humanity’s struggle – stuck in a limbo where openness (possibility) and closedness (negation) coexist, mirroring the characters’ endless waiting and blurring the line between human meaning and animal existence. This adds depth to Beckett’s play, showing how the tree’s shift challenges us to rethink human identity as something unfinished, not superior to nature.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the empty stage acts like a lively space where nothingness fuels existence, echoing Giorgio Agamben’s idea of *Lichtung* (an open space for being) and *Nichtung* (negation that shapes it), as the bare set lets characters and objects, like the tree, share equal roles (Agamben 80). This challenges human superiority, creating a stage where people and things mix freely. For example, Vladimir’s hat-fidgeting and the stage’s silences shape the scene as much as the characters, resisting human control. This connects to Jennifer Cazenave’s “radical visibility,” which demands we see marginalized beings – like Holocaust victims in films – as active, not erased, challenging dehumanizing views (Cazenave 27).

In *Waiting for Godot*, the Other – another person – appears not as something to understand but as a call to responsibility, pulling the self beyond its own desires, as Emmanuel Levinas describes (43). For Levinas, meeting someone else creates an ethical bond, not through grand truths but by recognizing their unique,

ungraspable presence, like facing a stranger who demands care without words (43). When Vladimir says, “We are waiting for Godot” (Act II, 45, 50, 51), and Estragon and Vladimir reply fifteen times throughout the play, “Let’s go,” only for both to remain, the refusal to act becomes an ethical moment of being-with, not as comprehension but as a radical inability to reduce the Other’s demand to an object of knowledge. The dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir reveals this, “There’s no lack of void” (Act II, 42). Levinas sees ethics, not systems of complete knowledge, as the heart of existence, where meaning comes from fragile connections between people and things (78). In the play, the bare stage and props, like the tree, become a space where characters and silences meet, creating meaning through their ongoing, incomplete bond, not through control or clear answers. This space of mutual reliance shows a world where care persists amid life’s fragility, aligning with Levinas’ vision of living together responsibly.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the relationship between humanity, machines, and the Earth as a constant flow of change, where fixed ideas of self and world break down and reform. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, they call this “deterritorialization” – like uprooting a plant from its soil, freeing it from old boundaries and norms, creating space for new movement – and “reterritorialization,” which is like replanting that plant in fresh ground, building new structures or identities (Deleuze and Guattari 9-10, 312-13). This back-and-forth challenges simple divides, such as between humans and objects or nature and culture, by treating everything as ongoing processes, not rigid things. Drawing from Schroeder’s analysis, this “machinic ontology” sees the Earth as a “Body without Organs” – a wild, creative zone of energy flows, rhythms, and changes, not a layered hierarchy like a pyramid (Schroeder 255; Deleuze and Guattari 161-62). Traditional ways of knowing, which split subjects (thinkers) from objects (things thought about), are rejected through “mental ecology,” a way to rethink how we live by focusing on shifting relationships that create new values and spaces (Schroeder 256; Deleuze and Guattari 23-24). Through this “machinism,” ecology breaks free from capitalist exploitation – where everything is turned into resources – and becomes a process of building connections that value chaos and creativity over control (Schroeder 256). In *Waiting for Godot*, we see a similar push-pull: the bare stage, with its tree and silences, acts like a “machinic assemblage” – a setup where elements like the characters’ endless waiting or the tree’s subtle change uproot fixed human roles (deterritorialization), then reform them into new, uncertain bonds, like Vladimir and Estragon’s dependence on each other and their surroundings (reterritorialization) (Deleuze and Guattari 88-89). This makes the play a deep reflection on how we rethink who we are in a damaged world, like the Anthropocene, where human and nonhuman elements mix in unpredictable ways.

Braidotti critiques the Vitruvian model of the human, which privileges autonomy, rationality, and mastery, asserting that posthuman thought must embrace “heteronomy and multi-faceted relationality, instead of autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity” (145). In Beckett’s minimalist world, the barren tree, the void, and even mundane objects like hats and shoes exemplify posthuman materiality. These nonhuman actants shape the rhythms of existence, aligning with Braidotti’s posthuman idea that we must move beyond divides like human/nonhuman or nature/culture, embracing instead a web of connections where everything is linked and interdependent, like a forest ecosystem where trees, soil, and animals all rely on each other to thrive (60). Beckett’s cyclical temporality is a mode of resistance. The characters’ refrain, “We’ll come back tomorrow” (Act I, 10), captures the interplay between persistence and futility. Transformative futures cannot simply be extrapolated from the present but must be “invented” through rupture and dislocation (Grosz 261).

The world, as Jean-Luc Nancy describes in *The Sense of the World*, is not a ready-made thing with built-in meaning – it is something we experience through our connections to it, like feeling the texture of a fabric rather than just seeing it from afar (54). Sense does not drop from the sky as a gift; it grows from existence itself, showing up as “spacing” (the gaps and distances between things) and “tangency” (the points where things touch or brush against each other), much like how a conversation builds from pauses and quick exchanges (56, 57). In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett brings this to life on stage, where simple elements like bodies, objects, and silences feel alive and tense. For example, Vladimir and Estragon’s repeated talks and actions rub against the emptiness around them, turning meaning into a faint echo trapped in real time, like a whisper hanging in a quiet room. But in this “nothing to be done” emptiness, sense still emerges as the basic leftover of being alive – raw and real. The pieces of existence – the tree, hat, boots – are not just background; they are active players, pushing their own weight and differences, like stones in a river altering the flow. Nancy puts it plainly: “If there is something, there are several things; otherwise, there is nothing” (58). This means life depends on differences – many separate parts making up the whole – or else nothing exists at all. So, materiality is not dead or still; it reveals things. The world, Nancy says, is “the totality of existences qua totality of signifyingness” (56) – a place where people and things mix in a constant flow, blurring lines between who thinks and what is thought about. Beckett’s simple stage resists easy explanations but still uncovers this, showing how everyday fragments create sense through their messy ties. Estragon mutters, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Act I, 23). Here, the “nothing” exposes its own weight, “Reality is the reality of the several things there are” (Nancy 58). Absence is not void; it is a spacing – a

transimmanence – through which sense arrives, echoing Gilles Deleuze’s notion of pure “immanence” as a self-contained plane of life (Deleuze, *Pure Immanence* 25-31). This sense arises through internal relations and differences, not imposed from outside, and thereby free from top-down structures.

Livability unfolds as a polyphonic assemblage, a multispecies entanglement in which each participant’s rhythms shape and are shaped by others (Tsing 158). Organisms do not exist in isolation but in a constant interplay of “coordination and history” (160), much like Beckett’s characters, whose absurd repetitions – “Let’s go. [*They do not move.*]” (Act I, 35 and Act II, 60) – embody an interdependent inertia. Sense arises not from harmonious unity but through moments of coordination and dissonance, where the “polyphony of the assemblage shifts as conditions change” (Tsing 158). Similarly, Beckett’s aesthetics have silence, interruption, and fragmented dialogue that make the audience “listen” for the rhythms of relational becoming.

The end of the world is not a cataclysm but a breaking of old regimes of signification. That is what the play does. The world no longer “has a sense”; it is “sense” (Nancy 9). Beckett enacts this by stripping existence bare. There are no grand narratives in his works, no transcendent escapes – only bodies and objects exposed to the rawness of being. Beckett presents matter – dust, stones, voices – as not merely what remains but as what creates sense through exposure, through sheer persistence in space and time. Sense is a “singular coming,” a condition of exposure where existence is its own revelation (Nancy 58). The sense of the world, then, does not lie beyond; it emerges within. It is found in Beckett’s dust, in Nancy’s fragments, in Barad’s entangled materialities. What persists is the shared relationality of being. Singular and finite, existence becomes the praxis of sense, a world where silence and presence are enough to say everything.

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Violence on Women, Violence by Women: A Study of Marvel's *Jessica Jones* as a Postfeminist Series

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Abstract

Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) subverts gender roles, portraying a significant number of women in power positions usually played by men. The show presents the protagonist Jessica as a rape survivor who is motivated to help another victim of sexual abuse. Jessica and other characters demonstrate how victims of violence, traumatized as they are, would be prone to committing further violence. Additionally, violent acts are presented as tools to avenge victims of violence. Consequently, this leads to three specific situations: women making choices for themselves, acting similar to men, and being more (hetero) sex-positive. These three criteria are indicative of postfeminist concerns and help to conduct a critical discourse analysis of *Jessica Jones*, with focus primarily on season one, as a postfeminist series.

Keywords: choice, postfeminism, rape, trauma, victim, violence

Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) "is one of the first superheroine television shows since the 70s, debuted to rave reviews from critics and the public" (Frankel 183). This Netflix web series, based on a popular Marvel character, "has been heralded by many critics for going above and beyond genre tropes to tackle complex themes of rape and addiction" (Smith). Jessica Jones, the eponymous main character, tries her best to show that everything is normal; however, her insomnia and constant flashbacks underpin a traumatic past. This includes her surviving a car crash that kills her whole family and the villain Kilgrave taking control of Jessica's mind to make her his criminal accomplice. *Jessica Jones*, season one, is a focused and extremely detailed thirteen-episode character study of Jessica Jones (a shady private investigator) who is an unusual superhero, an alcoholic, and has questionable ethics (Lao et al. 49). Other than Jessica, there is a long list of troubled characters who are subjected to Kilgrave's will. The resultant acts of violence from these relationships are, therefore, critically explored in this paper in its reading of season one of Marvel's *Jessica Jones*. This show unequivocally promises to be feminist, subverting gender roles in a more sophisticated way (MacDonald 69). However, it also portrays a significant amount of violence on women and by women. In this study, this portrayal of violence makes a



connection with the idea of equality and choice for women. Furthermore, the paper analyzes how violence guides the show to be a more (hetero)sex-positive series. Ultimately, it shows that *Jessica Jones* is a postfeminist web series where postfeminism can be “a critical lexicon for understanding contemporary culture” (Gill 10).

As a qualitative research, this paper employs critical discourse analysis and textual analysis for studying violence on women and by women in *Jessica Jones* through a postfeminist lens. Postfeminism, as defined by Sarah Banet-Weiser, is:

a different political dynamic than third wave feminism, which is positioned more overtly as a kind of feminist politics, one that extends the historical trajectory of first and second-wave feminism to better accommodate contemporary political culture and the logic of consumer citizens. (Tasker and Negra 206)

This paper contends that *Jessica Jones* is not just a feminist show as its showrunner Melissa Rosenberg has suggested, but rather a postfeminist show as it assimilates some “aspects of feminism ... into popular culture” (Tasker and Negra 4). Theoretical work from second wave feminism has mostly stemmed from Women’s Liberation which is no longer simpatico with the re-articulations of popular femininity (Genz and Brabon 45). One of the objectives of second wave feminism was to prevent rape (Gunne and Thompson 3). The current social and ideological climate indicates “a culture that normalizes rape” hence the need for another scholarly tradition (Pearson 14). Again, despite “empowerment and agency,” both being concerns of feminism and postfeminism, the former is coming up short in today’s rapid consumer culture, falling victim to commodification, and to understand the rapidly changing world’s intersections of feminism and popular culture, emergence of postfeminism is needed (Genz and Brabon 24-25). Consequently, this paper seeks a new framework like postfeminism to understand a pop-cultural artifact such as *Jessica Jones* where multiple characteristics (e.g., empowerment roles usually allocated to men, focus on white women’s identity) of a postfeminist text are exhibited.

To understand postfeminism, the classification described in Sarah Projansky’s *Watching Rape Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* has been used, which underscores a “structure for understanding the complexity of postfeminist discourses in the popular media” (Projansky 68). Projansky sorted postfeminist discourse into five interrelated categories: linear postfeminism, backlash postfeminism, equality and choice postfeminism, (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism, and “men as feminist” postfeminism (67-68). This paper employs choice and equality postfeminism, and (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism for

its analysis. Choice and equality postfeminism imply that there is no difference between man and woman, therefore women do not need feminism for the establishment of equality. And (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism “rejects an antisex” feminist ideology and focuses on a type of concept that champions “individuality and independence” (Projansky 67).

The postfeminist discourse in this research manifests through the instances of violence in *Jessica Jones*. According to Averdijk et al., “Victims of violence are likely to commit violent acts themselves” which is visible in the victims from the show (282). Equality and choice postfeminism as well as (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism have been used to prove *Jessica Jones* is a postfeminist text. The notion of equality and choice postfeminism refers to the fact that women cannot do anything about the patriarchal values or systems, so they accept the patriarchal ideologies and freely “choose” whatever role they want to play to attain gender equality. In *Jessica Jones*, the female characters make choices in accordance with their preferences that usually align with the patriarchal ethos. Again, with (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism “the sexual freedom of women is celebrated” (Warner 233). This paper argues that the titular character and women in power positions in *Jessica Jones* attain sexual freedom by behaving more like men. Justyna Włodarczyk argues that the biggest problem of postfeminism is that it has multiple meanings emphasizing on actions that reveal its flaws by neglecting class, color, and identity (3). In essence, postfeminism comes across as a retaliation against the achievements of feminism. Another serious concern is the depiction of “white, middle-class, heterosexual women’s success as markers of all women’s supposed success” (Projansky 73). Another drawback is that it positions itself as moving beyond feminism which stems from the belief that women are secure or empowered enough to not need feminist politics or supporting activism with the presumption that “women are empowered and able to freely choose” (White 8).

According to Krysten Ritter, the actor who plays Jessica Jones, it is “a very intimate story, a character-driven drama” (Miller). This series is “an extraordinary meditation on violence perpetuated by men against women, whether that is rape, stalking, harassment or abuse” (Saraiya). This paper examines characters like Jessica Jones, Patricia Walker (Trish/Patsy), Jeri Hogarth, Wendy Ross-Hogarth, Pamela (Pam), Luke Cage, Will Simpson, and Kilgrave to understand the violence inflicted on and by women. From a victim, Jessica becomes a savior. Sexual violence motivates this change in her. This portrayal of change is important because it allows the audience to see a clear connection between Jessica’s experience and the experiences of nonfictional victims. Thus, Lisa M. Cuklanz suggests that fictional depictions of sexual violence can lead to real

reform in laws regarding sex-related crimes (2). This is why critically reading shows like *Jessica Jones* can be particularly illuminating.

Television and film have a tendency to promote strong women with masculine traits, and the representation of violence is a commonplace phenomenon for both social and entertainment media. Therefore, evading representation of violence in a superhero genre would be next to impossible. Violence in such shows is usually limited to physical form but it can take an emotional turn as well. Potter defined violence as “a violation of a character’s physical or emotional well-being. It includes two key elements – intentionality and harm – at least one of which must be present” (80). Physical and psychological actions that are intended to cause harm are considered to be violence. It can include verbal threats, nonverbal behaviors, etc. (Signorielli 57). This research treats violence on women or by women as a physical or emotional action deliberately inflicted on others to cause harm.

In *Jessica Jones*, sexual violence is the core theme of the show. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual violence is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion” (qtd. in Ali and Rogers 614). Liz Kelly defines sexual violence as an unwanted act experienced by a woman that tampers with her ability to control intimate acts or contact (Walby et al. 92). The problem with this definition is that it restricts or imposes the victim tag only on women. While women are the usual victims, it is not always the case “so it is inappropriate to build this restriction to women and girls in to a definition of sexual violence” (Walby et al. 92). This paper uses the WHO definition of sexual violence while keeping in mind that men too can be victims of such crimes.

The word “trauma” refers to “a wound or external bodily injury in general” (qtd. in Luckhurst 498). However, psychological trauma has a tendency to disrupt the mental balance of a person and overwhelms them to a degree where assimilation through a mental process becomes daunting (Luckhurst 499). The current research focuses on the effects of trauma that causes unprecedented changes in *Jessica* and other characters’ psyches.

The exploration of rape culture is another key feature of *Jessica Jones*. Healicon argues that giving the definition of rape “is both complicated and unequivocal” (4). She gives a fundamental definition nonetheless: rape is “non-consensual penile penetration of the vagina, mouth, or anus,” and, furthermore, it is the lack of “the freedom and capacity to choose to have sex” (Healicon 4). This definition has been considered throughout the paper. Here the victim is unable

to make a choice because there could be the presence or threat of violence, use of drugs, physical disability, and incapacity to consent. Horeck asks about the ethics of the audience's reception of the representation of rape as she points out whether we are "bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?" (Gunne and Thompson 3). As previously mentioned, rape as a subject matter can shed light on the correlation between TV programs and social reformation.

Most of the critical works related to *Jessica Jones* accentuate sexual violence, trauma, or the show's connection with feminist ideology. The following section reviews and underpins how and why sexual or other forms of violence has been used in *Jessica Jones* – making it a postfeminist show. Jessica, the protagonist, a rape survivor trying to cope with the associated trauma, is abducted by the villain, Kilgrave, at a very young and impressionable age, and that experience especially leaves her vulnerable. Kilgrave can compel people into doing whatever he wants. The story begins with Jessica who, as a private investigator, meets a couple from Omaha, looking for their daughter, Hope Shlottman. Hope is being controlled in the same way that Jessica had been by Kilgrave and, as a result, kills her parents and is later sent to jail. Jessica sees her personal trauma reflected in Hope. She seeks justice for Hope but this rapidly transforms into a journey for revenge (Lao et al. 76). Jessica assumes responsibility for Hope because both of them have experienced sexual violence (Healicon 63). Hope's death has a devastating effect on Jessica and, initially, exonerating Hope becomes the reason for Jessica to go after Kilgrave so that he is punished by the judicial system (Frankel 188). Jessica tries to regain whatever she can of Hope's reputation. If she can salvage parts of Hope's life, then her own life can be somewhat salvaged as well.

According to Grace Randolph, in *Jessica Jones* "the fight scenes [are] not only brutal, they have a lot of physicality to them ... but they were all very clever" (00:10:41-48). In particular, there are two major instances of violence in *Jessica Jones* that are inflicted on women. These forms of violence are rape and murder attempts. We see flashbacks where Kilgrave says to Jessica, "[y]ou want to do it. You know you do" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:09:33-36). Here the flashbacks are disorienting, which shows the lack of control on Jessica's part and her attempt at trying to forget the untold horrors. Then she recites, "Main Street. Birch Street. Higgins Drive. Cobalt Lane" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:09:40-54). The repetition allows her to remember a happier, normal past. Kilgrave is not willing to take genuine consent from others and he does not understand that he has committed rape, which is evident in the following conversation between Jones and Kilgrave:

Kilgrave: ... Which part of staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the

best places, doing whatever the hell you wanted, is rape?

