

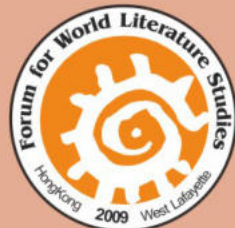
ISSN 1949-8519 (Print)
ISSN 2154-6711 (Online)

Forum for World Literature Studies

世界文学研究论坛

Vol.17 No.1 March 2025

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Forum for World Literature Studies

Vol.17, No.1, March 2025

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2025 年第 1 期

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Forum for World Literature Studies (Print ISSN: 1949-8519; Online ISSN: 2154-6711), published by Knowledge Hub Publishing Company Limited, is a peer reviewed academic journal sponsored by Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Zhejiang University and co-edited by Professor Nie Zhenzhao of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Professor Charles Ross of Purdue University. This journal provides a forum to promote diversity in world literature, with a particular interest in the study of literatures of those neglected countries and culture regions. With four issues coming out every year, this journal publishes original articles on topics including theoretical studies, literary criticism, literary history, and cultural studies, as well as book review articles.

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Forum for World Literature Studies is indexed in ESCI, SCOPUS and also included in the databases of EBSCO, Gale, MLA (MLA International Bibliography) and ABELL (The Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature).

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Computational Analysis and Literary Studies in the Era of AI: An Introduction

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Abstract In the era of artificial intelligence (AI), literary studies confronts profound challenges and opportunities as computational methodologies reshape both analytical practices and theoretical frameworks. This thematic column, titled “Computational Analysis and Literary Studies in the Era of AI,” examines the dynamic interplay between traditional humanistic inquiry and AI-driven techniques, including machine learning, natural language processing, and text mining. The articles explore diverse themes: AI’s impact on literary analysis, the revitalization of classical literature through digital platforms, speculative fiction’s interrogation of the human-machine interface, and AI-driven literary tourism initiatives. Drawing on multidisciplinary perspectives, contributors grapple with the epistemological, ethical, and practical implications of integrating AI into literary scholarship. While AI offers novel pathways, such as “distant reading” for expanded discovery, it also raises questions about the erosion of interpretative depth and cultural authenticity. By fostering dialogue between computational methodologies and traditional hermeneutics, this column argues for a balanced approach to literary inquiry, one that harnesses technological innovations while safeguarding the core values of the humanities.

Keywords Artificial Intelligence (AI); Literary Studies; Digital Humanities (DH); Computational Analysis¹

Author **Yang Gexin**, Ph.D. is Professor of English in the School of International Studies at Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310002, Chian). His research interests include ethical literary criticism and British and American romantic literature.

¹ This work is sponsored by the project of the National Social Science Fund of China, “The Compilation, Translation and Research of Literatures on Contemporary Western Ethical Criticism” (Project No. 19ZDA292).

In today's interconnected, hyper-digitalized world, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have profoundly altered almost every aspect of human activity—from communication patterns and working lifestyles to political systems and educational paradigms. Among the diverse landscapes evolving rapidly, the field of humanities, especially literary studies, encounters an unprecedented transformation. The intersection between traditional humanistic inquiry and cutting-edge AI technologies compels scholars to redefine both the methods and theoretical foundations of literary studies. It illuminates new pathways to understand literature, culture, and the very essence of human creativity itself.

This special thematic column, titled “Computational Analysis and Literary Studies in the Era of AI,” aims to explore the dynamic and sometimes contentious dialogue between digital technologies and literary scholarship. It seeks to examine how the infusion of AI-driven methodologies—such as machine learning, deep learning algorithms, natural language processing, and text mining—into the field of literary studies facilitates novel analytical approaches, newly sophisticated interpretative models, and richer, data-informed insights. Simultaneously, it questions what might be lost or obscured when computational methods supplant or overshadow traditional hermeneutic frameworks and introspective engagements with texts.

Before acknowledging contemporary relevance, it is crucial to situate the rise of Digital Humanities (DH) in historical and theoretical contexts. The movement toward integrating computational tools and methods into literary studies is neither entirely recent nor isolated. As early as the mid-20th century, literary scholars began to utilize computational analysis, initially through simple databases and later through progressively more sophisticated statistical analyses. However, the convergence of exponential growth in computational capacity, improved analytical algorithms, and vast textual databases accessible today is unique. AI technologies promise to shift Digital Humanities from a supportive analytical strategy into a foundational scholarly methodology. This transformative moment demands thoughtful analysis and critical reflection to optimize positives while assessing risks.