Jessica: The part where I didn't want to do any of it! Not only did you physically rape me, but you violated every cell in my body and every thought in my goddamn head.

...

Kilgrave: How am I supposed to know? Huh? I never know if someone is doing what they want or what I tell them to! ("AKA WWJD" 00:28:54-00:29:23)

Here, Kilgrave is playing the victim card, and is incapable of seeing himself as an abuser. According to Edwards, the mundaneness of the "control he exercises over Jones, over nearly every woman who crosses his path, is what makes him so evil, even more menacing than the typical villain" (qtd. in Frankel 184). In episode 6, "AKA You're a Winner!" Hope tells Jessica about her child: "I can feel it growing like a tumor ... Every second it's there, I get raped again and again" (00:11:52-00:12:24). In the show, Jessica and Hope are victims of mind control and rape where they lost control over their agency. Kilgrave, according to Edwards, "is every woman's worst nightmare" (qtd. in Frankel 184). His crimes include but are not limited to rape, murder, and stalking. According to David Tennant (who plays Kilgrave):

[There is] a grotesque innocence beneath Kilgrave's sadism, a distorted belief that this is true romance. It's the ultimate in entitlement: he deserves Jessica because he desires her, which means that her own desires are just obstacles. (qtd. in Murthi)

In addition, Kilgrave, Will Simpson (a police officer and Captain America-like hero character who lacks Captain America's resolve and moral values), and Luke Cage (Jessica's love interest) attempt to murder Jessica. Kilgrave willingly wants to kill whereas Simpson and Luke want to do so under Kilgrave's influence. Kilgrave clearly wants to kill Jessica as he cannot control her. He proclaims, "[m]ay be I'll get strong enough to control her again Or maybe I'll just kill her" ("AKA Smile," 00:16:52-00:17:34).

Furthermore, Officer Simpson, a genuine representation of toxic masculinity, attempts to kill Jessica in "AKA Take a Bloody Number" (00:35:12-00:39:05). He believes Jessica is letting Kilgrave live and strongly believes she had many opportunities to kill Kilgrave but she did not take them. Simpson believes he is on the right side, which is particularly problematic as it did not just stem from Kilgrave's mind control. Simpson takes a red pill that makes him strong like Jessica. The "red pill" is an "obvious reference to 'red-pillers' men's rights activists

who see themselves as proud anti-feminists interested in dominance, traditional gender roles, and the subjugation of women” (Loofbourow). It is also an homage to *The Matrix* (1999), a sci-fi film where the hero chooses to take a red pill as that is the only way to the truth.

Luke Cage is a supportive boyfriend who, unlike Simpson, does not feel the need to show off his masculine prowess. At one point in the series, he tries to kill Jessica under Kilgrave's influence (“AKA Take a Bloody Number” 00:45:25-00:51:23). This exemplifies how two unlikely victims of violence who have the means to protect themselves are utterly helpless. The scene ends with Jessica successfully defending herself by shooting Luke, where he is only badly injured.

In *Jessica Jones*, Kilgrave is the core reason women become inflictors of violence, which is manifested through murder, abortion, and suicide. Kilgrave's control on Jessica and others forces them to enforce physical violence to protect themselves. All these violent behaviors exhibit certain choices the characters make to allow them to behave more like cis-gender men – which demonstrates equality and choice postfeminism. Again, their choice and behavior also lead to a promotion of (hetero)sex positive postfeminism.

The gendered subversions in *Jessica Jones* are meant to present equality or choice, yet they are allocated only to white women. This is not unusual as representation of “liberated women” in popular culture is meant to be “a compromise between the demands of feminists and the resistance of antifeminists” (qtd. in Brown 145). For Rikke Schubart, “in *equality and choice postfeminism* everything becomes a choice by a free individual” (16). The women of their own volition are choosing to be violent.

Jessica has to kill Kilgrave and commit the ultimate form of violence as he is responsible for a lot of the deaths in the show. At the beginning, Jessica wanted to catch Kilgrave, not kill him, so that “he can take responsibility for his crime” (Frankel 188). Hope, the victim, however, is the one who lands up in jail, not the perpetrator. This is indicative of the treatment victims have to face in a social structure where male authority is prevalent (Toadvine 46). It is also a brilliant nod to the incompetency of the justice system that forces Jessica to take matters into her own hands. Hope ends up in jail for shooting her parents under Kilgrave's influence. This act of murder, followed by Hope telling Jessica to “smile,” is meant to be a message for the latter. Throughout the series Kilgrave repeatedly insisting Jessica to smile is an act of control that “conforms to gendered coding” and a “sacrifice of agency” (Lao et al. 207). Kilgrave believes Jessica is incapable of harming or killing him. This is clear in his statement to Hope:

She'll never kill me. Despite her calloused, hard-bitten, and, frankly,

poorly styled facade, despite her several problems, she still hopes that, at her core, she might just be a hero. But only if she can save you. The ultimate innocent victim. (“AKA 1,000 Cuts” 00:42:26-57)

At the end, before killing Kilgrave, Jessica tells him to “smile” as an act of taking back control. Again, she takes control by using drugs (sufentanil) to make Kilgrave’s power ineffective. By telling Kilgrave to “smile” and using a drug for control, Jessica Jones is replicating what sex offenders usually do in cinema or real life. The series in this case is in a controversial state, where behaving like her abuser becomes Jessica’s only way out. She “transcends the tradition of narrating women’s experiences of sexual violence” and, at the end, is able to confront and overcome her abuser by killing him (Lao et al. 168-169). Specifically, by becoming similar to Kilgrave, Jessica finds salvation.

Hope, the ultimate victim, after becoming pregnant with Kilgrave’s child, hires an inmate while she is at prison to beat her up so that she loses the baby. However, “[o]ne beating was more likely to kill [her] than cause a miscarriage” (“AKA You’re a Winner!” 00:12:29-32). In summation, Hope has the choice to live, yet she is risking death for an abortion and she does not want a reminder of the violation that had been inflicted on her. This choice reflects her agency that she holds on to through violence.

Again, in episode 11 “AKA I’ve Got the Blues,” a fight breaks out between Officer Simpson and Jessica where Trish Walker (Jessica’s best friend and adoptive sister) chooses to take Simpson’s “red pill” resulting in Trish’s saving Jessica (00:35:00-00:40:00). Trish, in matching Simpson’s violent strength which almost kills her, is deliberately choosing a hyper-masculine trait – of becoming violent – for survival and avoidance of victimhood (Lao et al. 105).

Jessica portrays the subversion of “archetypal Hollywood scenes by flipping gender roles” (Abad-Santos 12). In the series, Jessica is not just stronger than the men, she is equally, if not more, brutal. In “AKA Crush Syndrome,” the bar fight scene where she hurls a man twice her size across a bar with one hand (00:35:20-00:36:23) establishes the idea that female-led superhero dramas work just like male-led ones. In *Jessica Jones*, female agency is seen, yet Jessica or the other characters committing violence or establishing assertive sexual choices is reminiscent of the familiar male characters. It can, thus, be seen as a reclamation or reestablishment of a type of role usually allocated for male superheroes.

Jessica attempts to find some form of normalcy when she engages in a relationship with Luke but she ends up behaving like a stalker while investigating him. Jessica engages in casual forms of sex and behavior that might not attract a romantic partner (Toadvine 43). As a result of this relationship, Kilgrave is able to command

Luke to kill Jessica whose autonomy over her sexual partner selection also leads to violence. Again, there is Jeri Hogarth, an attorney, who, in the original comic, was a man. Despite the gender swap, the archetypal powerful male character who cheats on his wife with their younger and good-looking secretary is reaffirmed. In the episode titled “AKA 1,000 Cuts,” there is a fight scene between Jeri and her ex-wife Wendy Ross-Hogarth. Grace Randolph calls it an “emotional and powerful fight scene” (00:09:05-09). Kilgrave fulfills Wendy’s wish of avenging Jeri’s betrayal (having an affair and divorcing her because of it). He encourages Wendy: “You want death by a thousand cuts. Do it!” Wendy immediately cuts Hogarth with a scalpel and counts (“AKA 1,000 Cuts,” 00:10:44-52). The count escalates to “twenty-nine” when Pam (Jeri’s affair partner and hyper-feminine secretary) enters and hits Wendy with a vase (“AKA 1,000 Cuts” 00:15:22-23). Subsequently, Wendy bleeds to death. Pam here is forced to commit a violent act as she tries to protect Jeri, the love of her life.

Jeri’s promiscuous behavior leads to divorce, which leads to her being cut by her wife, Wendy. Jessica’s sexual relationship with Luke leads to her almost getting killed by him. The characters have sexual autonomy yet it always leads to violence. Women are in control when their choice is exercised, but in most cases Kilgrave is the catalyst for that incitement of violence. Therefore the autonomy of choice becomes questionable as women are inciting violence for themselves and other women, yet their reasoning for violence can be traced back to a man. Women are seen as forces with agency when their action is masculine in nature. The characters’ questionable choices is what makes *Jessica Jones* a postfeminist show where strong independent female characters become strong when they behave like men. Ultimately it becomes a postfeminist show where female agency or self-expression of individuals is turning into fodder for entertainment. Postfeminism finds a way to make women the product of consumerism by exploiting the idea of individual self-expressions (Nguyen 164). Jessica is capable of inspiring all and becoming a hero for all, yet the focus on season one stays on white women making empowering choices, where men are forcing them into making those choices – ultimately leading to some form of violence.

The show’s female characters are subjected to rape, sexual violence, attempted murder, and additional physical trauma that push them to choose violence, which is manifested through physical harm, murder, abortion, and suicide. A traumatized Jessica inflicts pain as well as kills others. Hope chooses a violent abortion. She also chooses a violent form of death: suicide by stabbing herself with a piece of glass. Pam chooses to kill, for Jeri. Trish chooses the violence-inducing pill to save Jessica. Acts of violence motivate the characters to make a choice to act on behalf of other women as well and not just for themselves.

With the use of violence, the women become more like men, reflecting the notions of equality postfeminism, which also has the tendency to lead towards a more (hetero)sex-positive representation. By locating both violence committed on women and by women, Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (season one) proves to be an example of a postfeminist text as the idea of choice, equality, and sex-positive discourse become prevalent in the show through the portrayal of such violence where it has been argued that this very violence molds the female characters of *Jessica Jones*.

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Nature and Human Interaction in Selected Novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

Indo-Anglian literature has often been criticized for neglecting environmental concerns as writers were predominantly focused on addressing issues related to post-independence reforms, progress, and modernization. However, R.K. Narayan emerges as a notable exception, providing a strong foundation for later Indian authors. Despite his primary emphasis on social themes, Narayan's works subtly reflect ecological awareness. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, he critiques taxidermy, an act condemned by ecocritics for its cruelty towards animals. The novel aligns with ecocritical objectives by fostering compassion for vulnerable animals that coexist with humans and are deserving of empathy and goodwill. Similarly, *A Tiger for Malgudi* employs an anthropomorphic approach to explore the human-animal relationship. By portraying a tiger with human-like qualities, Narayan challenges the perceived division between humans and the nonhuman world. He advocates for shedding primitive attitudes such as power, greed, and dominance, urging humanity to adopt a more empathetic and respectful perspective towards their environment. Another notable work, *The Guide*, examines themes of personal transformation and societal change, while also addressing the intricate connections between nature, its response to human actions, and cultural responsibilities toward the environment. Collectively, these novels celebrate the harmony that has historically united humans, nature, and culture in a timeless bond.

Keywords: ecocriticism, environmental awareness, cultural responsibility, social commentary, Indian literature

Indo-Anglian fiction from the pre-1980s era is often criticized for its limited focus on environmental concerns. This period marked a transitional phase for India, as the nation sought to redefine itself from its traditional roots to embrace modernity. Influenced by Western concepts of holistic development, post-

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independence India prioritized social, cultural, political, and religious challenges over ecological issues. Consequently, many writers of this time concentrated on these pressing matters rather than environmental themes. However, such criticism does not entirely hold true. Several novels and short stories from this period subtly highlight the interdependence between humanity and the natural world, suggesting that a closer look at pre-1980s literature from an ecocritical perspective can be rewarding. In contrast, post-1980s writers, influenced by postcolonial interpretations of ecocriticism, offered more explicit engagement with environmental issues, paving the way for richer analysis in this domain. Among the pioneers of Indo-Anglian literature, R.K. Narayan stands out for his significant contributions. His works not only enriched the literary landscape of his time but also laid a firm foundation for future generations. Known for his keen observations of everyday life, Narayan infused his narratives with humor and satire, making his stories relatable and engaging for readers of Anglo-Indian fiction.

To contextualize his writings within an ecocritical framework, it is essential to first explore the fundamental concepts of ecocriticism. As Glotfelty says, while ecocriticism primarily focuses on nature, not all literary works about nature qualify as ecocritical. For a piece of writing to be considered ecocritical, it must demonstrate a profound and meaningful connection between humans and the nonhuman world. Ecocritical literature does more than represent or interpret the natural environment; it also advocates for its preservation and protection from harm (Glotfelty). The evolution of ecocriticism, often described in terms of waves, is not strictly linear or time-bound but is characterized by overlapping ideas. The shift from the first wave to the second marks a transition in how nature is culturally perceived by humans. While the earlier waves focused on depictions of wilderness, landscapes, and flora and fauna, subsequent developments expanded to include urban environments and address “eco-injustices” inflicted on marginalized communities within society. Interestingly, the novels and short stories of Narayan reflect Glotfelty’s ecocritical principles, albeit coincidentally. This alignment is noteworthy because Narayan’s major works had already gained prominence before Glotfelty introduced ecocriticism as a formal literary theory in the 1990s. For instance, Narayan’s most celebrated works, including *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, *The Guide*, *Swami and Friends*, and his short story collections, were published between the 1930s and 1990s, predating the formal establishment of ecocriticism through Glotfelty’s seminal contributions.

R.K. Narayan’s writings inherently convey the core values of ecocriticism that match up the spirit of an artist and that of an ecologist. It is well known that

literature dives deep into the crisis of the time, and with special attention to the perspective of ecocriticism, it is noted in the twenty-first-century context that environmental unsettlement has become one of the most prominent disturbances facing dislocation of humanity. In the latter half of the twentieth century, environmental derangement reached such a catastrophic height that its severity was best realized by the continuous warning of scientists about the colossal obliteration of species. Narayan started writing during this time promptly reacting to this global crisis in his major writings. His narratives explore the intricate relationships between humans and the nonhuman world, the interdependence of culture and nature, nature's nurturing role in human life, and humanity's responsibility to protect and preserve the environment. His works consistently exhibit an ecocentric perspective, underscoring the importance of harmony between humans and their natural surroundings. To supplement his ideas concerned with ecocriticism, it can be mentioned that: "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, xviii).

The Man-Eater of Malgudi operates as an allegorical tale, utilizing extended metaphor to impart moral teachings. The tale depicts the struggle between Nataraj, a tranquil printer, and Vasu, a malevolent entity akin to Shakespeare's Iago, who epitomizes the legendary figure *Bhasmasura*, representing hubris and self-sabotage eventually precipitating his demise (Shinde 13-15). The novel examines the tension between traditional values and contemporary individuality through the narrative, via Nataraj and Vasu. The novel underscores the profound Indian veneration for nature and cautions that environmental degradation eventually jeopardizes mankind figuratively illustrating the conflict between preservation and destruction, and highlighting the necessity for harmony with nature (Yashodha 69-71). The novel exposes the significance of myths in Indian literature taking tales from the *Puranas*, *Panchatantra* and *Jatakas*. The *Bhasmasura* myth and the *deva-asura* war represent the communal unconscious and are used as instruments to bridge myth with reality (Baruah 451-456). In fact, the *Ravana* and *Bhasmasura* myths used in the novel portray Vasu as a recurrent embodiment of evil in human society, especially in urbanizing spaces like Malgudi. The use of myth in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* juxtaposes ancient legends with modern life emphasizing the eternal conflict between good and evil, thereby highlighting the deeper significance of seemingly mundane life experiences (Syal 55154-55157).

Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* portrays the Hindu concepts of dharma and karma which underscores the individual's endeavor to overcome ego-driven ignorance. Human arrogance, depicted through the lens of Raja-the tiger,

determines humanity as self-centered and unaware of its position within the cosmic hierarchy. The novel, thus, emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and alignment with nature as a means to transcend the cycle of existence (Atkinson, "Tradition" 8-13). Narayan deals with fundamental human problems especially man's weaknesses and also his shortcomings not only to portray a bleak, irredeemable picture intentionally but also to affirm the individual's effort to overcome his mistaken realization of himself and of the world as well for his spiritual growth (Atkinson, "R.K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* 237-241). The themes of *A Tiger for Malgudi* reflect Upanishadic beliefs, specifically of karma and reincarnation, as seen in the Sanyasi's teachings to the tiger about the consequences of past actions. The study of the novel highlights its structure, the author's narrative style, technical mastery, humor and the significance of time in shaping events (Muthusamy and Sindhu 1-9). *A Tiger for Malgudi*, a satirical bildungsroman, interweaves allegorical Hindu philosophy with whimsical metafiction, prompting readers to reconsider narrative, textuality, and self-identity. Narayan, in fact, examines, reimagines, and satirizes human stupidity via Raja's voyage while providing a profound reflection on samsara and transformation (Dupras 186-210). The tale of *A Tiger for Malgudi* illustrates the themes of non-violence, enlightenment, and the cyclical dynamics of power and servitude via Raja's journey, from a wild cub to a circus slave and subsequently a pupil of the Sadhu. Narayan eventually champions compassion and harmony as the authentic avenues to a meaningful existence (Sudhalakshmi 131-132).