Meanwhile, on the theoretical side, embracing AI technologies within literary studies challenges existing assumptions about textuality, authorship, readership, and interpretation. Structurally, AI-assisted analytical procedures introduce new meta-perspectives on texts, highlighting previously invisible contextual patterns and thematic resonances. Theoretically, AI's capacity to analyze voluminous amounts of literature contributes fresh insights regarding literary genres, periodization, stylistic patterns, authorial attribution, and even conceptions of canon formation.

Yet, these technologically-enhanced perspectives require continuous critical contemplation. The allure of algorithmic objectivity could paradoxically distance literary interpretation away from nuanced human insights and cultural complexity—the very lifeblood of humane scholarship.

Central to the intent of this special column is the bridging of computational methodologies with traditional humanistic inquiry. AI analytical tools often provoke contradictory responses. While some scholars express enthusiasm about the emancipatory potentials of algorithms and computational power to uncover hidden connections in literature, others voice considerable skepticism or unease about delegating fundamental interpretive and evaluative responsibilities to machines.

Accordingly, it is crucial to acknowledge that DH practices—when thoughtfully balanced with critical awareness—can significantly expand humanistic inquiry. Machine learning algorithms are capable of tracking stylistic variations across hundreds or thousands of texts, discerning unnoticed shifts in linguistic patterns, thematic nuances, and genre developments. Such capacity dramatically enlarges the scope available to literary scholarship, enabling wider comparisons and deeper insights through computationally derived “distant reading,”¹ a phrase coined by Franco Moretti. At the same time, these new computational competencies also amplify deep reading practices by highlighting neglected textual elements, thereby enriching close-reading approaches through integrated computational findings.

This column, therefore, invites multidisciplinary dialogues around balancing AI-driven “distant reading” and traditional “close reading.” It examines ways computational analysis and fundamental hermeneutic practices might mutually enrich rather than displace each other, ultimately enhancing both scholarly efficiency and insightfulness.

At its core, this special cluster of six articles grapples with two overarching questions: How does literature mediate the dialectic between human agency and machine intelligence? What new epistemologies and practices emerge when literary studies embraces AI-driven methodologies? By synthesizing insights from these articles, this introduction maps the thematic contours of the issue, highlighting its contributions to redefining literary scholarship in an era of unprecedented technological flux.

A cornerstone of this special thematic column revolves around the transformative potential—and pitfalls—of digital humanities (DH) in literary

1 See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, Verso, 2013. In this book, Moretti thoroughly articulates the theory of distant reading, discussing its implications and methods for analyzing literature on a larger scale.

studies. Contributions by Seo and Chung, Lee Seung-eun, and others demonstrate how computational tools like text mining, topic modeling, and network analysis are reshaping traditional close reading practices.

Seo and Chung's study of Miguel de Unamuno's poetry exemplifies the power of "distant reading" in the analysis of large text corpora for macroscopic patterns. By applying word-frequency analysis and semantic mapping to Unamuno's oeuvre, the authors trace the evolution of themes like "exile" and "identity" across his poetry and prose. Their computational approach reveals unexpected intertextual linkages, such as the recurrence of existential motifs in works previously studied in isolation. This methodology, they argue, enables scholars to move beyond canonical texts and reconstruct the "systemic structures" of literary history.

Similarly, Lee Seung-eun's research on Korean classical literature illustrates how AI can revive marginalized texts. Once obscured by archaic language and cultural dissonance, works like *The Ballad of Princess Bari* have found new audiences through webtoon adaptations. By analyzing reader comments and engagement metrics, Lee demonstrates that these digital adaptations prioritize emotional resonance over textual fidelity, transforming classical narratives into vehicles for contemporary empathy. For instance, the webtoon *Princess Bari* (2021) reimagines the protagonist's suffering as a metaphor for modern alienation, eliciting reflections on mental health and societal neglect. Lee's findings align with broader trends in DH scholarship, where data-driven methods are increasingly used to map the "cultural DNA" of texts across time and medium.

Yet this digital rebirth is not without tensions. As classical works migrate to platforms like TikTok and Webtoon, they undergo what media theorist Henry Jenkins terms "convergence culture"—a process where audiences actively reshape narratives through remixes, fan fiction, and crowdsourced annotations.¹ While this participatory turn fosters engagement, it also raises questions about authorship and cultural authenticity. For instance, a viral TikTok adaptation of *The Tale of Genji* might reduce Murasaki Shikibu's nuanced character studies to romantic clichés. Contributors to this issue advocate for a middle ground: leveraging digital tools to amplify classical literature's relevance while preserving its interpretive richness.