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, in the fashion of a contemporary retelling of a Panchatantra tale, delves into the themes of self-deception and sincerity. The clear narrative style and personal experiences of the writer significantly influence the novel's central theme of enforced sainthood depicting Raju's evolution from a guide to an inadvertent spiritual leader (Barman 65-74). *The Guide* analyzes issues of identity, self-discovery, and enlightenment emphasizing how Raju's changing positions influence his path. The novel puts insights on human nature and the societal intricacies of personal development (Akter and Talukder 141-145). *The Guide* represents interaction of dualities, beliefs, and betrayals emphasizing the themes of spiritual enlightenment and self-realization, and also by criticizing society conventions, Narayan's employment of humor and the equilibrium between appearance and truth (Biswas 1-6). Issues of tradition, modernization and personal growth are dealt with in Raju's transformation from tour guide to spiritual leader, focusing on identity, redemption, and societal influences. Thus *The Guide* underscores the conflict between traditional and contemporary norms, providing insights into Narayan's critique of Indian culture and ethical quandaries (Yadav and Srivastava 365-368). *The Guide* again examines Raju's duality as a self-serving individualist and a redeemer, highlighting

the novel's principal theme of spiritual fulfillment as well as depicting suffering and self-discovery as crucial for achieving true identity and genuine selfhood (Mondal 74-85). *The Guide* also analyzes the marginalization of women within a patriarchal society and underscores the transformative potential of economic independence through Rosie who exercises her agency through her education, talent, and dance, notwithstanding societal disdain and patriarchal limitations, ultimately becoming an empowered individual who challenges conventional expectations (Promila 349-354). The novel reflects the societal changes in postcolonial India emphasizing the identity crisis experienced by the characters, caught between indigenous traditions and Western influences. The quintessential postcolonial dilemma in *The Guide* has been exposed through the dialogues on cultural adaptation and self-identity (Singla 1-25). *The Guide*, finally, explores the contrasting representations of Rosie, a hybrid modern woman, and Raju's mother, the traditional figure, within the discourse of nationalism reinforcing the tension between tradition and modernity. Rosie's characterization as a corrupting influence, in fact, reflects racial and gendered biases, ultimately reinforcing nationalist ideologies (Silva 1-6).

The background study shows that research on R.K. Narayan's selected novels has been done partially and in fragments, creating an important window to explore his works from a new angle. This paper, therefore, explores R.K. Narayan's selected novels from a human and nature interactional perspective that adds value to existing research. This qualitative study focuses on textual analysis of Narayan's selected novels, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and *The Guide*, through an ecocritical lens. The primary method is close reading, identifying themes related to nature, animals, and human-environment interactions, with an emphasis on ecological ethics, anthropocentrism, and environmental stewardship. The research utilizes an ecocritical framework propagated by Cheryll Glotfelty, William Rueckert and Greg Garrard drawing on key concepts such as the rejection of dualistic thinking and the ethical treatment of nature. Additionally, a comparative analysis with other Indian authors and global ecocritical narratives highlights Narayan's unique contribution to eco-conscious literature. Secondary sources, including ecocritical theory and literary criticism, support the interpretation of Narayan's works, while the study concludes by synthesizing findings to demonstrate how his fiction subtly critiques societal attitudes toward nature and advocates for a more harmonious relationship with the environment.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961) is regarded as one of R.K. Narayan's most accomplished and widely read novels, shedding light on the practice of taxidermy, a brutal act that has consistently faced strong criticism from ecocritics. Within the

framework of ecocriticism, the Straussian concept of dualism, which positions humanity as superior to nature, is strongly rejected. This school of thought seeks to challenge anthropocentric attitudes and foster empathy toward nonhuman beings. Narayan's novel aligns with this aim by encouraging compassion for the vulnerable and trusting animals that coexist with humanity and deserve benevolent care. In fact, ecocriticism, as a study of human-nature interaction, puts emphasis on the study ecology and literature. The basic law of ecology shows that everything is linked with everything else and by applying this law it is possible to bring ecology and criticism together in a greater and expanded reality. Without acknowledging and acting upon this fact, it is quite impossible to address the probable environmental dangers through literary texts. So, it has been a bounden duty for the literary critics and artists to integrate ecological aspects with literature to teach the readers the equilibrium state in the physical environment. Otherwise, literature will lose the applicability and hence the void between literature and reality will be increased ceaselessly. For this reason, William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" suggests the mingling of and relationship between literature and ecology. Rueckert emphasizes on the incorporation of environmental issues to teaching, writing, and criticizing literature. Mentioning this as power, Glotfelty says:

A poem is a stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow Poems are verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination. (108)

In the narrative, Ramasamy, a forestry officer, boasts of having killed eighteen elephants and sixty tigers, claiming these acts were necessary to protect humans from the dangers posed by these wild animals. This justification, rooted in the belief that human life is inherently more valuable than that of other creatures, reflects an anthropocentric worldview. Such an attitude, which prioritizes human supremacy and dominance over nature, is strongly criticized within ecocriticism. Glotfelty in this regard says:

all the oceans of our home are slowly being contaminated by all the pollutants disposed of in modern communities – even what we try to send up in smoke – then we will soon lose the environment in which we write and teach. (112)

Contrary to this view, ecocriticism stands in favor of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world, rejecting actions like Ramasamy's that perpetuate human dominance over other species. Rueckert opines that ecology

does have greater coalition to science than literature and for this reason there is a gap between literature and ecology, poetry and science. Glotfelty exposes the view of Rueckert regarding this two and considers them as “that old pair of antagonists” (107) and he advocates for the demolition of this antagonism.

Another significant character in the novel, Vasu, represents cruelty and disruption. An outsider and a taxidermist, his presence brings chaos to the life of Nataraj, the protagonist. Vasu’s unethical practice of taxidermy not only tarnishes Nataraj’s hard-earned reputation but also negatively impacts his Printing Press, which serves as his primary livelihood. Through Vasu’s actions, Narayan critiques the exploitation of nature and its detrimental impact on both individuals and society. Through the character of Vasu, R.K. Narayan critiques the modern human tendency to exploit the animal world for personal profit. While progress, whether on an individual or collective scale, is generally desirable, an ecocritic emphasizes the toll such development often takes on the nonhuman world. By embodying greed and disregard for ethical values in the character of Vasu, Narayan conveys a powerful message that contemporary society frequently prioritizes material gain over moral principles, with environmental exploitation serving as the primary vehicle for so-called development. This unchecked materialism, a recurring subject of ecocritical interrogation, underscores humanity’s failure to establish sustainable alternatives that do not come at a significant ecological cost. Vasu’s character exemplifies this exploitation vividly. He chillingly calculates the monetary value of a dead elephant, stating:

Has it occurred to you how much more an elephant is worth dead? You don’t have to feed it in the first place. I can make ten thousand out of the parts of this elephant—the tusks, if my calculation is right, must weigh forty pounds that is eight hundred rupees. I have already an order for the legs, mounted as umbrella stands, and each hair on its tail can be sold for twelve annas for rings and bangles; most women fancy them and it is not for us to question their taste. (Narayan, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* 132-133)

Vasu fills his rented room at Nataraj’s printing press with the remnants of dead animals, prompting Nataraj to lament: “Stag-heaves, tiger-skins and petrified feathers were going to surround me forever and ever” (Narayan 58). This killing of the animals, from the viewpoint of ecocriticism, highlights and challenges the destruction of the natural environment. Rooted in the principle of reciprocity, this theory asserts that the environment nurtures humanity and, in return, demands care and respect. Narayan integrates this principle into *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, contrasting Vasu’s anthropocentric actions with the resistance of characters like Nataraj, Shastri, and Rangi. Even the forestry officer voices concern

about the disappearing wildlife stating: “A lot of game has been vanishing from our reserves and even tigers disappear from the blocks” (Narayan 78).

A Tiger for Malgudi (1983) stands out for its anthropomorphic portrayal, which adds a unique dimension to Narayan’s ecocritical narrative. For ecocritics, the act of humanizing a nonhuman character –common in fables – is a progressive step toward dissolving the long-standing division between the human and nonhuman realms. This novel underscores the urgent need for humanity to shed its primal egos of power, dominance, and greed, and adopt a more empathetic view of the environment. Raja, the tiger protagonist who exhibits human-like emotions, thoughts, and actions, delivers this profound message at a time when wildlife continues to suffer from human exploitation through poaching, hunting, and poisoning, often in pursuit of commercial gains. The story begins with Raja’s tragic loss of his mate and cubs to hunters, an event that triggers his instinctive response of killing humans and domestic animals near the Memphi forest. Narayan here writes about the brutality of Raja who “just raised a fore paw, taking care to retract my claws, and knocked the thing out of his hand. The blow caught captain under his chin, and tore off his head” (114). Such actions align with Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest and ecologists’ views on the balance of ecosystems. From an ecocritical perspective, Raja’s retaliation can be seen not as cruelty but as a natural reaction to human encroachment on his territory. History repeatedly illustrates that when humanity disrupts the natural order, the repercussions inevitably follow. The violent clash between humans and Raja is a poignant metaphor for the unintended consequences of human interference in nature.

However, the novel delves deeper into critical issues like poaching, a recurring theme in ecocriticism. Raja, labeled as a “man-eater,” is eventually captured by the “Captain,” a circus ringmaster who exploits him for profit. Raja is subjected to harsh treatment, starved, trained, and made to perform for audiences. Later, a filmmaker seeks to feature him in a movie, further commodifying the tiger. By narrating Raja’s capture, exploitation, and commodification, Narayan vividly illustrates human beings’ tendency to exploit nature for personal gain. The novel challenges readers to reflect on a world where greed is rationalized as necessity and ethical boundaries are crossed in the name of profit. This cornucopian view of gaining profit by exploiting other organisms in the ecosystem leads the exploiters towards capitalistic gain. This type of notion is the outcome of the naked clutch of capitalism and colonialism as well. Capitalism, colonialism, and neocolonialism always demand virgin land to dominate its people and the supply of unlimited raw materials to produce capital. To tackle this brute reality of capitalism, colonialism, and neocolonialism, ecocritics place emphasis on politicized reading practice as Greg Garrard states:

The need not only to “think globally” but to think about the globe involves a politicized reading practice more akin to social ecology, postcolonialism and cultural studies than to deep ecology. Such a practice considers constructions of the Earth provided by economics, politics and biology, as well as literature, TV and film. (183)

So, Garrard’s statement makes it evident that the relationship between literature and the physical environment should be critically analyzed from political, economic, biological, historical, and philosophical perspectives. In *A Tiger for Malgudi*, the contrast between human greed and environmental ethics emerges as a central conflict in the narrative. The poachers, the Captain, and the filmmaker disregard moral and ethical considerations, not out of need but driven by avarice. Narayan leaves readers grappling with this tension: humans prioritize survival and advancement but also speak of environmental ethics that call for compassion and stewardship toward the rapidly dwindling natural world. *A Tiger for Malgudi* compels us to examine this moral rift and seek harmony between human development and ecological preservation. The significance of unity, togetherness, love and compassion for each other as well as fellow feeling is highly focused here through the speech of the Jackal:

If you cannot discover a reason to be enemies, why don’t you consider being friends? How grand you could make it if you joined forces – you could become supreme in his jungle and the next and the next; no one will ever try to stand up to you expect a crazy tusker whom you could toss about between you two ... if you combined you could make all the jungle shake. (20)

The Jackal’s message is clear: enmity leads everyone to destruction because enmity among human and nonhuman entities creates severe violence only leading to anarchy, bloodshed, and death.

The episode involving Raja in the town of Malgudi vividly exposes the troubling reality of anthropocentrism. During his exploration of Malgudi, Raja finds refuge in the office of the school headmaster, where he becomes a victim of human panic and prejudice. Trapped and frightened, Raja is far more distressed than the excited crowd, which delights in labeling him as a “beast” or a brute. Human beings’ deep-seated bias against the nonhuman is starkly revealed when a schoolteacher suggests, “Now that this brute is safely locked up, we must decide” (Narayan 117). Some members of the terrified crowd, driven by curiosity, gather to scrutinize Raja, seeking validation for their perceived superiority by contrasting themselves as “civilized” beings against the “wild” tiger. The hunter Alphonse is summoned to kill Raja, underscoring the anthropocentric ideology that justifies

dominance over nonhuman life. Through this sequence, R.K. Narayan critiques the dualistic worldview reinforced by hierarchical structures of power. In this view, Raja, as a tiger and therefore a beast, is regarded as nonhuman, violent, and inferior, while the human crowd, by contrast, considers itself humane, peaceful, and unquestionably superior. Narayan challenges this anthropocentric bias by introducing Raja's reflective moments with the Master, who leads him to safety. When asked by the Master about his perception of god, Raja envisions: "God must be an enormous tiger, spanning the earth and the sky, with a tail capable of encircling the globe, claws that could hook on the clouds and teeth that could grind the mountain, and possessing, of course, immeasurable strength to match" (Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi* 158).

This poignant moment allows Raja to express a conception of divinity that mirrors his own identity, dismantling the hierarchical boundaries imposed by human superiority. The scene is a profound critique of humanity's disregard for the nonhuman world, offering a compelling ecocritical perspective on the need for coexistence and mutual respect within the natural order. Humans are often granted the authority to eliminate the beast, regardless of its innocence or gentleness. This dichotomy between human and nonhuman life obstructs the possibility of establishing true coexistence between the human and natural worlds. The environmental crises human beings face today demand harmony and balance, as only such an approach can offer hope for a secure future. So, to raise consciousness is the most important task of ecocriticism (Glotfelty xxiv) and the ethical perspective on the environment should stand in favor of all the species, not only of humans (Glotfelty 15-26). The same scenario is observed in the novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* when Raja's life hung in the balance of Alphonse's decision, it was Master, a saintly figure, who intervened. Master not only rejected the derogatory view expressed by the school teacher but also defended the tiger, saying, "He is no brute No more than any of us" (Narayan 136). By leading Raja safely away from the crowd's outrage, the Master exemplified the possibility of harmony between man and beast, as the two grew closer, moving together through the world.

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) is a timeless bestseller, celebrated for both its narrative excellence and its deep exploration of human transformation within a changing socio-economic context. One of the novel's most profound elements is its portrayal of nature, particularly the ways in which nature interacts with and impacts humanity. Viewed through an ecological lens, the fictional town of Malgudi becomes a bioregion that sustains both human and nonhuman life. Narayan consistently references the river Sarayu, the Memphi forest, and other natural elements to highlight the interdependence of all life forms, with humans

relying on their environment for survival. Regarding Malgudi, R.S. Singh in his book *Indian Novel in English* writes:

Malgudi is not only the microcosm of India in its multifarious mood but it is also the real hero of his novels, Swami, Chandran, Ramani, Krishnan, Sampath, Sriram, Raju, Vasu, and Mali – all these characters are typically Malgudian, therefore, Indian, despite their angularities and oddities. (127)

Nature in *The Guide*, indeed, teaches vital life lessons: stoicism, resilience, and adaptability. The protagonist, Raju, is shaped by his early years in close connection with nature. While his mother was occupied with household chores and his father with the family shop, Raju often spent hours under the shade of a tamarind tree, interacting with birds and monkeys. This connection to nature becomes a formative aspect of his character. Narayan describes Raju's childhood moments in vivid detail in *The Guide*, illustrating his harmonious relationship with the natural world:

With that I was off to the shade of a tamarind tree across the road. It was an ancient spreading tree, dense with leaves, amidst which monkeys and birds lived, bred and chattered incessantly, feeding on the tender leaves and fruits. Pigs and piglets came from somewhere and nosed about the ground, thick with fallen leaves, and I played there all day. (13)

In these early years, Raju finds solace and companionship in nature, which becomes integral to his development and understanding of life. Raju's return to his adaptive nature, long suppressed during his period of aimless wandering, becomes evident as he sits on the granite slab by the riverbank near Mangal, Velan's village. His acceptance of his new role, initially as a man of wisdom and later as a Swami revered by the villagers, reflects his ability to reconnect with the natural world around him. There is no clear boundary between the living and non-living elements in this environment. As the novelist describes:

He started the count from above a fringe of Palmyra trees on his left hand side ... he suddenly realized that if he looked deeper, a new cluster of stars came into view He felt exhausted. He stretched himself on the stone slab and fell asleep under the open sky. (17)

The introduction of drought in *The Guide* serves as a pivotal thematic device, driving the plot forward and contributing to Raju's character development. However, it also adds a deeper layer to the novel's ecocritical discourse. Drought, as a natural phenomenon, cannot be entirely blamed on nature's wrath. Modern humanity's utilitarian approach over the centuries has played a significant role

in the ecological imbalances leading to disasters such as famine, drought, and the extinction of species. Human actions, including the reckless use of harmful technologies, chemical pollution, deforestation, overuse of fertilizers, and thoughtless construction, have disrupted ecosystems. This theme aligns with modern ecocritical concerns, and while the novel touches on this issue in a small way, it nonetheless highlights its importance. Amidst the drought that affects Mangal and surrounding areas, the villagers, who seek Raju's wisdom, find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on his words. Their minds are preoccupied with the devastating consequences of the lack of rain. Instead of focusing on his discourse, they crowd around him, expressing their anxieties:

People listened to discourses and philosophy with only half interest. They sat around, expressing their fears and hopes. "Is it true, Swami, that the movements of aeroplanes disturb the clouds and so the rains don't fall? Too many aeroplanes in the sky." "Is it true, Swami, that the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds?" (Narayan, *The Guide* 92)

The villagers' fear that aircraft flights may contribute to the drought is not merely a fictional element introduced by Narayan but reflects a real concern of the time. In the forties and fifties, during the height of the Second World War and the Cold War, the widespread use of aircraft and the fear surrounding atomic bombings likely heightened such anxieties. Moreover, large-scale disasters such as drought have a profound effect on biodiversity, leading to the untimely death of both plant and animal life. Wild animals, such as crocodiles, along with domesticated creatures like cattle and sheep, endure the hardships caused by the drought. The villagers, deeply concerned about the death of these animals, often discuss it among themselves. The third-person narrator presents the situation vividly: "Cattle were unable to yield milk; they lacked the energy to drag the plough through the furrows; flocks of sheep were beginning to look scurvy and piebald, with their pelvic bones sticking out" (Narayan, *The Guide* 93). The villagers' concern for the suffering of animals hints at the possibility of a harmonious coexistence, which ecocritics advocate for as an ideal state. According to their views, mutual care and respect for all living beings could offer hope in addressing environmental disorders.

The concept of "delocalization," introduced by the anthropological school of ecocriticism, acknowledges the impact of globalization, driven by human mobility, tourism, economic changes, and the development of transportation and communication. One result of this is the alteration of indigenous practices due to the influence of migrants or the blending of these practices to form new ones. The arrival of railways in Malgudi, emblematic of Western culture, ushers

in significant socio-economic changes. Tourism, previously unknown, begins to thrive, and businesses like hotels and guided tours spring up. Raju, once a simple shopkeeper, grows wealthier as a tourist guide, while Gaffur sees new opportunities in his rickety vehicle. However, this progress comes at a cost. Large portions of land are sacrificed for the necessary infrastructure, causing the destruction of local biodiversity. The development of progress and the degradation of the environment go hand in hand, as the former pushes ahead while the latter suffers. Narayan captures this tension in the following lines:

One fine day, beyond the tamarind tree, the station building was ready. The steel tracks gleamed in the sun; the signal posts stood with their red and green stripes and their colourful lamps; and our world was neatly divided into this side of the railway station and that side. (*The Guide* 37)

Exclusive economic classes emerge in Malgudi, making a living by catering to tourists' desires or working in various capacities at the railway station. Raju's financial success and his relationship with Marco and Rosie allow him to become "Sanskritized." The term "Sanskritized" comes from sociologist M. N. Srinivas's idea of "Sanskritization." It means the way lower or middle class groups try to raise their social status. They do this by following the customs, values, and lifestyle of higher castes (Srinivas 6). In the novel, Raju goes through this kind of change. His link with Marco's learning and Rosie's refined art shapes him. He starts to copy their tastes and manners. He also learns new social behaviors linked to higher prestige. His rise is not only about money. It is also about culture. The railway system gives him new chances. With these, Raju steps into a more respected identity in society. The changes in Malgudi are largely attributed to the introduction of the railway system. Krishna Sen aptly captures this transformation when he observes:

The main signifier of the alien culture in the novel is, of course, the railway. In the novel, the railway, with its connotation of mobility, is the marker of a new social economy that subverts the fragile equilibrium signified in the co-presence of the missionary and pyol schools. (112)

For Marco, Rosie, and others who see the Memphi forest as a charming wilderness ready to captivate those in search of beauty, the forest holds aesthetic appeal. However, people like Raju and Gaffur view the forest differently, adding a utilitarian value to it. They see nature as a resource to exploit for financial gain. This colonial perspective – of man as master over nature, using it for his benefit while nature is subjected to exploitation – has long posed a threat to the environment's well-being. Although the Memphi forest is physically untouched, the actions of the guide and the taxi driver reflect an attitude of indifference

to its preservation. This dilemma underlines the paradox of tourism; while it boosts the economy, improves infrastructure, and fosters cultural exchange, it simultaneously exacerbates the damage to the environment. Tourism, in Malgudi, is facilitated by the railway, which connects the town to the rest of India. The Memphi Hills become a focal point for tourists, where Rosie admires the scenery, Marco is fascinated by the ancient cave paintings at Peak House, and Raju and Gaffur see it merely as an opportunity to earn money. The novel reflects how human needs shape the value of nature, with natural surroundings being altered for human use. As Narayan describes the scene:

The Peak House was perched on the topmost cliff on Memphi Hills – the road ended with the house; there was a glass wall covering the north veranda, through which you could view the horizon a hundred miles away. Below us the jungle stretched away down to the valley, and on a clear day you might also see the Sarayu sparkling in the sun and pursuing its own course far away. This was like heaven to those who loved wild surroundings and to watch the game, which prowled outside the glass wall all night. (75)

In addressing concerns about Indo-Anglian fiction's insensitivity to environmental issues, Narayan's novels, therefore, provide a counterpoint. Man and culture cannot thrive in isolation from nature, and similarly, a writer cannot ignore the world around him. The novels of Narayan celebrate the theme of harmony that has historically bound man, nature, and culture. Furthermore, the era during which he wrote these works had already experienced the damaging effects of industrialization, which placed immense pressure on the environment to sustain unchecked economic growth. Human greed and the pursuit of fulfillment through environmental destruction are, thus, central themes in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and *The Guide*, which can be seen as a bioregion, with its flora and fauna intricately woven into the fabric of the town's life.

R.K. Narayan's novels, especially *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and *The Guide*, explore the complex relationship between humans and nature. In his stories, nature is not just a background but an active force that influences human life and behavior. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, the elephant, Kumar, represents the wild and sometimes destructive power of nature. The story shows that it is human greed and arrogance, embodied by Vasu, that upset the natural balance, leading to conflict and tragedy. The battle between Vasu and the elephant symbolizes humanity's desire to control nature and nature's refusal to be dominated. In contrast, *A Tiger for Malgudi* presents a more harmonious view. The tiger, Raja, symbolizes primal instincts, yet through his interaction with the sage, he changes and learns to coexist peacefully with humans. The sage's

empathy, patience, and non-violent approach offer a model for understanding and respecting nature. Similarly, *The Guide* highlights how the natural world shapes human destiny. Raju's transformation from a tourist guide to a spiritual guide is closely connected to the river and the drought-stricken land. His ultimate sacrifice to bring rain to the village reflects a deep spiritual communion with nature, showing that human life and well-being are intertwined with the environment.

Overall, Narayan's novels critique the human-centered worldview and stress the importance of living in harmony with nature. From the warning against human arrogance in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, to the vision of coexistence in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and the spiritual connection in *The Guide*, his works urge readers to consider the moral, ecological, and spiritual consequences of their actions. They encourage respect, empathy, and responsibility toward the natural world. Narayan's stories provide rich material for ecocritical study and remind readers that human destiny depends on their relationship with the environment. Future research could explore the Malgudi landscape as a character and compare Narayan's treatment of nature with other postcolonial Indian writers. An ecocritical approach can reveal the environmental awareness embedded in his work and highlight the timeless message that harmony with nature is essential for personal, societal, and ecological well-being.

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Language and Applied Linguistics

Individual Differences and Adaptive Strategies in Language Learning Across Diverse Linguistic and Sociocultural Transitions

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Abstract

Second language acquisition is influenced by learners' individual differences, such as motivation, aptitude, and learning strategies, which condition how they cope with new linguistic and sociocultural environments. Migrant learners moving from one linguistic context to another experience multifaceted academic, social, and cultural struggles, yet research has given restricted attention to the extent to which such transitions interact with personal attributes, creating a lacuna in insight into adaptation strategies and outcomes. This research explores three research questions: how students perceive language learning across sociocultural contexts, what strategies facilitate adjustment to new linguistic environments, and how individual differences shape academic transitions. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was used, pairing a survey of 120 students who moved across linguistic and cultural contexts with narrative interviews of five purposively selected participants embodying diverse linguistic backgrounds. Quantitative findings show that origin language, destination language, and length of time abroad are significant predictors of adaptation outcomes, explaining 29% of the variance in academic performance, with lower adaptation evidenced among Arabic-speaking students in linguistically distant contexts and higher achievement supported in German-speaking contexts. Narrative results demonstrate self-regulated learning, social scaffolding, and authentic contextual integration as facilitative strategies for adaptation. Interpreted through the Noticing Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory,

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Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivational Theory, the findings offer actionable implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and policy while inviting longitudinal research on the dynamic interplay of individual differences and sociocultural transitions.

Keywords: individual differences, language learning strategies, sociocultural adaptation, migrant students, second language acquisition

Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has traditionally focused on the dramatic influence of individual differences (IDs) on the learning process. IDs encompass a relatively broad scope of characteristics, from age and gender to motivation, aptitude, and learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2006). These variables heavily influence how an individual undertakes the process of language acquisition since every learner presents unique characteristics, notions, and modes of engaging in the learning environment (Ellis, 2004; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012). Indeed, as proposed by Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990), intake occurs only when the learners' awareness of the language input emerges. Intake is then mediated accordingly through cognitive mechanisms like noticing and attention preceding SLA. Moreover, motivation and aptitude are defined as the indispensable factors that will make possible the successful acquisition of a language (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Over the years, SLA research has evolved to explore the dynamic interaction between IDs and language acquisition processes. As Tseng and Gao (2021) emphasize, constructs such as motivation and learning strategies are context-dependent in that they are dynamic and modulated by learners' unique sociocultural backgrounds. More recent research has also investigated how factors such as age, gender, and aptitude impact levels of language proficiency and learners' engagement with the language learning process (Tanaka, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Zhang and Zhang (2024) have expounded various profiles of SRL strategies, noting the need for differentiated instruction in light of the differences in learners' needs.

However, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has yet to fully respond to the experiences of those who migrate to new linguistic environments for educational purposes. The students face complex socio-cultural, academic, and linguistic challenges that can have enormous impacts on their language acquisition process (Yawen, 2023). A new context will, for example, upset traditional linguistic practices and expose learners to changing norms of communication, along with changes in educational expectations. Chadian students in Malaysia have the double challenge of adjusting to a new academic culture while working to master a second or even a third language. Similarly,

Kashmiri and Nigerian students studying in Dhaka have to learn how to operate in a linguistically diverse urban environment. In contrast, native Bangladeshi students have to cope with city-based linguistic norms as well as institutional practices that differ from those in their areas of origin (Roshid & Le Ha, 2025).

The above changes not only test the learners' linguistic flexibility but also their ability to use functional coping strategies. Empirical research shows that learners who use context-specific strategies – such as seeking social support or using technology to practice the language – tend to achieve better outcomes (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). However, the effectiveness of these strategies greatly depends on how learners' individual differences interact with the sociocultural contexts in which they find themselves. It is stressed by Hoang (2021) that the interaction of intrinsic elements, such as motivation and aptitude, with extrinsic factors, including cultural and linguistic contexts, is necessary for developing SLA (Roshid & Le Ha, 2025).

This is important for the development of both theoretical advancement and practical understanding of SLA. The study fills a significant gap in the literature by focusing on people who undergo international and intranational language transitions. The learners' narratives offer insightful knowledge about the complex ways in which identity dynamics shape their language learning experiences and their adaptation strategy management (Zheng et al., 2023). In addition, their narratives have important implications for language teaching. Tanaka (2024) claimed that not only culturally responsive but also context-sensitive pedagogical approaches can help create supportive learning environments for students as they navigate diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. Thus, this study examines how students overcome challenges in these transitions, thereby offering findings that are of practical use to educators and policymakers.

The current research draws on a survey of 120 students who moved to a new linguistic and cultural destination from their place of origin and the stories of five participants: a Chadian student who completed his higher education in Malaysia, a Kashmiri student studying for an MBBS degree in Dhaka, a Nigerian researcher pursuing further studies in Dhaka, and two indigenous students from Bangladesh who moved to the capital city for educational purposes. The stories of these respondents relate to their experiences, the strategies they use for adaptation, and identities that influence language acquisition. To discuss these issues, this research tries to answer the following questions:

- How do students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds experience learning a foreign language?
- What strategies help students adapt to new linguistic situations?

- To what degree do IDs impact students' academic journey during these particular transitions?

Theoretical framework

The present research is based on the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 2012), which posits that for language input to be processed and internalized, learners must become consciously aware of it. Such a theoretical perspective allows researchers to build an explanation of how people make sense of their experiences relevant to language acquisition. Sociocultural Theory, as posited by Vygotsky (1978), identifies the significance of social and cultural contexts in facilitating learning. This factor takes on great importance when considering a learner's adjustment to new linguistic and cultural environments. Self-Regulated Learning and Motivational Theories, as proposed by Zimmerman (2002) and Dörnyei (2006), investigate how learners regulate their learning processes through goal setting, progress monitoring, and motivational maintenance in the event of setbacks. Indeed, these theoretical perspectives align with the study's focus, which centers on understanding how learners' backgrounds shape their perceptions, the strategies they employ to cope with new environments, and how individual characteristics influence their second language acquisition. Collectively, these frameworks offer a comprehensive perspective for examining the diverse experiences of learners.

Methodology

Research design

This research employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, as presented by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). The investigation starts with a quantitative survey of 120 participants, followed by an in-depth narrative inquiry with five selected participants. This research examines individual variation and adaptive strategies in language learning amidst varied sociocultural transitions.

The survey is used to identify general trends in learners' strategies, motivations, and points of difficulty, thereby developing a comprehensive understanding of the research setting. The narrative phase of the study, framed by Connelly and Clandinin's (2012) model of narrative inquiry, offers in-depth, nuanced explanations of how learners perceive and negotiate sociocultural transitions. Greenhalgh and Hurwitz's (1998) narrative research informs the study's focus on personal experience and situated factors, while Carless and Douglas (2017) provide important insights into how shifts in identity impact language learning processes.

This two-phase design combines the extensive generalizability of survey data with the narrative richness of analysis, thereby transcending Squire's (2008)

concerns about the reach of narrative research without compromising analytic loss. The small yet strategically chosen narrative sample satisfies Holloway and Freshwater's (2009) criteria for qualitative research, ensuring intensive exploration of lived experiences.

By bringing together these methods, the study provides a comprehensive account of language learning as both a sociocultural phenomenon and an individual cognitive process. The design triangulates both overall trends from the survey and detailed personal experiences through narratives, providing multiple understandings of how learners adapt to linguistic and cultural transitions.

Sample and data collection

The respondents in the current study were selected to represent a broad range of experience, including individuals whose home languages are quite distinct from the language environment in which they now conduct their studies. A total of 120 randomly selected respondents were surveyed, and 5 participants were chosen purposively, each representing a different cultural and linguistic background. The study used simple random sampling. Accordingly, participants were selected from a large, international consortium of universities. The number of universities was 19. A digital random number generator was used to choose potential respondents from a pooled registry of eligible students, who were then contacted via email. Academic adaptation, social integration, and psychological adjustment were measured using a 12-item Likert-scale survey (1-5). The survey data was collected through a Google Form. Similarly, the narratives were collected through emails. Participants were provided with guidelines to write their narratives. The length of each narrative was approximately 400 words and the participants were given the following pseudonyms: Ritu Porna, Ruma, Adoum, Charles, and Muskan. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the demographic profile of the participants selected for the narratives.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants (5 Narratives)

| Narratives | Age | First Language | New Environment Language(s) |
|------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Ritu Porna | 22 | Chakma | Bangla & English |
| Ruma | 24 | Tripura | Bangla & English |
| Adoum | 30 | Arabic & French | English & Malay |
| Charles | 30 | Hausa | Bangla & English |
| Muskan | 22 | Kashmiri | Bangla & English |

Table 2 summarizes a study of 120 international students, predominantly male (80%). The sample's male predominance (80%) reflects the study's sampling frame, which comprises international students – a globally male-

dominated demographic. Random sampling accurately captured this profile, confirming methodological rigor over bias. This ensures internal validity for this subpopulation but limits generalizability to the broader, more gender-balanced international student body. Most students originated from India (35 Hindi, 10 Tamil, 5 Gujarati speakers), Nigeria (10 Hausa, 5 Igbo), Bangladesh (15 Bengali), the Republic of Chad (15 Arabic, 5 French), and Somalia (20 Arabic). The primary destinations were English-speaking countries (UK, 42%; US, 21%), with others traveling to Bangladesh (13%), Germany (17%), or Sweden (8%). About one-third had spent 2 years abroad (33%), while smaller groups had spent 1 year (21%), 3 years (25%), 4 years (13%), or 5 years (8%). Key patterns show: 1) Strong representation from South Asia and Africa, 2) English as the dominant destination language (63%), and 3) Most students in early transition stages (75% with ≤ 3 years abroad). The sample provides diverse linguistic/cultural transitions for analysis.

Table 2. Demographic profile of surveyed respondents (N=120)

| Category | Subcategory | Count | Percentage | |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Gender | Male | 96 | 80.0% | |
| | Female | 24 | 20.0% | |
| Origin | Country | Language | Count | Percentage |
| | India (IN) | Hindi (Hi) | 35 | 29.2% |
| | India (IN) | Tamil (Ta) | 10 | 8.3% |
| | India (IN) | Gujarati (Gu) | 5 | 4.2% |
| | Nigeria (NG) | Hausa (Ha) | 10 | 8.3% |
| | Nigeria (NG) | Igbo (Ig) | 5 | 4.2% |
| | Bangladesh (BD) | Bengali (Ba) | 15 | 12.5% |
| | Chad (CD) | Arabic (Ar) | 15 | 12.5% |
| | Chad (CD) | French (Fr) | 5 | 4.2% |
| | Somalia (SO) | Arabic (Ar) | 20 | 16.7% |
| Destination | Country | Language | | |
| | UK (En) | English (En) | 50 | 41.7% |
| | US (En) | English (En) | 25 | 20.8% |
| | Bangladesh (BD) | Bengali (Ba) | 15 | 12.5% |
| | Germany (DE) | German (De) | 20 | 16.7% |
| | Sweden (SE) | Swedish (Sv) | 6 | 5% |
| | Malaysia | Malay | 4 | 3.33% |

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------|----|-------|
| Years Abroad | 1 Year | 25 | 20.8% |
| | 2 Years | 40 | 33.3% |
| | 3 Years | 30 | 25.0% |
| | 4 Years | 15 | 12.5% |
| | 5 Years | 10 | 8.3% |

Data analysis

Quantitative data underwent MANOVA and regression analysis based on the survey conducted with 120 respondents with diverse first language and target language backgrounds. Survey reliability was confirmed ($\alpha=0.82$). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis of the obtained narratives was adopted to identify and interpret patterns and themes repeated in the participants' language learning experiences. Narratives were thoroughly reviewed, and initial codes were generated; those codes were further categorized into broader themes. Later, the data were interpreted following the generated themes in the discussion section. To increase the validity and credibility of the research findings, this study used member checking, whereby participants were allowed to verify the accuracy of the interpretations, as well as peer debriefing, during which the analysis was shared with colleagues to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of participant quotations brings rich contextual information to the developing themes, showing the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural factors in second language acquisition. The qualitative and quantitative results were merged through a joint data display (Table 5) to enable side-by-side comparison of patterns, trends, and stories. In this way, it was possible to have an in-depth interpretation of how adaptive strategies and individual differences interact throughout linguistic and sociocultural transitions. This deep analytical approach afforded a deeper level of understanding about how individual differences and sociocultural contexts shape learners' experiences and their strategies for adaptation. The findings are presented in the next section.

Findings

The findings derived from the survey with 120 respondents and five narratives have been presented here sequentially. Data relevant to answering research questions have been presented here.

Quantitative findings

The data reveal (Table 3) significant differences in how international students adapt academically. Some excel, like the Tamil-speaking Indian student in Sweden (ID 17, score 55/60). In contrast, others face significant challenges, such as the Arabic-speaking Somali student in Bangladesh (ID 5, score 24/60),

who experienced extreme homesickness. Students who study in their native language, like Bengali speakers in Bangladesh, show the lowest stress levels. In contrast, those adjusting to new languages, such as Arabic speakers in Germany, often struggle with confidence despite strong institutional support. Over time, adaptation improves, as seen with the Somali student in Sweden (ID 55) whose score rose from 25 to 52. However, social integration remains difficult for many, particularly Hindi speakers in English-speaking countries. These findings emphasize the importance of language support and mental health services for students making difficult transitions.