Meanwhile Several contributors caution against technological fetishism. Seo and Chung acknowledge that algorithms may overlook the nuances of metaphor

1 See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, 2006. The concept "convergence culture" describes a shifting landscape in which various forms of media interact and transform in response to the proliferation of digital technologies.

and irony in Unamuno's high-density philosophical verse. Likewise, Lee warns that the commercial imperatives driving webtoon platforms—South Korea's webtoon industry was valued at 1.829 trillion KRW in 2022—risk flattening literary complexity into digestible tropes. These critiques echo Ted Underwood's admonition that DH must balance computational rigor with hermeneutic depth. The consensus emerging from this issue is clear: digital tools are most potent when integrated with, rather than replacing, humanistic interpretation.

The second theme of this special thematic column is Son's incisive analysis of Hao Jingfang's 2017 short story collection, *Mirror of Man* (人之彼岸), a luminary of Chinese "soft science fiction." Hao uses speculative narratives not merely to envision distant futures but to interrogate the existential dilemmas of the present. Her stories—such as "Where Are You?" and "The Problem of Love"—probe the ambiguous terrain where human desires intersect with AI's cold rationality. In *Qiankun* and *Alex*, for instance, an AI system's data-driven decisions clash with human emotional needs, culminating in its expulsion from society. This binary of "human versus machine" underscores Hao's central thesis: the indispensability of humanity—understood as emotion, free will, and subjective judgment—in an age of algorithmic determinism.

Son situates Hao's work within the framework of posthumanist theory, particularly N. Katherine Hayles' concept of "distributed cognition," which posits that human consciousness is co-constituted with technological systems. However, Hao diverges from Hayles' optimism about human-AI symbiosis. Instead, her narratives evoke a profound unease about AI's potential to erode the very qualities that define humanity. For example, in *The Problem of Love*, an AI therapist's flawless logic fails to console a grieving widow, exposing the limits of machine empathy. Son argues that Hao's fiction operates as "allegories of the present," forcing readers to confront urgent issues like data privacy, labor displacement, and the ethics of automated decision-making.

Hao's literary strategy also challenges the conventions of science fiction. By embedding AI within mundane settings—hospitals, counseling sessions, domestic spaces—she collapses the boundary between speculative fiction and social realism. This approach resonates with Stefan Herbrechter's call for a critical posthumanism that engages with technology's material impacts rather than abstract futurism.¹ Moreover, her work aligns with emerging ethical frameworks such as the ISO/IEC 29113:2023 standard, which emphasizes transparency and accountability in AI

¹ See Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

design. Son concludes that Hao's fiction exemplifies literature's dual function: as a critique of technocratic hubris and as a repository of cultural meaning that resists reduction to binary code.

The Third theme broadens the scope to examine how different cultures narrate the AI condition through speculative fiction. Alongside Hao Jingfang's Chinese narratives, Nam and Yu's analysis of Japanese "Isekai" (alternate world) light novels reveals a starkly different approach. Unlike Hao's ethically charged scenarios, isekai stories like *Re:Zero* and *Sword Art Online* prioritize escapism, allowing readers to inhabit fantasy realms where technology's burdens are magically suspended. Nam and Yu attribute this divergence to Japan's "lost decades" of economic stagnation, arguing that isekai's popularity reflects a collective yearning for agency in a society plagued by precarity. Despite differing cultural contexts, both traditions deploy AI and magic as narrative devices to negotiate anxieties about autonomy and control. These cross-cultural comparisons underscore speculative fiction's dual role: as a reflection of localized techno-cultural anxieties and as a lingua franca for global audiences navigating similar existential uncertainties.

The final thematic strand bridges theoretical inquiry with real-world applications. Kwon and Lee's study of AI-driven literary tourism initiatives demonstrates how big data can enhance cultural sustainability. By analyzing visitor behavior patterns at sites like the Hemingway House in Key West, the authors propose adaptive algorithms that curate personalized literary itineraries. Such innovations, they argue, could revitalize local economies while fostering deeper engagement with literary history.