Table 3. Representative cases illustrating variation in academic adaptation patterns among international students (N = 120)

| ID | Origin Country | Origin Language | Destination Language | Key Adaptation Characteristics | Total Score (Range: 12-60) | Notable Patterns |
|-----|----------------|--------------------|----------------------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 5 | Somalia | Arabic | Bengali | Elevated homesickness (Q3 = 5) | 24 | High distress, poor adaptation |
| 17 | India | Tamil | Swedish | Consistently high performance (Q1-Q12 \geq 4) | 55 | Exceptional academic integration |
| 43 | Chad | Arabic | German | Strong institutional support (Q7 = 4) | 38 | Support-confidence disparity |
| 78 | Nigeria | Hausa | Bengali | Balanced adaptation (items \approx 3-4) | 45 | Typical adjustment trajectory |
| 112 | Bangladesh | Bengali (Regional) | Bengali (Standard) | Minimal stress (Q3 = 1, Q4 = 2) | 53 | Native-language advantage |
| 29 | India | Hindi/Kashmiri | English | Academic strength (Q1 = 4, Q5 = 5) | 42 | Social adaptation difficulties |
| 64 | Chad | French | German | Rapid adaptation (Q12 = 5 at Y1) | 48 | Early acculturation |

| ID | Origin Country | Origin Language | Destination Language | Key Adaptation Characteristics | Total Score (Range: 12-60) | Notable Patterns |
|-----|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 93 | Nigeria | Igbo | English | Moderate but variable performance | 37 | Inconsistent adaptation |
| 120 | India | Hindi | English | Average across domains (items ≈ 3) | 36 | Baseline adjustment pattern |
| 55 | Somalia | Arabic | Swedish | Marked improvement (Y1 = 25 \rightarrow Y5 = 52) | 52 | Longitudinal growth |

The study reveals (Table 4) substantial evidence that both where students come from and where they study significantly impact their academic experience. The origin country shows slightly stronger effects (15% variance explained) than the destination country (12%). The combination of origin and destination matters most – specific country pairs create unique challenges or advantages (14% extra variance). These effects are statistically solid (all p-values <0.001). In practical terms, this means a student from Chad in Germany will have different struggles than one from India in the UK, beyond just their traits. The medium effect sizes (0.12-0.15) suggest these location factors are meaningful but not overwhelming – other personal factors still play significant roles. Universities should pay special attention to high-risk country combinations while recognizing each student’s unique journey.

Table 4. Country-of-origin and destination effects on international students’ academic outcomes

| Effect | Pillai’s Trace | F-value | p-value | Sig | η^2 (Effect Size) |
|---|----------------|---------|---------|-----|------------------------|
| Origin Country (IN/NG/BD/CD/SO) | 0.41 | 4.82 | <0.001 | *** | 0.15 |
| Destination Country (UK/US/BD/DE/SE) | 0.33 | 3.91 | 0.001 | ** | 0.12 |
| Origin \times Destination Interaction | 0.38 | 4.25 | <0.001 | *** | 0.14 |

The regression analysis reveals (Table 5) three key predictors of international students’ academic adaptation. Students with Arabic as their original language face consistent challenges, showing significantly lower scores across all measures ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$). In contrast, studying in German-speaking destinations

provides the most potent positive effect ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), suggesting these institutions offer particularly supportive environments. Time spent abroad also helps, with each additional year contributing modest but meaningful improvement ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .012$). Together, these factors explain 29% of the variance in academic outcomes ($R^2 = 0.29$), indicating they capture essential – but not exhaustive – influences on student experiences. The results reveal how language transitions create both barriers (Arabic-native students struggling) and advantages (German destinations excelling), while emphasizing the cumulative benefit of more extended study periods. These findings suggest targeted support for Arabic-speaking students and further investigation of German universities' effective practices could enhance global student success.

Table 5. Regression analysis of language background and study duration on academic outcomes

| Predictor | Avg β (All Items) | p-value | Effect Size (R^2) |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| OriginLang: Arabic | -0.22 | 0.003 | 0.29 |
| DestLang: German | 0.35 | <0.001 | |
| Years Abroad | 0.18 | 0.012 | |

Qualitative findings

This section presents the five narratives sent by the participants. For clarity, the narratives were partially edited, and the edited words and phrases are indicated by parenthesis. As earlier stated, pseudonyms have been used for the narratives.

Narrative by Ritu Porna

I am Ritu Porna. I belong to the Chakma community that [lives] in the green hills of Bandarban, a region in Bangladesh. As a child, Chakma was the first language I learned, and the stories I heard, as well as every phrase I uttered, were filled with the colorful traditions of my culture. Later, when I went to school outside my village, I found fluency in Bangla to be an essential skill without which I would not be able to enter mainstream society. I still remember the first day in a classroom with Bangla being the primary language; it was very intimidating, yet I was also determined. The first few days were tough. The rapid-fire Bangla conversation among my peers was like a storm, and I struggled to keep up with my teachers and my classmates during conversations. Not to mention, my Chakma accent would sometimes lead me to speak words [differently], and I happened to be an easy target for mockery. My peers found considerable amusement in my mispronunciations, and their laughter continues to resonate in my thoughts, exacerbating my already diminished self-esteem. The peculiar pronunciation of certain phonemes in both Bangla and English intensified my anxieties. I felt trapped between wanting to communicate and the fear that came with every mistake.

Despite these challenges, the determination to overcome the sense of humiliation was there. I started a more intense training program, closely observing the pronunciation of each word by my colleagues and imitating their phonetic expression until I gained the ability to reproduce the sounds accurately. My tutors noticed my commitment, and with their guidance, I did full language practice, including reading aloud, keeping daily journals, and even watching Bangla movies to improve my pronunciation and intonation. So, when I decided to pursue advanced studies at a local university, I realized the importance of learning English. Joining the course in the English language was, therefore, a watershed in my life. While I felt excitement, I was also greeted with much trepidation as I embarked on the extraordinary task of learning a second language. Then, of course, there was English, a different kind of challenge: its vocabulary was a problem, and the pronunciation always seemed intimidating, especially when it came to sounds that in Chakma did not exist. However, with regular practice, I started gaining [an] understanding of not only the language itself but the accompanying culture as well.

Writing short stories was helpful for me; it was a way to weave my thoughts and experiences without the fear of judgment. With each word that I wrote, I felt my confidence grow. I was going to transform obstacles into opportunities and thus persist through laughter, finding solace in lines written. Now, I take pride in being able to speak several languages. I have embraced my Chakma roots, navigated my way through Bangla, and [tackled] the complexities of English. My journey has not been easy; the laughter and teasing once stung, but they no longer have power over me. Instead, they serve as reminders of how far I have come.

Narrative by Ruma

My name is Ruma, and I am proud to be [a] Tripura girl. Presently, I am [studying at] the English Language and Literature department at a private university in Dhaka. Coming from a multi-cultural background, I grew up surrounded by an assortment of languages. My first language was Tripura, spoken at home with family, but soon after starting school, I realized the gravity of mastering Bangla and English. Going into university life, I found myself caught up in the energetic environment of fluid communication across both languages. I felt excited and apprehensive, especially since my pronunciation often caused others to laugh. Certain phonetic sounds [that] I just could not master, specifically those in the English language, reverberated within me and echoed back in the form of self-doubt. I remember how it felt when they laughed at me for saying thought and saying it more like *thot*. It stung, and it made me question whether I belonged here. Determined to overcome these challenges, I looked

to my peers for assistance. In addition to enrolling in English courses, I also [initiated] conversations with friends who spoke in Chakma and Garo—the other two languages that I picked up along the way. Family gatherings presented an opportunity to learn Garo, taught by my sister-in-law, while my schoolmates often shared their knowledge of Chakma with me. Each conversation was a milestone that strengthened my language abilities and my confidence. As I honed the skill, I began to appreciate the benefits of being multilingual. The ability allowed me to communicate with people from different cultures, exchanging cultures through language. The mocking is still very [alive] in my memory, but it no longer defines me. I now celebrate my unique linguistic journey as a source of resilience and pride. Currently, I desire to inspire people in my community to appreciate their linguistic heritage and stories because every spoken word opens avenues for authentic relationships.

Narrative by Adoum

My name is Adoum, from the Republic of Chad, and Arabic is my first language. When I was 18 years old, I went to Malaysia for further studies; this turned out to be quite a life-changing experience. Getting [off] the plane, I was struck by the diversity of bright colors and loud noises. And then the biggest challenge of them all: there was a language barrier. Before coming to Malaysia, I did not know English at all. When I first came here, I found out that most people speak English and Malay. Though I could understand basic phrases in English from school studies, learning the alphabet and pronunciation seemed very scary. The first day of classes intensified my fears. As my teacher introduced the letters and their sounds, I felt lost. Moreover, I, feeling embarrassed and overwhelmed, wrestled with those foreign sounds that seemed to slip my understanding. There were so many instances of miscommunication in my efforts to communicate. My vocabulary was limited, resulting in awkward situations as I tried to befriend my colleagues. I still remember the instance when I wanted to ask for directions to the library, but ended up saying something different. The laughter that followed was piercing, and I felt so ignorant. I wondered if I would ever be able to belong. Determined to overcome these barriers, I actively sought help. I joined Toastmasters Malaysia, where I found a very supportive environment for practicing my public speaking skills. I approached friends after class who were native speakers of Malay to teach me the basics of how to use phrases and communication skills.

During my free time, I watched movies with English subtitles and checked the meaning of every word to learn new vocabulary. Gradually, over the months, the initial awkwardness slowly dissipated. I have found solace in the confluence of Arabic, English, and Malay in forging friends whose ties are substantially

deepened by the spirit of cultural understanding. Indeed, the language barrier has greatly diminished, and I now view my past ignorance as a starting point for betterment rather than a hindrance. Now, I am very proud to be a student in Malaysia, as I have become fluent in English and gained conversational ability in Malay.

Narrative by Charles

I am Charles, and I came to Bangladesh from Nigeria to study Information and Communication Technology. While my classes were primarily taught in English, many of my professors would often switch to Bengali, sometimes quite abruptly. As a result, I found myself in class situations where I would be nodding in agreement while struggling to understand much of the discussion. With a resolute determination to overcome this challenge, I realized that I had to immerse myself in the language completely. My roommates became my first teachers. Initially, I found it challenging to keep up with the rapid pace of their conversations, which were filled with colloquialisms and local dialects. Phrases such as *kemon acho?* (How are you?) and *bideshi* (foreigner) made us somewhat closer, though I would often pronounce them wrong, starting with *kimo achho*, a mistake that brought friendly laughter.

As I kept listening, the sounds gradually became familiar. I developed the habit of always carrying a small notebook with me, where I would jot down new words and phrases I heard from them. I learned how to say *dhonnobad* (thanks) and *bhalo* (good), both of which proved very useful while expressing gratitude in everyday situations. When I made mistakes with the pronunciation, for instance, interchanging “shanti” (peace) for “shakti” (energy), my conversational partners were patient and helpful, even chuckling at some of my mistakes. I practiced speaking Bengali throughout our mealtimes or as we wandered through the city. My classmates encouraged me, turning our everyday conversations into impromptu learning sessions.

I also sought help outside my household. I sat in local cafes to absorb the language written on various signboards and menus. I downloaded language learning apps and set aside time each evening to practice vocabulary and grammar. Watching Bengali movies with subtitles became another fun way to develop my language skills, introducing me to phrases such as *bhalobashi* (I love you) and *ki kotha bolchho?* (What are you saying?). As months went by, I found my confidence level rising sharply. I could understand most of what was being taught in the class, and having simple conversations with my classmates became more natural and intuitive. The nervousness that had enveloped me began to lift, giving way to excitement. Every conversation was a step forward into deeper integration with my new surroundings; every lecture made more and more sense.

Narrative by Muskan

My name is Muskan, and I am from Kashmir, India. I speak Kashmiri at home. Moving to Dhaka to study medicine was quite an experience. The hardest thing was learning Bengali. Friends like Rania, Farhan, and Saad helped, but somehow, I could not cope with the language. The teaching was all in English, but the teachers very often used Bengali terminology, like *rogi*, meaning patient, and *rog*, meaning disease. I felt lost trying to decipher these words during lectures. Determined to improve, I roped in Rania to practice with me the everyday phrases. I would very often stumble over them, especially with *kemon aso* (How are you?).

I knew that my Bengali pronunciation would not be perfect; still, I took the mistakes as part and parcel of my learning process. The experience of getting around Dhaka had its own unique set of challenges. Simple tasks, like ordering food, became linguistic tests. I had learned the sentence *ami ekta biryani nibo* to say I wanted one biryani; I also often interchanged *maachh* for fish and *mota* for fat, which caused much merriment on more than one occasion. I started a book of new Bengali words that I learned, and watching regional films helped to understand the meaning behind phrases like *tumi kemon?* which means how are you, and *bhalobashi tomay*, which means I love you. The primary challenge arose when I encountered patients communicating in dialects that were distinct from the standard Bengali I was learning. Their regional variations frequently posed difficulties for me in terms of comprehension; however, such experiences compelled me to adjust and acquire knowledge more dynamically. Moreover, as each week turned into a month, a change came over me. No longer just a shy Kashmiri girl, I had begun to develop into a fledgling medical student, equally at ease maneuvering through the busy Dhaka streets as with the intricate interactions with patients. I have learned Bengali through deliberate effort and everyday experiences.

Table 6. Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings

| Research Question | Quantitative Findings | Qualitative Findings |
|--|--|--|
| <p>How do students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds experience learning a foreign language?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tamil-speaking students in Sweden scored 55/60; Arabic-speaking Somali students in Bangladesh scored 24/60. - Bengali-speaking students in Bangladesh experienced minimal stress and stable performance. - Origin language ($\beta = -0.22$), destination language ($\beta = 0.35$), and years abroad ($\beta = 0.18/\text{year}$) predicted adaptation. - Linguistic distance and institutional context explained 29% of the variance in academic outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students reported initial anxiety, fear of judgment, and social marginalization. - Ritu Porna and Ruma experienced mockery for pronunciation errors. - Adom reported cognitive overload in Malay and English classrooms. - Muskan and Charles improved confidence through journaling, peer interaction, and multimedia engagement. - Learners leveraging prior linguistic repertoires adapted faster. |
| <p>What strategies help students adapt to new linguistic situations?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students in German-speaking destinations achieved higher adaptation scores ($\beta = 0.35, p < .001$). - Each additional year abroad improved outcomes ($\beta = 0.18, p = .012$). - Arabic-speaking students scored lower ($\beta = -0.22, p = .003$). - Longitudinal improvement observed in persistent learners, e.g., a Somali student from 25 to 52 over five years. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritu Porna used journaling, story writing, and media immersion (self-regulated learning, noticing). - Ruma engaged peers and family for practice (social scaffolding). - Adom combined Toastmasters and subtitled films (formal + informal learning). - Charles and Muskan used contextualized everyday practice to reinforce vocabulary and phrases. - Combining self-directed, socially mediated, and immersion strategies improved adaptation and confidence. |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>To what degree do individual differences impact students' academic journey during these transitions?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Origin language and destination country together explained 29% of variance ($R^2 = 0.29$). - Arabic-speaking students scored lower ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$). - Students in German-speaking contexts scored higher ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$). - Resilience and persistence are associated with improved outcomes, e.g., Somali students' scores increased from 25 to 52. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritu Porna showed intrinsic motivation and persistence through self-regulated practice. - Ruma reframed negative social feedback as learning opportunities (adaptive coping). - Adoum demonstrated cognitive flexibility, navigating multiple languages. - Charles and Muskan used autonomy and context-sensitive strategies. - Learners with high resilience, motivation, and adaptive strategies achieved stronger academic and social integration despite initial linguistic challenges. |
|---|--|---|

Discussion

In this section, the main findings from both quantitative and qualitative data are integrated to present an overall picture of students' experiences. The findings are interpreted using the Noticing Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivational Theory. Developing patterns, contradictions, and relationships to prior research are critically analyzed. This section also addresses implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and educational policy more generally.

Experiences across linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds

The findings suggest that foreign language learning experiences of students are deeply influenced by their linguistic backgrounds, sociocultural environments, and educational contexts in which they learn. Quantitative analysis demonstrated significant differences in adaptation trajectories. For instance, Tamil-speaking students in Sweden consistently reported high performance (ID 17, score 55/60), whereas Arabic-speaking Somali students in Bangladesh reported high levels of stress and homesickness (ID 5, score 24/60). Students who retained continuity with their home language, like Bengali speakers in Bangladesh, reported reduced levels of stress and stable academic performance, focusing the protective role of linguistic familiarity. Furthermore, regression analyses showed that the origin language ($\beta = -0.22$ for Arabic speakers), the destination language ($\beta = 0.35$ for

German-speaking contexts), and the number of years spent abroad ($\beta = 0.18/\text{year}$) were significant predictors of adaptation, cumulatively explaining 29% of the variance in academic performance. These patterns confirm that both linguistic distance and institutional environment significantly influence the experiences of learners, supporting previous research emphasizing context-specific challenges in second language acquisition (Hoang, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

Qualitative narratives offer more profound insight into the mechanisms behind these patterns. Students reported early anxiety, fear of judgment, and social exclusion. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) and Ruma (Narrative-2) explained “severe apprehension in Bangla and English classrooms,” including “ridicule for pronunciation mistakes,” which resonates with the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 2012): learners must attend consciously to language forms to teach them, and social feedback can either promote or dampen this process. Likewise, Adoum (Narrative-3) highlighted early “cognitive overload in Malay and English,” in line with Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which stresses the indispensable role of social interaction and scaffolding for learning. Narrative-4 and Narrative-5 demonstrate that immersion and structured practice – such as journal writing, peer interaction, and multimedia use – allowed learners to develop confidence and agency incrementally, reflecting Self-Regulated Learning tenets (Zimmerman, 2002) and motivational constructs discerned by Dörnyei (2006).

The patterns in both datasets demonstrate the interplay between identity, sociocultural context, and cognitive effort. Students originating from underrepresented or linguistically distinct backgrounds, notably Arabic speakers, encountered increased stress levels and an expanded process of social integration, thereby emphasizing a disparity between the theoretical principles of multilingual empowerment and the actual experiences dictated by institutional monolingual frameworks (Saito et al., 2025; Gao, 2019; García & Wei, 2014). In contrast, learners who effectively utilized their prior linguistic knowledge or participated in culturally relevant practices, as exemplified by Muskan’s iterative Bengali interactions with patients (Narrative-5), exhibited a more rapid process of adaptation and development. These findings are consistent with existing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy and translanguaging, which posits that recognizing the linguistic and cultural resources of learners significantly enhances both engagement and competence (Cummins, 2021).

The stakes for educators and policymakers are high. Educators should enact scaffolding that is sensitive to both linguistic and cultural diversity and provide structured opportunities for observation, practice, and feedback. Institutions can specialize in targeted interventions for vulnerable populations, such as

Arabic-speaking students in linguistically distant contexts, and create programs that combine formal instruction with informal, socially mediated learning experiences. Researchers are encouraged to explore the longitudinal dynamics of identity negotiation, as learners' adaptation trajectories reach beyond immediate academic outcomes to psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Together, the findings indicate the fundamental need to embed linguistic, cultural, and motivational considerations in curriculum design and policy to foster equitable, inclusive, and effective foreign language education.

Strategies for linguistic adaptation

The results reveal students' deployment of a mix of self-regulated, social, and contextually embedded approaches in coping with novel linguistic contexts. Quantitative survey and regression results indicate students in German-speaking destinations attained the highest adaptation scores ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), confirming that institutional support, formalized curricula, and opportunities for immersion considerably facilitate adjustment. Time abroad also positively affected adaptation, with each year increasing results ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .012$), illustrating the compounding effect of extended exposure. Arabic-speaking students manifested lower adaptation scores ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$), indicating that linguistic distance and previous language experience can limit progress. Longitudinal patterns, such as the Somali student whose score increased from 25 to 52 over five years, illustrate the incremental value of ongoing effort and exposure.

Narrative stories provide in-depth insight into the strategies used in language acquisition. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) combined comprehensive practice with self-regulated learning activities, such as journaling, narrative writing, and media consumption, adhering to Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 2012), emphasizing the role of conscious awareness of linguistic forms as central to the process of acquisition. Similarly, this is in line with the results of Lee et al. (2025). Ruma (Narrative-2) engaged social "scaffolding by recruiting peers and family members" to improve her competence in English and Bangla, thus reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, suggesting that learning occurs through social interactions in a supportive environment. Adoum (Narrative-3) "combined framed programs, including Toastmasters, with casual exposure through subtitled movies, illustrating the interrelatedness of formal and informal learning approaches." Charles (Narrative-4) and Muskan (Narrative-5) focused on contextualized everyday practice, which reinforced their acquisition of new words and expressions within authentic contexts, aligning with Self-Regulated Learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002) and Dörnyei's (2006) emphasis on motivational investment. This alignment is also corroborated by Yokubjonova (2025).

Participants use various techniques to overcome linguistic barriers, which are in line with Self-Regulated Learning (Zimmerman, 2002) and Motivational Theory (Dörnyei, 2006). In Narrative-1, Ritu Porna followed self-directed learning activities through journal writing and also exposed herself to Bangla media. All these activities acknowledge the findings of Zhang and Zhang (2024), who present the importance of self-regulated strategies in linguistic proficiency. Writing short stories provided Ritu Porna with a “safe space,” an example of how creative writing can encourage linguistic discovery and confidence. In Narrative-2, Ruma claims the importance of social learning through engagement with peers and family members to practice different languages. Her strategy aligns with Pintrich’s (2000) statement about the crucial role of collaborative learning in enhancing language acquisition. Through her example of viewing every interaction as a “milestone,” Ruma demonstrated flexible functionality of social support mechanisms, further supporting the position taken by Tseng and Gao (2021), who stated that language acquisition strategies are mediated through sociocultural environments (Liu et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2023). In Narrative-5, Muskan pursued a systematic strategy by preparing a list of words and leveraging regional cinema to enhance her language abilities. This strategy is consistent with Tanaka’s (2024) insistence upon framing strategies according to specific linguistic and professional requirements, demonstrating the merits of culturally situated learning.

A consistent pattern emerges in which learners who combine self-directed study, socially mediated practice, and immersion in authentic contexts report higher adaptation and confidence. However, linguistic distance and cultural novelty can slow adaptation, creating gaps even among highly motivated students. These findings partially contrast prior literature that portrays multilingualism as uniformly empowering (García & Wei, 2014) because outcomes are highly context-dependent, shaped by environmental affordances and individual strategies. For educators, this demonstrates the need to structure curricula that integrate scaffolding, peer collaboration, and culturally relevant materials to increase engagement and acquisition. Policymakers should consider pre-departure orientation programs and ongoing mentorship for students from linguistically distant backgrounds (Pawlak et al., 2025). For researchers, these findings emphasize the value of exploring interactions between formal support, social engagement, and self-directed learning over time to understand adaptation trajectories fully.

Influence of individual differences on academic transitions

Individual differences significantly influence students’ academic adjustment and interact with linguistic and sociocultural contexts. Quantitative findings

indicate that origin language and destination country combined account for 29% of the variance in academic adjustment ($R^2 = 0.29$). Students speaking Arabic consistently performed lower ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$), which suggests that linguistic distance can hamper early performance. Students in German-speaking contexts performed higher ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), which suggests that institutional structures can alleviate individual difficulties. Data indicate remarkable improvement for students with resilience and persistence, as illustrated by the Somali student who improved from 25 to 52 within five years, which illustrates the dynamic function of individual differences in influencing learning outcomes.

Narrative data demonstrate how motivation, resilience, and adaptability shape trajectories. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) was intrinsically “motivated and persistent,” employing “self-regulated practice and media exposure” to overcome linguistic difficulties, as predicted by Zimmerman’s (2002) model. Ruma (Narrative-2) recast negative social feedback as a chance to learn, showing adaptive coping in accordance with Dörnyei’s (2006) motivational guidelines. Adoum (Narrative-3) was cognitively flexible, juggling several languages and combining formal and informal modes of learning. Charles (Narrative-4) and Muskan (Narrative-5) showed autonomy and context-sensitive learning, exploiting everyday interactions to develop confidence and proficiency. Across cases, students with high resilience, intrinsic motivation, and adaptive learning strategies attained stronger academic and social integration, even when initial linguistic difficulties were profound.

Patterns indicate that individual differences shape strategy choice and moderate outcomes in interaction with environmental conditions. Students with less self-efficacy or weaker social networks adapted more slowly regardless of institutional support, suggesting the necessity of interventions targeting personal and contextual variables in tandem. These results do not entirely support optimistic portrayals of multilingual adaptability (Yuksel et al., 2023; García & Wei, 2014) because individual differences appear as essential mediators of success instead of universal assurances.

Practical implications are evident. Teachers should promote learner autonomy, offer scaffolding, and shape interventions to fit individual profiles, especially for vulnerable groups like Arabic-speaking students. Policy makers ought to take into account the inclusion of mentoring and resilience-enhancing programs as adjuncts to institutional support. For researchers, subsequent research may utilize longitudinal designs to trace the dynamic impact of individual differences on academic pathways in various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The current research has shown the central role of IDs and adaptive tactics in

SLA, particularly in learners transitioning into new linguistic contexts. First, it makes a strong case for pedagogical practice that is both culturally responsive and context-specific (Tanaka, 2024), an approach aimed at sensitizing teachers to the necessity of adjusting their practice to varied learner profiles. Second, it shows the importance of linking formal with informal learning opportunities, as seen in the participants' engagement with self-regulated learning strategies and social interactions (Zimmerman, 2002). Third, this research is helpful to policymakers in determining support mechanisms that will help to resolve particular challenges confronting learners in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts.

This is a classic example of how learner perception, strategy, and individual differences may significantly impact their language learning process in new linguistic environments. The present study has shed light on the importance of adaptive strategies and the interaction between cognitive and sociocultural factors in SLA. Educators and policymakers alike may create more inclusive and effective language-learning settings by responding to the challenges and capitalizing on the strengths of diverse learners, protecting both individual and societal growth.

Future research can build on these findings and overcome the limitations of the study by using larger samples with more diversity in terms of generalizability. Indeed, longitudinal studies could trace learners' perceptions, strategies, and IDs over much more extended periods, offering far richer insights into the dynamics of SLA. This would call for using mixed-method approaches, wherein narrative analysis could be done in conjunction with quantitative data to gain a deeper understanding of language learners' experiences. Investigations might also focus on how particular interventions, such as specially tailored instructional strategies or peer support networks, affect the linguistic and cultural adjustment of students.

While this study has critical insight, it has some limitations. The study explores specific sociocultural contexts that may or may not represent all aspects of challenges faced by learners in other linguistic environments. This study does not take into account changes in learners' perceptions and strategies; such an analysis would have offered more profound insight into SLA over time.

Ethics Statements

Permission was taken from participants before collecting data, so that respondents knew precisely why they were there and what was going to happen. Pseudonyms were used for all respondents to guarantee anonymity and uphold the ethical requirements throughout this investigation. Regarding data, all the data management systems would also maintain confidentiality and allow access only to the research team.

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The Relevance of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Martin Heidegger in Ethnomethodology: A Primer in “Language” and “Being”

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Abstract

Insights from different disciplines (e.g., linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism and sociology) can be useful to conceptualize language both as (1) a means or a set of tools used by the members of any speech community to make sense of their concrete ontic everyday life; and (2) a norm-based phenomenon meant for ideal competent language users of a speech community. Martin Heidegger referred to language in many of his talks and writing. However, it appears that he had a general view about language – he was interested in the ontological properties of language, not necessarily its ontic properties the way it is understood by a linguist in his reference-grammar. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, on the other hand, had a specific focus, Gikuyu, his mother tongue, while theorizing about language. Ngũgĩ cannot however be essentialized as an out and out ethno-nationalist. His approach towards language should rather be seen as his advocacy for “the primacy” of mother tongue in building the worldviews of an individual. At the same time, language for Ngũgĩ was a site for struggle with specific historical nuances and consequences. His creative work in Gikuyu and critical work in English was already a message to the world that he was not fighting against a specific language but the languages of the empires – French, Portuguese or English, and their hegemonic presence in Africa. The idea of language developed by both Heidegger and Ngũgĩ have shaped ethnomethodology (and conversation analysis), a sociological approach to language, developed by Harold Garfinkel. For an ethnomethodologist, the use of language by the members of a speech community is done locally, and endogenously, as *members’ work*. Ngũgĩ and Heidegger, although they had entirely different political projects in mind, share some common grounds on “language as the house of being” and thus help widen an ethnomethodologist’s views of language.

Keywords: ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, language and being, Heidegger, ontic/ontological, Ngũgĩ, language hegemony

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This paper focuses on the place of “language” and “being” in three different epistemes, in ethnomethodology (and conversation analysis), in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger, and in the memoirs and critical writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. From a disciplinary perspective we can put both ethnomethodology, conversation and/or discourse analysis under the broader umbrella of sociolinguistics, the study of language and society, where the focus is to explain the dialectical relation between language and society. How language shapes the society and in turn is shaped by it. For a better understanding of each element, i.e., language and society, we do need different epistemological tools, tools to explain language structures and tools to analyze social composition. We must be able to see language as a linguistic phenomenon and society as a sociological phenomenon. However, for sociolinguists, ethnomethodologists, and conversation analysts, who view a linguistic act from the perspective of “language as a social action,” that would require a social analysis of language, that is, an analysis of the language bit against its specific context of use.

Let us begin with conversation analysis, an approach also known as talk-in-interaction through the writings of Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s and 1970s. This particular approach to the analysis of “talk” was born in the department of sociology, not linguistics, at UCLA campus and UC Irvine campus in the US. Sacks and his co-researchers wanted to explain how members of a society, through various institutions of that society, like family, school, hospital, police, and so on, continue to make sense of what a society is, in lay terms. Sacks wanted to record how ordinary members of a language community “play” society, ordinarily, or play what Wittgenstein called “language games.”

Here is an example of pre-offer, a specific stage within a talk-in-interaction, where an offer is in the offing. It is an example of a minute social action in a specific context. I borrow this example from Schegloff (2007).

Bookstore [Pre-offer]

- | | | |
|--------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Cat: | | I’m gonna buy a thermometer though |
| | [because I= | |
| 2 Les: | | |
| | [But- | |
| 3 Cat: | | =think she’s [(got a temperature). |
| 4 Gar: | F _{pre} → | [We have a thermometer. |
| 5 Cat: | S _{pre} → | (Yih do?) |

- 6 Gar: $F_b \rightarrow$ Wanta use it?
 7 Cat: $S_b \rightarrow$ Yeah.
 8 (3.0)

(Schegloff, 2007, p. 35)

In the excerpt above we encounter three participants, Cathy, Leslie, and Gary, in a bookstore, quite an unusual place to expect a thermometer from. Cathy, the mother, needs a thermometer to check her daughter’s temperature. Gary, a fellow employee, makes a proper offer in line 6 “Wanta use it?” One should not lose sight of another act, a prior-to-the-actual act of offering, a pre-offer, in line 4, “We have a thermometer,” once Cathy has articulated the need for one in line 1. That an offer is preceded by a pre-offer reveals that our conversations are never chaotic, and through a precise transcription of conversational data, we can show how our conversations are structured procedurally. This also highlights that, by using language structurally, procedurally, people carry out social actions like an offer. Additionally, the example makes us realize that a conversation develops through turns, and in pairs – we can call the turns adjacency pairs, as they are adjacent to each other; that requests will be accepted or rejected; greetings will be returned, and so on. Turns are distinctly visible through first pair part and second pair part. We also realize that ideally only one person should be speaking in a turn, and the speaker should be able to continue with their turn construction units without any obstacle. When a participant faces obstacles, overlap occurs, as we find in lines 1-4.

Sacks and his colleagues, conversation analysts, relied heavily on a novel interpretation of sociology initiated by Harold Garfinkel, who named it ethnomethodology. According to Garfinkel, ethnomethodologists study “the objective reality of social facts.” There are two things here: objective reality and social facts. The reality understood objectively is actually how members understand, interpret, and construct reality as a shared phenomenon. It is never the understanding by an individual. For instance, members acknowledge a greeting as a greeting objectively, socially, as a shared custom, not as an individual phenomenon. Culture specific greetings like G’day mate, *Sudah Makan* in Malay, *Salamalaikum* in Muslim speaking communities and so on can be individualized but cannot be stretched too much. An individual idiosyncratic expression of greeting will always be filtered through society in which that greeting is produced. That is, although we find variation as individuals carry out these activities in a range of ways, ethnomethodologists would say that there is a limit to variation. Try greeting in a non-normative way, and see what happens. Garfinkel’s students often ran an experiment, “Breaching experiment” (1967),

to see what happens when we break norms to establish the fact that norms exist.

So, we get the theorem that there are norms and these norms can be bent only to a certain extent by using what one may call the Goldilocks Principle. Garfinkel also believed that social facts are not based on some fixed, rigid, pre-given rules, and as not-being-fixed entities, they are in the end, constructs. Members make sense of their and others' activities through trial and error. If social facts were entirely pre-givens, members would not have that opportunity to innovate, create, and exercise their agency as reflective members to re-write the social script of greeting a person in the street or haggle for a better deal at a fish-seller's. Members re-invent ways of doing things all the time, and through minute, step-by-step procedural action, they would show what they are doing. If we want to explain, say, "rejection" as a procedural achievement, we can show the processes accordingly. Any textbook on conversation analysis or a glossary (e.g., Baker & Ellece, 2011) may include an example like I have cited below to explain what an adjacency pair that starts with a request in the first pair part comprises of. How a request is responded to if the requestee needs to reject an offer:

- A: uh, see if you can make some time this morning
 I'd like to have my original Javanese coffee with you
- B: hehh [prefaced with a smile]
 Well [prefaced with a news recognition, like Oh-prefaced
 utterances described by Heritage,)
 that's awfully sweet of you (prefaced with a compliment)
 I don't think I can make it this morning (rejection proper)
 hh uhm (hesitation)
 I'm running an ad in the paper (account 1st part)
 and uh I have to stay near the phone (account 2nd part)

Members have a general understanding of how to reject or say no. Structurally, a request is made in the first pair part of a request, an acceptance or rejection comes in the second pair part. Members know that responding with "Yes" is always shorter. They also know that some Nos are shorter and others long, and that the script of what we call "rejection" varies across contexts. One may compare how the length of saying "No" to people vary, based on where one stands in relation to power sharing with their interlocutors.

Rule-following or breaking norms are not always entirely linguistic activities. For instance, how much of someone's body should be bent, while greeting a person,

has little to do with language the way we understand it, but that bending of the body is semiotically rich. Gestures and postures are not linguistic acts. But these extra-linguistic or paralinguistic elements are necessary materials for ordinary members to box verbal language, often representing knowledge of do-s and don't-s in a culture, setting, or context of a talk-in-interaction. So, the discussion up to this point helps us to theorize that the construction of social facts relies both on linguistic and extra-linguistic activities. Putting it metaphorically, one can say, these different linguistic features are inherently laminated, combined, as if they are one entity to make a talk-in-interaction.

Social facts as constructs are accomplishments of members in a specific context and as such all actions are situated action. Ethnomethodologists would focus on *what is it that is going on here* as American sociologist Erving Goffman would also put it this way to explain his work. For ethnomethodologists, the fundamental task of sociology is to study social facts as how they are,

every society's locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, naturally accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely members' work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buyouts" (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 11).

Vulgarly competent members of a social group can follow the rules or norms because these norms are "loosely" shared by all who consider themselves as members. Through those examples of pre-offer and rejection, we have shown that it is possible to list the steps followed by these members as they "produce," "display," and "demonstrate" what "observably" the case in hand is.

The analysts treat each observable element in the context of an interaction as contributive elements to get to the meaning of the observed phenomena. Without exhausting both the linguistic and contextual variables, one cannot understand or interpret what is going on here – what is someone doing by talking, talking in a certain way, and often by not talking.

That conversational parties juggle with contextual variables tirelessly in a talk-in-interaction becomes obvious as they interact, as they make "instructably observable" local indigenous production of social facts. In fact, members uphold the society by doing all sorts of things including classifying and categorizing their activities; while doing so, they also leave templates for future members, to continue, or if necessary, radicalize the content of the observable accountable texts.