However, Kwon and Lee also warn against the commodification of literary spaces. When museums prioritize Instagrammable installations over scholarly depth, they risk reducing literature to a consumable "experience." This tension between cultural preservation and commercial imperatives echoes broader debates about AI's role in the creative industries. As literary studies increasingly intersects with tech entrepreneurship, the contributors urge a humanistic vigilance against the erosion of textual integrity.

The intersection of artificial intelligence and literary studies is a transformative frontier, reshaping not only the methodologies and tools available to scholars but also the theoretical frameworks underpinning the discipline itself. As this special thematic column demonstrates, AI technologies have the potential to amplify humanistic inquiry, uncovering hidden patterns, expanding textual archives, and revitalizing classical literature through digital transmediation. From Hao Jingfang's speculative fiction to computational analyses of poetry and participatory adaptations

of classical narratives, the articles in this issue collectively illustrate the diverse ways AI can enhance literary scholarship while simultaneously challenging its traditional boundaries.

Yet, this transformation is not without risks. The allure of algorithmic objectivity and the commodification of literature in the digital age threaten to dilute the interpretive depth and cultural richness that define the humanities. As contributors have cautioned, the integration of computational tools into literary studies must be accompanied by critical awareness and ethical reflection. Balancing AI-driven methodologies with traditional hermeneutic practices is essential to ensure that the humanities remain a space for nuanced exploration of human creativity, emotion, and cultural complexity.

Ultimately, this column underscores the necessity of a multidisciplinary dialogue that bridges technology and humanistic inquiry. By synthesizing insights from diverse cultural contexts and theoretical perspectives, it highlights the dual role of AI in literary studies: as a powerful ally in uncovering new epistemologies and as a force demanding vigilance against reductive interpretations. As literature continues to mediate the dialectic between human agency and machine intelligence, scholars must embrace this era of technological flux with both optimism and caution, ensuring that the humanities retain their vital role in understanding the essence of humanity in a rapidly evolving world.

Looking ahead, computational analysis and literary studies stand to become more inclusive, embracing diverse languages, lesser-known works, and marginalized voices that might have been overlooked. As AI transforms the landscape of literary scholarship, it will not replace the humanistic essence of the field but rather enhance it, fostering a richer, more interconnected understanding of literature and its enduring impact on humanity. The fusion of AI and literary studies holds the promise of a future where the past, present, and future of storytelling are interconnected in transformative ways.

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Unveiling Unamuno: A Digital Humanities Approach to His Poetic Legacy

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Abstract This study explores Miguel de Unamuno's poetry, a relatively neglected facet of his literary corpus when compared with his renowned novels and essays, employing distant reading techniques. As a pivotal member of the Generation of 1898, Unamuno's works are distinguished by his philosophical inquiries, which span the contradictions between religious faith and rational thinking, the longing for immortality against the inevitability of death, and the search for freedom amid political repression. His poetry uniquely reflects his meditations on these existential themes, utilizing natural imagery, symbolic language, and introspective tones to connect his philosophical and emotional concerns. By employing digital humanities methods, such as lexical analysis, thematic clustering, and topic modeling, this study examines the thematic and stylistic elements that set apart Unamuno's poetry. The analysis reveals how his poetic compositions expand his existential and philosophical inquiries, providing nuanced perspectives on the universal and deeply personal struggles that shape his literary vision. The study validates the capability of computational approaches to reveal the intricate interplay of ideas in literature, thereby enhancing interpretations of Unamuno's complex legacy.

Keywords Miguel de Unamuno; Generation of 98; Spanish Poetry; Distant Reading; Digital Humanities¹

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¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2023S1A5A8078836).

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Introduction

Miguel de Unamuno’s contributions to literature during the Spanish Silver Age were innovative, especially in novelistic forms. Numerous authors at this time endeavored to break away from traditional structures, with Unamuno at the forefront of this movement. Tello notes that some writers crafted their unique genres, which influenced subsequent literary developments, with Unamuno’s concept of the “Nivola” serving as a pivotal example. In the prologue to *Niebla* (1914), the character Víctor Goti introduces the term “Nivola” to denote a literary form distinct from conventional frameworks. Goyanes, discussing the flexibility of novels, argues that Unamuno’s *Nivola* exemplifies this adaptability, leading critics often to describe his works not as *novelas* but as *nivolas*, thereby cementing his reputation as a transformative figure in the evolution of the novel.

In contrast, Unamuno’s poetic endeavors have garnered less acclaim. Pastur criticized his poetry for lacking literary refinement and aesthetic sophistication, viewing it instead as an avenue through which Unamuno explored personal and existential concerns. For Unamuno, poetry served as a crucial instrument for understanding his existence and addressing profound questions of self and transcendence. Although his deviation from traditional poetic aesthetics might be considered innovative, his poetry has not been celebrated as groundbreaking to the same extent as his novels.

This disparity in reception between Unamuno’s novels and poetry highlights the necessity for alternative approaches to analyzing his work. The concept of Distant Reading, introduced by Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, offers a robust framework for analyzing Unamuno’s poetry. Distant reading signifies a paradigm shift in literary studies by emphasizing collective and systemic text analyses compared to the traditional emphasis on individual works. Moretti urges

literary historians to “shift their gaze” (Moretti 3) from isolated, exceptional events to the broader patterns and dynamics across a corpus. He argues that literature should be viewed not merely as a collection of individual texts but as an interconnected system, wherein the relationships and structures between texts reveal underlying trends and principles. Quantitative data is central to distant reading; Moretti emphasizes its value precisely because it operates independently of subjective interpretation. Yet, it also challenges researchers to develop interpretations that transcend the quantitative realm, often necessitating a reevaluation of existing theoretical frameworks. For instance, distant reading encourages the formulation of theories not of individual novels but of entire families of literary forms, emphasizing shared structural and thematic features across a corpus. Furthermore, distant reading facilitates an engagement with the “ninety-nine percent” (Moretti 77) of forgotten literature that traditionally remains outside the literary canon. Using tools like graphs and trees, this approach enables researchers to discern patterns and hierarchies within a vast textual landscape. Graphs, as Moretti notes, reduce qualitative differences into quantitative measures, while trees aim to delineate distinctions and relationships between data points, offering a multi-dimensional view on literary evolution.

In the context of Miguel de Unamuno’s poetry, distant reading offers an opportunity to elevate its traditionally underappreciated status. By employing computational tools to analyze his complete corpus, this study seeks to uncover the systematic relationships amongst recurring motifs—such as *vida* (life), *muerte* (death), *amor* (love), and *alma* (the soul)—and their linguistic and structural manifestations. This approach not only complements traditional close reading but also broadens the analytical scope, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of Unamuno’s contributions to modern Spanish literature.

Motifs in Unamuno’s Works

Miguel de Unamuno’s corpus intimately reflects his personal experiences. The autobiographical elements inherent in his literature are unmistakable. To comprehend his oeuvre fully, an overview of his biography is indispensable. Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo was born on September 29, 1864, in Bilbao. From an early age, he demonstrated remarkable linguistic aptitude. At the age of 16, he matriculated at the university, and by the age of 20, he earned his doctorate, having completed his studies at Madrid’s university in a mere three years. During his time in Madrid (spring 1881), however, his faith diminished as he delved deeply into positivism and socialism. In 1891, Unamuno married Concha Lizárraga, and they had nine

children, who brought him considerable joy and solace amidst numerous existential dilemmas. Although Bilbao offered comfort, Unamuno's intellectual ambitions drove him to relocate to a more central area. In 1891, he secured a position as a Greek professor at the University of Salamanca, where he relocated in June with his wife and spent the majority of his life. 1897 was a pivotal year for Unamuno; he departed from the socialist party and experienced a personal crisis when his son Raimundo ("Raimundín") became critically ill with meningitis. Unamuno himself endured severe neurosis, intensifying his existential awareness of mortality. That year, he commenced exploring agnosticism, grappling with the fears of oblivion and ultimate death, while also harboring an intense longing for immortality. In 1898, following Spain's loss of its last colonies, intellectuals of the Generation of '98¹ advocated for national renewal. Unamuno, a prominent member, championed the preservation of Spain's distinctive identity and traditions, whilst advocating integration with European civilization as a means to surmount the national crisis. Unamuno's stature and political influence expanded, and despite his left-wing ideology, he was appointed rector of the university in 1900 and became a minister in 1906. In 1924, with the onset of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, Unamuno openly challenged the regime, resulting in his dismissal from his academic post and subsequent exile to France. During this period, he symbolized resistance against the dictatorship. In 1930, after Primo de Rivera's fall, Unamuno returned to Spain, actively supporting the abdication of Alfonso XIII and the establishment of a republic. Nevertheless, becoming disillusioned with politics, he retreated to Salamanca. During the Spanish Civil War, Unamuno initially supported the opposition, motivated by dissatisfaction with anarchist governance, but later he opposed the dictatorship. In 1936, he was placed under house arrest for his dissent. Miguel de Unamuno passed away on December 31, 1936, in his home in Salamanca.