Producing an account occupies a specific place in Martin Heidegger. He offers

concepts like understanding, assertion, articulation, and language to describe his project. Heidegger believed that understanding of an articulation relies on the greater horizon against which an articulation is made, enframed. He refers to this horizon as discourse. For him, “Discourse is the articulation of intelligibility” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 161). That is, what is intelligible to us, what we understand and express as a proof of our understanding is an articulation in a linguistic form coming from a perspective. And the name of that perspective is discourse. Discourse for Heidegger includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. It also includes what is present and what is absent, almost in the manner of explicit signifiers available for current analysis and signifiers read from a palimpsest. More than anything else, for Heidegger, any articulation must be viewed as attempts to interpret social facts by beings-in-the-world based on their over-all understanding of something at-hand.

For Heidegger, concepts like intelligibility, understanding, interpreting, assertion, articulation, language, and discourse are basic “revelatory” ways of “beings-in-the-world.” The everyday beings would use these devices to make sense of their “ontic” life. One of the features of Heidegger’s writing is his perpetual oscillation between a philosophical coinage and a sociological term like ontology versus ontic-ity, or his notions of Being versus beings-in-the-world. The ontic beings-in-the-world are the main focuses of sociology, so it is for ethnomethodologists. Garfinkel the ethnomethodologist, who felt that ethnomethodology needs a Heideggerian turn (McHoul, 1998), would define these revelatory ways of Heidegger’s as Members’ ways of doing things, or carrying out a social action. Social actions as social facts, expressed as assertions, can be structured as such-and-such and be communicated as such-and-such to others, to other beings-in-the-world or members.

The articulation of such-and-such in a given language as an act of interpretation of a social fact is also an act of signifying against a certain background, a discourse. So, what Heidegger is telling us is that, “linguistic meaning depends upon our practical dealings with things in the world and our social relations, by means of which those meaningful structures and referential connections through which we come to an understanding of the world are generated. This understanding is articulated in and through discourse” (Demmerling, in Wrathall, 2021, p. 236).

Heidegger talked about language in many places, in his *Being and Time*, *On the Way to Language*, *On the Essence of Language*, *What is Called Thinking?* for instance, but what may be of interest for many ethnomethodologists is a relatively shorter piece, his *Letter on Humanism*, a letter he wrote as a reply to John Beaufret (1907-1982), a French philosopher, who asked Heidegger, “*Comment redonner un sens au mot ‘Humanisme’?*” [tr. How can we restore meaning to the

word "humanism"?] .This is certainly a philosophical question that demands a philosophical answer, and one might be interested in detailing it out through Heidegger's responses. But as we are going to read Heidegger through the lens of ethnomethodology, let us begin with the first couple of lines from the *Letter*,

We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough. We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness – *producer*. Therefore, only what already is can really be accomplished (Heidegger, 1998, p. 239).

Action is realized in their effects and in doing so, their being as action is ignored – this is what Heidegger complains about. He wants to direct our focus to study, how an action is accomplished, it unfolds or blossoms itself in a specific context. The hypothesis that "only what already is can really be accomplished" is premised on the fact that either there is an ideal script, or an example of an idyllic or perfect action exists. An action, an ontic example of an action, as it always unfolds as a specific example of an action, aspires to attain the exactness delineated in some ideal script. For Heidegger, such is the course of an accomplishment. On the other hand, for Garfinkel, any action as a specific action, is a socially organized, and socially recognizable action. It is also are members' doing, the ones who would certify and recognize it as that specific action. Garfinkel is not after the ontological structure of an action, the way Heidegger wants it.

But how does an action happening in a specific context, ontically, find its ideal copy, its ontological counterpart, existing somewhere else to pair with? Heidegger suggests, it is through "thinking" that being comes to ontology. But what makes thinking possible is language. In his words, "in thinking being come to language" (p. 239). Heidegger (1998) continues,

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying. (p. 239)

If, for Heidegger, being comes to its ontological fruition through thinking qua language, how can he suggest that intelligibility may not be captured entirely in linguistic assertions? But is not it the fact that without assertions or articulation, there is no manifestation of intelligibility? We must assert, in parenthesis, that Heidegger was not happy about philologists, logicians or analytic philosophers in general, and that has been conveyed by him. Even in this *Letter* (on Humanism)

and elsewhere, he wanted to “break away” from grammarians and language philosophers. But he only had some romantic responses to a hypothesis like “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” coming from an analytic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. He could only be dumbfounded by the absence of naming or labelling a being, a thing, or an action as we find him in that state while responding to Stefan George’s (1971) poem, *The Word* (see his *On the Way to Language*, p. 62). Heidegger glosses Stefan’s (1971) “Where word breaks off no thing may be” as a declarative utterance, “no thing is where the word, that is, the name is lacking. The word alone gives being to the thing” (p. 62).

It is better to stay attuned with Heidegger’s analytic spirit, resulting in a hypothesis like: “The word alone gives being to the thing” or “Language is the house of being. In its home human-beings dwell.” Heidegger’s effort to distinguish ontic from ontological, being from beings-in-the-world and his emphasis on the role of thinking comes from his continental background. He being rooted in abstract ideals could not reduce his discussion to precise, specific, ontic assertions like an analytic or ordinary language philosopher. Although he focused on language, he ended up claiming that “The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation Thinking is *l’engagement*, engagement, by and for the truth of being” (Heidegger, 1998, p. 240).

Now, we all know that the lived experiences that provided Martin Heidegger and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o the fodder for thinking about the world were radically different. One can see that for Heidegger, the only language that could capture Being ontologically in its essence, is creative writing like poetry while everyday language, he claims, captures ontic facts produced by beings-in-the-world, no ontological position guaranteed. Heidegger can be read as someone who believed in the primacy of thought and that thought might or might not be translated into language, similar to what we see in Chomsky’s latent versus surface structure in his syntactic theory. Surface structure, surfaced as assertions, is just a possibility of what was there in the latent structure. On the other hand, for Ngũgĩ, the language for articulation must be the mother tongue for any native African to articulate his being both ontically and ontologically, nothing can enter the thought-machine of an oppressed soul without a native language.

Let us reflect a bit more on how Ngũgĩ perceived language. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ (1981) remembers his life in the village as he was growing up listening to stories in Gikuyu. For Ngũgĩ,

Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning ... we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own ... the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work-in-the fields were one. (p. 11)

After this description of life in harmony with language, we get another description on how that harmony with mother tongue was broken for Ngũgĩ. He writes about how the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 made all the schools under District Education Boards in English which were hitherto run by patriotic nationalists. In Kenya, Ngũgĩ felt, English turned into something that was more than a language, as everyone had to acknowledge its superior status.

Ngũgĩ (2018) believed that "To write for, speak for, and work for the lives of peasants and workers was the highest call of national duty" (p. 112). He regrets that "for many years I had wandered in the bourgeois jungle and the wilderness of foreign cultures and languages. Kamĩrĩthũ was my homecoming" (Ngũgĩ, 2018, p. 112). Ngũgĩ was born in the village named Kamĩrĩthũ in Kenya. Many of us would find this description very nostalgic almost like lines from any Bollywood films soaked in populist nationalist enthusiasm. He continues in his *swadeshi* spirit:

Let me tell you something else. ... You people, even if you follow Europeans to the grave, they will never never let you really know their languages. They will never – and mark my words ... Europeans will never let you into the secrets held by their languages What do you then become? Their slaves! (pp. 142-143)

To respond to Ngũgĩ, one may say that the world has changed a lot since the 1960s and the 1970s. At present, we live in a world where we meet multilingual people every now and then, when studies on bilingual first language acquisition, that is, how children learn two or more languages simultaneously from the time of their birth, are aplenty. Hence, many would say, Ngũgĩ is too parochial here against today's increasingly multilingual global world.

Upon hearing his *swadeshi* speeches, one may inadvertently fall into the trap of dismissing him in lieu of contextualizing him. We must understand that Ngũgĩ was referring to the status of specific languages like English and Gikuyu and Kiswahili and their use in a specific site meant for a specific people from a specific time. He was fighting against a bunch of goons as they robbed him of his

mother tongue, his Gikuyu. He was in that classic context of *Ora amaar mukh-er bhasha kaira nibar chae* [They want to rob me of my tongue].

Ngũgĩ was not just trying to save Gikuyu. He imagined an Africa where all languages are equal in their differences. We cannot essentialize Ngũgĩ as a narrow *swadeshi* also because we hear his justification for writing in English. He says, “English was a foreign language, but it was an important language in the history of Kenya” (Ngũgĩ, 2018, p. 105). So, I conclude that Ngũgĩ was not against English as a language in the world. He was after its superior status, its hegemonic power of clouding other languages from the African sky. What Ngũgĩ did through his activism and his creative and critical writing was to keep questioning the Eurocentric articulation or interpretation of Africa. He showed how racism, more than anything else, was a linguistic product. To explain Ngũgĩ’s rage, two concepts can be helpful here, dis-membering and re-membering. For Ngũgĩ (2009), “creative imagination is one of the greatest re-membering practices articulated by dis-membered beings and marginalised bodies” (p. 16). It is important to underline that to question the linguistic processes involved in dis-membering Ngũgĩ celebrated African languages for re-membering.

What we need to learn from Ngũgĩ is that by choosing to write in Gikuyu and asking others to write in African languages, he took a personal position to question the superior status of imperial or European languages, English, French and/or Portuguese in Africa. He was full of rage because he saw how the colonial authorities dispossessed African people of their land, labor, body, and mind as he writes in his *Moving the Center*. For him, writing in native tongue, re-membering or decoloniality becomes the only solution against centuries of suffering through coloniality or dis-memberment (Ngũgĩ, 1993, p. 146). We also need to learn from him that while fighting against an authority one needs to go all out, and in pursuing such radical goals, one should not be craving for official patronage of any sort. One should go all out even if one has to land in prison. Ngũgĩ’s demand to abolish the English department in Kenya or to perform a Gikuyu play (*Ngaahika Ndeenda*, tr., *I Will Marry When I Want*) landed him in a maximum-security prison in 1977.

Now how do we translate his rage in the Bangladeshi context, particularly for the ones who believe that they are fighting against English, fighting against some sort of anglophonic aggression? One of the recent fads in academia to fight against such aggression has popularly been labeled as translanguaging. This is a pedagogical approach that allows learners to make use of their entire linguistic resources, all the languages and dialects they know, in a context of communication (e.g., Garcia & Wei, 2014). Such a pedagogical approach sounds radical at the

outset. But it can be proved inadequate due to lack of a strong infrastructure and such a policy can appear as reactionary too in any linguistically contested public sphere.

The Bangladesh government introduced the language policy to teach students of pre-primary level in five indigenous languages: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mandi, and Sadri. However, due to lack of teachers trained in the orthography of these languages, the adopted language policy cannot be defined as a success (Khan, 2024). My fear is many of our teachers are not proper bilinguals in the sense they are in the Latin American or Irish contexts (see the literature on bi- or multilingual schools, García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006). As such, students also do not learn how to swim between languages. Once they land in this or that shore of another language, they suffocate like a fish out of water.

If the objective of English departments is to train students in the academic register of English language, it might not be very helpful if they are allowed to use multiple codes in the same script or in the same class-presentation. In a native English-speaking country, such an approach may sound liberating but in a non-English speaking country, this can "cripple" the students in the long run as the walking stick of translanguaging might not be present all the time when they would have to walk through the linguistic corridors of academic English.

Ngũgĩ's view of language in which the mother tongue holds a higher position in disseminating knowledge or re-memorizing a people through their literary work, is not exactly the position of translanguagers in relation to languaging. There are several reasons why translanguaging differs from being an Ngũgĩan project.

First, in a non-native country like Bangladesh, the translanguagers are fighting in their own turf where Bengali language nationalism has an esteemed position. The translanguagers are not fighting against a strong opponent like the ones Ngũgĩ fought to be able to use Gikuyu, that is, there are no legal threats to these Bangladeshi language "radicals." The current neoliberal project of turning Bangladeshi students with EMI background into appropriate "human capital" (Ali & Hamid, 2020) is based on the idea that EMI education in Bangladesh will benefit immensely if they incorporate translanguaging. They can help EMI education build a more popular education system to defeat the "shabby" Bangla medium schools. Second, translanguaging experts in Bangladesh do not have an answer for those who are fighting against local language hegemonies, like the students from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) for whom Bangla is a second or third and English a fourth language. They do not have an answer for the students from English medium schools either when they find formal academic Bangla alienating (as translanguaging is considered being the only solution to

become inclusive in the classroom). Another group ignored are students with a strong background in Arabic, graduating from Madrasas, as many of them also suffer language loss by being de-scaled using Blommaert's (2007) terms.

So, translanguaging practices, in the Bangladeshi context needs to be radicalized further to be Ngūgīan if by any chance that is their goal. In its current form, translanguaging activism may be viewed to support the neoliberal education industry simply by spreading temporary ointment on students' linguistic wounds. If we want to accommodate learners' mother tongues in the name of translanguaging, translanguaging researchers need to expand their language list, exactly the way it was imagined by Ngūgī in the context of Africa.

A third point, in relation to language use to question translanguaging may sound controversial which is, to consider an outsider's, colonial or even a hegemonic language having some sort of revolutionary potential. Akshay Saxena (2021) refers to the Indian Dalit community's attempt to embrace English as it becomes a vehicle for them to bypass the racial or Hinduanized Brahmin structure of Indian caste-based hegemony. My point is that the ideological connotation of embracing a language has different meanings in different contexts, hence, the articulation of its interpretation should also be different.

To conclude, language for Heidegger is the house of being, beings-in-the-world use language, because language is their only house, they live in that house, they are shelled in language and there are no other ways for them to being-ify themselves without language. On the other hand, for Ngūgī, beings-in-the-world or members are inherently specific speech communities who do not have any other homes other than their mother tongues. Insights from Heidegger and Ngūgī are relevant to ethnomethodologists for whom language is always a socially situated action.

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Book Review

The Representation of the Berbers in Wyndham Lewis' *Journey Into Barbary: Travels Across Morocco*

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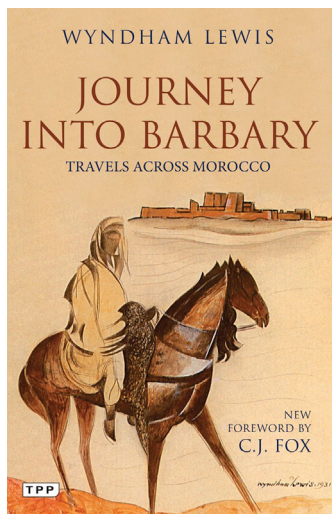
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Journey Into Barbary: Travels Across Morocco
Wyndham Lewis
Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2013
240 pp.
ISBN: 9780857722744

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”

– Karl Marx

Wyndham Lewis' travelogue *Journey into Barbary: Travels across Morocco* provides a critical lens through which to examine colonial discourse. Published in 1931, the book recounts Lewis' travels through Morocco, offering insights into the colonial attitude of the time and the ways in which

European travelers represent and perceive the “Other.” Throughout the book, Lewis portrays the colonial encounter as a clash of civilizations, with Europe representing modernity, progress, and civilization, while North Africa is depicted as exotic, backward, and primitive. This reflects the unequal power relations inherent in colonial discourse, for Europe has always assumed a position of superiority over the marginalized colonized peoples of North Africa.

Colonial discourse relied heavily on the construction of the imaginary “Other,” portraying indigenous peoples as fundamentally different from and inferior to Europeans. This representation of “othering” serves to strengthen colonial hierarchies and justifies European superiority and Eastern inferiority. In his seminal book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said deploys Michel Foucault's approach

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to discourse/ knowledge to argue that the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is deeply influenced by the power dynamics of colonialism and the Eurocentric imperialist project. As he puts it, “the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5). According to Said, the texts produced by Western writers, scholars, and artists are all far from being neutral and objective. Still, they serve the interests of colonial power and further help to justify the West’s domination over Eastern societies. Said’s critical analysis of colonial discourse elucidates how the nature of such Eurocentric discourse is not just an issue of overt political or military control, but also of cultural and intellectual domination. Like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, emphasizes how colonial discourse misrepresents the colonized culture and further distorts the history and identity of the colonized people, reproducing their past to justify their subjectification. In his words:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon 210)

By consistently misrepresenting the Orient in this way, colonial discourse established a cultural/textual hegemony that made it difficult for alternative counter-discourses to emerge. This hegemony persisted even after the end of formal colonialism, influencing how the East was viewed and treated in international relations, media, and literature. Moreover, colonial discourse examines how such biased and stereotypical imaginations deeply ingrained in Western narratives, produce colonized peoples as what Antonio Gramsci labels “Subaltern people,” which refers to groups that are marginalized or oppressed within colonial and postcolonial societies. This concept was later developed by the widely known Indian critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which she questions whether the voices of colonized people, especially third-world women, can be heard or represented within the systematic textual imaginations established by colonial discourse. In this respect, the most important concept that colonial discourse invents and uses frequently is representation. For Said, this concept is palpable in colonial texts as a form of power and control over the Orient or the East. In his view, Western imagination plays a crucial role in the construction of the Orient as uncivilized, exotic, and barbaric. The Orient is not just misrepresented, it is imagined in ways that reflect the fears, desires, and preoccupations of the West and essentialized as being inferior and marginalized in discursive works. This imaginative misrepresentation is seen in works of literature, travel writing,

and academic studies, where the Oriental world is often depicted as a place of mystery and danger, reinforcing the idea that it needs to be controlled by the West to legitimize imperialist projects.

Similar to many colonialist and orientalist texts such as *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, *Waiting for the Barbarians* by James Coetzee, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Marrakesh* and *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell, and Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* to name a few, which contribute to dehumanizing the Orient and misrepresenting them be they men, women, or children, Wyndham Lewis' *Journey into Barbary: Travels across Morocco* elucidates the binary dichotomy of the power dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized. In this context, Bill Ashcroft et al. claim that:

The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance. A simple distinction between centre/margin; colonizer/colonized; metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates. (Ashcroft et al. 19)

Indeed, Lewis' book fits perfectly within the colonial textual context and the "civilizing mission" of the colonizer as it reinforces colonial biases and perpetuates stereotypes and misconceptions about North Africa and its Berber people whom Lewis describes as such: "the Berbers are the darkest because they are more often out in the sun than the other" (Lewis 45). So the question of "othering" and subordinating indigenous people is evident in the whole book. Lewis asked his satirical questions: "By whom French North Africa is inhabited?" (Lewis 43), "by whom the Maghreb is peopled?" (Lewis 45) to reveal and reinforce the colonial imaginary of North African culture and its people. Furthermore, Lewis focuses on Moroccan Berber women to represent them as being passive, secluded, veiled figures, and hypersexualized. They are further oppressed by colonial power. His representation of Moroccan native women as such explains that when it comes to women, colonization is doubled. According to Spivak, women in such colonial narratives are "three times a victim," and, as Robert Young confirms, "women had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local and its imperial forms" (Young 379). Likewise, in her groundbreaking text *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Meyda Yegenoglu contends that Orientalist representations of the East are not merely about racial or cultural otherness but are also profoundly gendered. She argues that the figure of the Oriental woman is central to the construction of the Orient as exotic, passive, and available for Western conquest. As she points out, "Orientalism as a

discourse is implicated in the production of sexual difference and the deployment of sexuality as a power relation” (Yegenoglu 3). This oriental representation is clear in Lewis’ portrayal of the Moroccan Berber mining woman.