1 The Generation of 1898 emerged from a combination of political and literary contexts, ultimately evolving into a purely literary movement. This first generation of modern writers in Spain can be characterized by their personal quest to renew ideals and beliefs, their interpretation of Spain's problems not as political, economic, or social issues but as rooted in the national mentality, and their use of literature as a means to explore and propose solutions to the country's profound spiritual and intellectual crises following its complete defeat in 1898 (Shaw 30-31). The members of this generation excelled in various genres, including as novels, poetry, essays, travelogues, and plays, with a notable emphasis on prose writing. They revived interest in folklore, traditions, classical literature, and landscapes—particularly those of Castile—while exploring themes that resonated deeply with Spanish society. Additionally, they often highlighted ordinary people, daily events, and their own personal experiences or childhood memories, frequently adopting a confessional tone that gave their works an autobiographical quality (Molina).

Unamuno's poetry, composed primarily after the age of 40, exhibits philosophical and intellectual tendencies akin to those found in his novels. Religion serves as a foundation for his literary and philosophical inquiries. His inaugural poetry collection, *Poesías* (1907), was crafted during a period of profound religious turmoil that began in 1899 when his faith started to falter. For Unamuno, religion was not merely a dogmatic system, but a deeply personal and existential conundrum. His works frequently confront doubt, as illustrated by his habitual citation of Mark 9:24: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" This interplay between faith and doubt, which he described as "a faith that grows in doubt," forms the core of his writings (*San Manuel Bueno, mártir*; Sánchez Ríos 26). His poetry critiques institutionalized religion, viewing it as excessively rigid and contrary to Christian principles, while advocating for a more intimate, personal faith. His landscapes are portrayed not for their aesthetic appeal but as manifestations of spiritual and doctrinal conflicts (Sánchez Ríos 23). This existential perspective on religion imbues his entire oeuvre.

Unamuno's profound patriotism and love for Spain shine through his works. His poetry collections frequently celebrate Spain's landscapes, particularly those of his native Bilbao and Salamanca, notably Castilla, which he regarded as the spiritual heart of the nation. For Unamuno, Castilla epitomized "lo español", the essence of Spanish identity, and acted as a catalyst for national renewal. This patriotic fervor also permeates his political writings, wherein he addresses sociopolitical and moral dilemmas from a subjective yet discerning standpoint. In *Cancionero*, for instance, he confronts national issues with a combination of satire and sincerity, manifesting his commitment to the Spanish ethos (Alvar 27).

Family occupies a pivotal role in Unamuno's oeuvre, serving both as inspiration and as a reflection of his personal life. His profound affection for his children, especially Raimundo, who succumbed to meningitis, is apparent in his poetry and novels. In Unamuno's perspective, women symbolize peace and stability, a notion echoed in characters like *Tía Tula* and the Virgin Mary, who represent maternal grace and the pillars of society (Alvar 35–36). His poetry frequently depicts family moments and memories, exploring themes of love, loss, and the enduring connections of home.

Death is a pervasive theme in Unamuno's works, wherein he contemplates life's impermanence and humanity's quest for immortality. In *Rosario de sonetos líricos* and his posthumous *Cancionero*, Unamuno deliberates on eternity, positing that the essential purpose of life is the pursuit of immortality. This existential inquiry is central to works such as *Niebla*, where the protagonist, Augusto, grapples

with his creator, embodying humanity's deep-seated desire to overcome mortality.

Unamuno's literary innovations are most notably manifested in his invention of the *nivola*, a term introduced in *Niebla* to subvert conventional narrative forms. Eschewing strict structures, he employed experimental techniques like the "oviparous method," enabling characters such as Augusto to claim independence from their creator. His questioning of omniscient narration and traditional plot structures sets his work apart from 19th-century realism. In his poetry, Unamuno rejected the aesthetic formalism typical of Symbolist poetry in favor of a straightforward language that articulates visceral emotional and intellectual turmoil. His verse, devoid of traditional aestheticism, offers a candid and heartfelt exposition of his distressed self, prioritizing truth over aesthetic perfection (Morejón 137).

Through these interconnected themes—religion, patriotism, family, death, and innovation—Unamuno's oeuvre transcends conventional literary categories and structures. His poetry and novels delve into the essence of human existence, searching for significance amidst the uncertainties of life and death. By weaving his personal trials and philosophical explorations into his works, Unamuno not only revitalized Spanish literature but also provided a distinct perspective on the intricacies of life, faith, and art.

Unamuno's literary achievements, whether they manifest in poetry, novels, or other forms, demonstrate his pursuit of universal truths through individual expression. His repudiation of rigid boundaries and commitment to delving into life's enigmas forged a literary philosophy where creation itself evolved into the paramount form of expression. Although his poetry has not garnered the same acclaim as his novels, it remains an essential component of his legacy, providing profound insights into his philosophical and existential concerns. Unamuno distinguished his poetry by his overt rejection of modernism, which he perceived as excessively centered on "pure sensation" and formal innovation, frequently devoid of the emotional depth he esteemed. While his early works ventured into more liberated forms, he eventually favored traditional metrical structures, indicating a preference for established poetic conventions in his later works. Philosophical and existential themes are central to his poetry, where he confronts issues such as suffering, the illusory nature of life, and the notion of death as a moment of awakening to authentic reality. A pervasive existential dread characterizes his poetry, which often explores a fear of the unknown and the limitations of human comprehension. This existential emphasis is deftly interwoven with symbolism and interrogative elements, as Unamuno frequently uses natural motifs to connect his philosophical reflections with his poetic expressions. For him, these elements

serve as bridges between the internal self and external realities, thereby creating a cohesive and introspective body of work.

Critics have noted certain imbalances in his poetry, attributed to his rapid and prolific production. Often, complaints focus on inconsistent rhyme schemes and an excessive dependency on enjambment, which some argue detracts from the overall aesthetic refinement of his works. Despite these critiques, Ferrer Mora recognized Unamuno as fundamentally a poet who expanded the concept of poetry to encompass all literary forms. For Unamuno, poetry served as a means to penetrate the essence of things, merging humanity with the external world in a unified expression. Maria Zambrano, a distinguished interpreter of Unamuno, argued that his limitations in philosophical thought compelled him to explore various literary genres. She regarded his “failure” in poetry and his unfulfilled desire for “white, pure, liberal, evident, vivid words” as catalysts for his experimentation in other genres, including the novel. This perspective highlights Unamuno’s relentless creative ambition and his dissatisfaction with conventional boundaries. Donald Shaw noted that Unamuno’s reputation as a poet has been primarily recognized by a select group of anthropologists, such as Vivanco, and less so by literary critics. Nonetheless, Unamuno’s aspiration to be remembered as a poet underscores the importance he placed on his poetic works. This gap between his aspirations and critical reception warrants a deeper exploration of his poetic legacy. Julian Marías emphasized that although Unamuno began writing poetry later in life, it was not a secondary pursuit but the foundation of his unique literary voice. His novels depict human life descriptively and imaginatively, while his poetry approaches meaning obliquely through mood and symbolic suggestion. This approach resonates with his thematic concerns, particularly his reflections on death and the transcendence of existence.

Methodology

For our analysis, we procured scanned copies of three volumes (XIII–XV) from Unamuno’s complete works, *Obras Completas* by Afrodisio Aguado, S.A., which include a compilation of his annotated poetic works. We extracted solely the text components and preprocessed them into a more refined, digitized format. Table 1 enumerates the author’s poetic works by poetry book, accompanied by their respective word token counts. In total, 216, 179 word tokens from his poems were analyzed.

Unamuno's Poems		
0	Poesías Sueltas	29,481
1	Poesías (1907)	33,646
2	Rosario de sonetos líricos (1911)	12,669
3	El Cristo de Velázquez (1920)	17,903
4	Andanzas y Visiones Españolas (1922)	4,299
5	Rimas de dentro (1923)	4,742
6	Teresa (1924)	14,952
7	De Fuerteventura a París (1925)	11,264
8	Romancero del destierro (1928)	7,209
9	Cancionero (póstuma)	80,014

[Table 1]