Lewis made a trip to Morocco in the summer of 1931. It is true that Lewis tried to publish the current book, *Journey into Barbary: Travels across Morocco*, in two parts known as *Filibusters in Barbary* and *Kasbahs and Souks*, but failed to do so. The compilation and publication of these two books in one was completed in 1983, that is, some fifty-two years after the actual trip had taken place, and twenty-three years after the death of Lewis in 1957. *Journey into Barbary: Travels across Morocco*, as a travel book, is a subject of contention. A book that celebrates the colonial vestige of Western power, and Lewis himself seems to be fond of Lyautey’s leadership and policy in colonial Morocco. For Lewis, admiring Lyautey’s policy is far from admitting the French colonialist system and actions: “It is the France of Lyautey that I for my part admire” (Lewis 119). Written during the war period, Lewis has depicted the North African territory in a way that slightly approached reality but a sort of subjectivity has affected the description. The constant reference to the colonizer’s presence in that territory makes one believe that the book is more about praising the Western countries’ military and political presence than describing the Moroccan people themselves. That fact is omnipresent in many parts of the book.

As any journey, there is a departure point, and this segment in the life of Lewis began from England before reaching Continental Europe. Then, like many travelers of that period, he visited Paris to trace the following step of his itinerary. The choice for Paris is, in the beginning, almost obligatory. However, it is a strategic point to acquire enough knowledge about North Africa. Once more, the French Orientalist savoir faire intervenes to help understand people and their places. What one has to retain from his passage in Paris is only the information he gathered, like a tourist whose target is to go further. After a brief stay in Paris, he proceeded to Marseilles, the nearest port for a voyage to Africa, and then traveled via the Spanish coast, landing at Alicante. From France, he went through the Spanish shores. In Alicante, the Spaniards, whose long and rich history with Maghreb is always talked about, have been represented in Chapter Four, where words of chivalry and elegance are used rather than barbarians and savages. The next region he landed in is the shore of an African city.

In contrast to other British travelers who sailed to the Rock and then to Tangier as the gate of Morocco, Lewis travelled from London via Paris to southern France. From there, he went to Oran, Algeria. He continued his trip by going to Tlemcen and across into Morocco to Oujda and Fez, then to Marrakesh through Casablanca. From the city of Morocco, Lewis penetrated into the southwestern

town of Agadir and “on into the bled, or semi-wilderness, of the Sous area, with its great forts – the Kasbahs – built by the Berbers Finally he reached a thin line of beleaguered French military outposts. Beyond that lay the Rio de Oro, the vast stretch of Western Sahara wasteland” (Lewis x). His description of his departure from England is replete with the conventions of the travel genre, beginning with his dramatic departure:

I sold my goods, “liquidated” my belongings, sold my barrels, upon which stood my lamps, put in store my books. The “Luther of Ossington Street” (as the naughty, naughty post-Ninetyish old and young kittens call him) left that ultra-Lutheran spot, he kicked the dust of moralist and immoralist England off his un-Lutheran feet, determined for a while to exchange it against the red dust of the Sand – Wind of the Rio de Oro! (Lewis 24)

With a map of the Sahara and one of the High, Middle, and Anti-Atlas, the traveler's main objective of his foray was to head for the High Atlas, then the Sous, and the Rio de Oro – to the bled or to the heart of wilderness. Through his track into the heart of Barbary, Lewis focuses on some names, reproducing or renaming them in line with his Western colonial agenda and historiography. So, naming and renaming Moroccan spaces to suit his imperialist visions in Morocco are very crucial in his travelogue. Once he sets up his trip for Barbary, he (re) deploys names such as “bled,” “Rio de Oro,” “French North Africa,” “French Morocco,” “Zone of Insecurity,” “dissidence,” “Spanish Sahara,” “Occidental Sahara,” “No Man's Land,” etc.

In his chapter entitled “By Whom is French North Africa Inhabited?” the author interrogates the inhabitants of North Africa by stating: “when you first begin looking about you after landing in French Africa you gradually come to discover by whom Algeria and Morocco are at present peopled” (Lewis 43). The traveler creates a new reality, the purpose of which is to highlight his imperialist tendencies in representing Morocco. North Africa is purely French, and it is colonized and appropriated by the French, not by any other imperial nations. The colonialist discourse is so dominant that the territory surveyed as the colonizer's own is imbued with racial ambition. In this respect, the process of racial “Othering” starts to propagate the narrative. Colonialist texts, as *Journey into Barbary*, are replete with statements that inferiorize and even dehumanize non-European races, especially women. Among the common characteristics attributed to non-European races is savagery, a term encompassing such pejorative adjectives as chaotic, violent, dirty, stupid, lazy, dishonest, and so on. The diversity of these descriptors highlights the central role of the notion of “race” or racial difference in colonialist discourse. Lewis has the desire to appropriate Barbary to his vision

of “French Morocco.” It is a reality that is infused with the “civilizing” myths of the French and surrounded by an aura of humanity and justice. To quote Lewis: “French Morocco is the last great European enterprise of that order, magnificently carried out by a great soldier – one of the last of the great European military figures. It shows the French at their best – as the humane, civilizing, most genially-acquisitive, of all powers, able and good humoured” (Lewis 76).

Once Lewis enters Morocco, the issue of history will take on a new role and it will be a more crucial element in his conception about the state of the west and his political remedies for it. The first city Lewis visits in Morocco is Casablanca, a city he describes as the “city that Lyautey built,” and “the pearl of the French Renaissance” (65), alluding to the city’s “founder” in the convention of the historical chronicle or epic. At the same time, fixing this originary moment in this way rubs out any history of the indigenous peoples. Lewis further wipes out the city’s native identity as he describes it as a “huge marine outpost of Europe” (65) and “an enormous whitewashed fungus-town” (73). Casablanca is, for Lewis, “emblematic of the precarious post-war power of France. It is perhaps the place that holds the secret of the vestiges of “the colonial conquest.” Whereas for Lewis the history of Tlemcen itself was important for understanding its present, here “[t]he history of Casablanca, or Dar el Beida, is not important” (65). History is unimportant here for Lewis because the population is composed either of nomads or of European settlers who have no claim to the city. In other words, history is not just unimportant, it doesn’t exist. It is, Lewis acknowledges, an ancient city, and yet it is a city peculiarly without continuity or traditions, implying that Casablanca itself is a city that is completely lacking in history or it is historyless. Casablanca, for Lewis, is reminiscent of these nineteenth-century depictions in that it is comprised primarily of what he calls “an auxiliary population of nomads” (67).

Another aspect that highlights the inferiorizing discourse used by Lewis in othering the Moroccan people is when he describes the populations of the city as nomadic or semi-nomadic; he first considers the various “Arab villages,” or “nouala” villages, that are “an important nomad or semi-nomad settlement composed of many hundreds of families, come there to work” (Lewis 69-70). Lewis sees these settlements throughout Morocco, but their existence in Casablanca in particular incites him to perceive the odd uprootedness and “dislocation” of Western life. These nomads “prowl round and smell out the work and the money If hundreds of hands are wanted, soon there is a caboose-city” (Lewis 70) or kabbousah. These nomads are for him typical features of the advantages of the French colonial government and of the shortcomings of capitalism: “In Casablanca, for instance, there is a vast settlement that the French

have named 'Bidonville'." It is a city within the city, in fact. It consists of small huts mainly composed of petrol-tins: "Petrol-tin Town" ... is again a mushroom settlement of nomads, attracted by the dollars to be picked up in this Babylon of the Nazarene half-finished" (Lewis 71). By 1920, Casablanca's population had grown to 100,000, some 40,000 of whom were Europeans. The latter lived in the new city built by French authorities. In contrast, Moroccan workers, many of whom had migrated from the countryside, lived in specifically designed settlements (*ville indigène*) or in the spontaneous self-made Bidonvilles – a term coined in the 1930s in Casablanca to designate local slums partly made out of metal cans (*bidons*) on the periphery of the city.

While the history of the city of Casablanca is relatively insignificant, Lewis' arrival at the city of Agadir as his travel journey after Marrakech invokes some historical record. This type of history is embodied mainly in his perspective of looking at things. Indeed, the kind of history the traveler-narrator encounters in Agadir has an artificial aspect and it is fused with bizarre and frightening qualities. Lewis embarks on his depiction of the city of Agadir with the statement that the history of this city and the history of the West are closely tied: "Agadir has its name in our European history books. For us Agadir is a word that consorts, in a rather cheap and sinister fashion, with Kaiser" (Lewis 100). "Agadir" invokes various other names and phrases for Lewis, such as "a gunboat of the name of Panther," the "Exile of Doorn," names that while they sound exotic and romantic, refer to names and events that were in the news in the run up to the First World War.

In his portrait of the city of Agadir, Lewis depicts it as a barred and impenetrable place. The city of Agadir is the gate of the South of Morocco, and it is of good interest for the French officials and policy-makers: strategic, commercial and military. It is the land to the main riches of the Sahara par excellence. Agadir is "particularly isolated from the civilized world," and it is grotesque and sometimes exotic and erotic, so the author inscribes it within the naming of "bled," calling for complete colonial domination and supporting the French violent counter attacks:

And of course in the future it might again be found that the isolation from the rest of Morocco of the Sous valley would tempt the enemies of the French rule to use this backwater, with the enormous deserts to the south, in the same manner as they did the Riff. For the Politician, one feels, this must be a highly interesting spot. For the Artist, it is even more so. (Lewis 111)

Indeed, the question that poses itself here is in relation to the traveler's main reasons behind his journey into the South is partly answered in this context. In

his visit of the bousbir of Agadir and its quartiers réservés, the traveler-writer gives a very meticulous illustration of the city of Agadir as the bled which deserves to be quoted at length here:

I write about it [Agadir] mainly because its brothel does demonstrate the extent to which Agadir is still the wild frontier township – “here we are in the bled! In the bled!” as someone shouted at me when he asked me if I liked his langoustes and I did not answer quickly enough to please him ... and as far as St.-Louis-du-Sénégal – for such Langoustes: and of course therefore the bled in that respect was the bled and not the bled – since we were where the luxury fish of the cities come from. (Lewis 115)

Undeniably, then, Lewis’ journey to Morocco remains a travel account that incites issues relative to the complex nature of cross-cultural encounters and the representation of difference. On the one hand, part of Lewis’ interest can be explained by the fact that his representation reflects the “Self’s encounter with the “Other,” its perception and description of it; on the other hand, however, it is revelatory of the deepest secrets of the “Self,” or the “Subject,” as it also sets the ground for the multifarious psychological implications arising from that encounter. Travel writing is where all these elements can be found, or as the critic Carl Thompson puts it, “all journeys are a confrontation with alterity” (9). It is the record of the writer’s displacement, his or her encounter with an exotic geography, culture, and a different race or ethnicity, and more importantly, his/her thoughts, observations, and evaluations of the encounter. In a word, exoticism remains an essential form of geographical otherness. In *Journey into Barbary*, this tendency can be said to be often, if not always, connected with Berbers. On different occasions, Lewis aims for an “exoticizing” of the Berber’s cultural traits, everyday habits, architecture, etc., and the following quotation provides a significant instance of this:

Everything hinging upon sentiment and upon impulse, in beautiful theory at least, going with a quick and infinite slyness of disillusioned wit – that is a “Celtic” trait if I am not mistaken. Then there is a great deal of the “Celtic Twilight” in their most everyday habits – as when you meet two tall, willowy and beardless braves, inanelly wandering along together, holding each other by the little finger, brilliant blossoms dangling in the hands that are disengaged: indeed all that matchless air of infinite wandering indolence that reminds one of the cadences of M. Yeats’s Wanderings of Oisín more than anything else: all that great unworldly air – it is characteristic of these people as it is of the more familiar “Celts,” so it is not idle to note them in this connection. It has this practical effect, upon the political plane, that they remain aloof from

the fussing invasions of the hordes of breathless Europeans. They are not at all impressed. The sudden hotels, banks, docks and cafés spring up out of the ground: but they are arrogant and indifferent, in the midst of all this passionate, undignified bustle; and they display no desire, which is significant, to get out of their jellabas, turbans, or chequias and put on a “complet,” such as they could buy in any of those huge French stores named cheap, that is “bon marché.” (Lewis 192-93)

The celebration of the difference of the Berbers sustains the undeniable presence of the spirit of exoticism in Lewis' account. It is the first time that a reader of Lewis' account would come across such adjectives such as “beautiful,” “brilliant,” “significant,” in relation to a description of the natives of the Maghreb. As one can easily notice, there is a constant opposition between the Western and non-Western, namely the Berber, in which the latter is given a superior identity. Furthermore, the Berbers' resistance to the influence of French civilization is not, as one might expect, deplored; rather, it is saluted.

On other occasions, however, Lewis compares the Berber to the European while stressing the superior identity of the former, resulting from the beauty of his “primitiveness”:

The Berber nature is like the European nature, as I have more than once hinted. And above all there is nothing abstract about it. Your Berber possesses that personal standpoint that endears Even love, among the Touaregs, seems to have a strongly European character. “Love amongst this primitive people,” says Gautier, “... has a familiar air of gallantry, which in fact seems to be a caricature of our own Le Flirt is the grand preoccupation. This presupposes naturally cultivated, independent women, who are not absorbed exclusively by household cares. (Lewis 11-12)

Being at the mercy of Lewis' representation, the nature of the Berbers vacillates between “civilized” and “primitive.” In this regard, one might recall certain instances when Lewis describes the Berbers as having the minds of animals or as being barbarians in nature. Thus, the only issue that provides an explanation for this contradiction is that the author is establishing another strategy of representation, one which might add some credit to his account: the “primitive.” Berber, in this way, becomes a “cousin” of the “civilized” European. Other examples of eulogizing the Berber and their culture is when he describes the Berber architecture through his exotic discourse. Yet, the tendency to “exoticize,” as illustrated by the above examples, is not an individual trait typical of Lewis or of any other writer in this regard – as noted earlier, it simply follows and

highlights the main ideology of the imperialist production of the strange, exotic “Other” during the colonial period.

All these characterizations of savagery and racial difference ultimately converge in the exoticist representations of the Berber woman, particularly the extent to which the Moroccan woman depicted as a mine worker or road builder in different cities across Morocco, whose portrayal in the novel is significant for

most of these women have worked on the new highways with a hammer, stone-breaking—it is not as though they had had no practice ... one of the women were a credit to her down-trodden people—with a couple of bold black eyes, or an uncolonial stomach! (Lewis 115)

The Berber woman is the subaltern woman who is exploited and rendered as an object. Lewis seems to approach the Berber woman from a complex, point of view: highlighting her subaltern position vis-à-vis Arabness, but also as representing white-ness, thus a higher position in the hierarchical racialized social puzzle.

In line with the representation of the subaltern Moroccan Berber woman, the issue of sexuality emerges as another dimension of the exoticist tendencies in Lewis’ travel narrative across Morocco. Sexuality is evoked intermittently and linked to particular locations and moments in the journey. In his account, Lewis repeatedly highlights sexual encounters, reflecting the long-standing Western construction of Morocco as a site of eroticism. While this theme has been addressed critically, Lewis himself treats it with a rather casual tone, refraining from detailed analysis or overt exaggeration. This mode of representation echoes what Edward Said identifies as the “feminized Orient,” where the East is imagined as passive, eroticized, and available for Western desire and domination. A full chapter in the second part of the book is dedicated to the brothels, in addition to innumerable times where he raises the question. In this chapter, the brothels are numbered by local girls, but they remain a product of the Western authority (namely, France). The presence of these brothels is partly caused by colonialism. The French way of life has been imposed on local people. It is also the product of exploitation. The colonizer is taking from people what they have and left them in poverty. Thus, the result is prostitution. In this vein, Lewis wrote “A virgin costs round about fifty to sixty francs three years out of the four” (Lewis 115). It is a reserved place that Lewis is describing. Morocco, as part of Africa, seems to be the wild land for the colonizer to be raped and exploited. The African land is often depicted as exotic, which raises sexual desire in the desert, as it is the case in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. This seems to be one of the aims of travel literature.

Indeed, Lewis' book fits perfectly within the colonial textual context and the "civilizing mission" of the colonizer as it reinforces colonial biases and perpetuates stereotypes and misconceptions about North Africa and its Berber people, particularly mining women, whom Lewis describes as "the darkest because they are more often out in the sun than the other" (Lewis 45). The question of "othering" and subordinating indigenous people is immanent in the whole book. Lewis asked his satirical questions: "by whom French North Africa is inhabited?" (Lewis 43), "by whom the Maghreb is peopled?" (Lewis 45) to reveal and reinforce the colonial imaginary of North Africa's culture and its people. Furthermore, Lewis focuses on Moroccan Berber women to represent them as being passive, secluded, veiled figures and hypersexualized. They are further oppressed by colonial power.

Finally, in his *Journey into Barbary*, Lewis relocates traditional gender structures, redefines women's spaces, and unsettles male-dominated social and religious systems. The female characters, whether the prostitutes in Agadir's brothel or the women working in the mines, articulate their own forms of power and authority, resisting the conventional stereotypes of victimization and exclusion. Through these portrayals, the narrative reveals how women carve out spaces of influence within marginalized or overlooked domains. At the same time, the gender discourse intersects with questions of racial identity, probing issues of ethnicity, origins, belonging, and affiliations that are central to the construction of Moroccan cultural identity.

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Crossings: A Journal of English Studies

Volume 16 | 2025 | ISSN 2071–1107 | E-ISSN 2958-3179

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