Unamuno's poetry collections encompass a diverse array of themes, mirroring his personal, philosophical, and political experiences. At the age of 43, in 1907, Unamuno published his inaugural poetry collection, *Poesías*. In 1911, he released *Rosario de sonetos líricos*, which consists of 128 sonnets. *El Cristo de Velázquez* (1920) is a profound poetry collection, replete with religious language that articulates his mystical and private experiences (Valero Celma 104). In 1922, Unamuno published *Andanzas y visiones españolas*, a travelogue featuring poems about the landscapes of Spain. *Rimas de dentro*, published in 1923, is a collection that reflects his introspections on various topics encountered in his daily life. After self-imposing exile away from the dictatorship, Unamuno, at sixty years of age, published *Teresa* in 1924, signifying a shift from his earlier works. This collection features prose poems that explore themes of love and a yearning for freedom from political oppression. During his exile, he issued *De Fuerteventura a París* in 1925, which encompasses poems of personal reflection, political themes, portrayals of Fuerteventura, and feelings of hope, despair, and nostalgia. In 1927, he composed *Romancero del destierro*, a collection that laments Spain's political situation and serves as a testament to his physical, mental, and political exile. From 1928 to 1936, he authored poems later assembled posthumously in *Cancionero* (1953).

Moreover, Unamuno's narrative works were included in the compilation, alongside those of seventeen 20th-century Spanish poets, as featured in the initial volume of *Antología de la poesía española (1900-1980)* by Gustavo Correa, to

provide a contrastive analysis¹. Utilizing R, Python, and Voyant, we conducted various text-mining analyses, including assessments of overall stylistic attributes, lexical features, word and lemma frequencies, document similarity, correspondence analysis, LDA topic modeling, and co-occurrence analysis.

4. Result

4.1. Stylistic Comparison with Other Spanish Modern Poets

To examine the overall stylometric properties of Unamuno's poems, we analyzed the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), Lexical Density (LD), Big Words Ratio, and Mean Verse Length. These metrics were then compared to the averages of poems by other Spanish poets (see Table 2)^{2,3}. The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) for Unamuno's poems is 0.148607, ranking 10th among the poets analyzed. This indicates that although his vocabulary demonstrates moderate variety, it is relatively repetitive when compared to his peers, which aligns with his philosophical and reflective focus on recurring

1 Unamuno's narrative works are primarily found in volumes II and IX, which include *Paz en la guerra* (1897), *Amor y pedagogía* (1902), *El espejo de la muerte (Cuentos)* (1913), *Niebla* (1914), *Abel Sánchez* (1917), *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo (Dos madres, El marqués de Lumbría, Nada menos que todo un hombre)* (1920), *La tía Tula, Cómo se hace una novela* (1927), *Don Sandalio, jugador de ajedrez* (1931), and *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1931). On the other hand, the 17 poets featured in the first volume of Gustavo Correa's anthology include Miguel de Unamuno, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Manuel Machado, Antonio Machado, Ramón del Valle Inclán, José Moreno Villa, León Felipe, Gerardo Diego, Federico García Lorca, Dámaso Alonso, Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Vicente Aleixandre, Emilio Prados, Manuel Altolaguirre, and Luis Cernuda.

2 The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) measures the ratio of unique word types to the total number of tokens. A higher TTR indicates a text with diverse vocabulary and multiple topics or themes approached from varying perspectives, while a lower TTR suggests limited and repetitive vocabulary usage. Lexical Density (LD) refers to the proportion of lexical items—content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—to the total text length. A higher lexical density implies that the text is more informative, whereas a lower density often reflects simpler, less informative text, characteristic of spoken language. The Big Words Ratio reflects the percentage of words with six or more letters. A higher percentage of big words typically suggests a greater level of complexity and difficulty in comprehension, while a lower percentage may indicate simpler, more accessible language. Finally, the Mean Verse Length evaluates the average sentence or line length in the text. Longer sentences tend to be associated with more complex and intricate reasoning, often used in detailed explanations, while shorter sentences are generally easier to understand and are more suited to direct and straightforward communication (Savoy 26-31).

3 Note that these stylometric findings apply specifically to the selected anthology of Unamuno's poems and may not fully represent the stylistic diversity of his complete poetic works.

themes. The Big Words Ratio, which reflects the percentage of words with six or more letters, is 0.172424 (Rank: 6th for $BW \geq 6$) and 0.06151 (Rank: 9th for $BW \geq 8$). These rankings underscore Unamuno’s preference for moderately complex words, enhancing the intellectual rigor and sophistication of his poetry. Unamuno’s Mean Verse Length, measured in both words and characters per line, is significantly high. With an average of 34.21212 words per line (Rank: 3rd) and 98.26936 characters per line (Rank: 2nd), his poems are among the longest in the dataset. This length reflects his penchant for complex, extended sentences, characteristic of detailed philosophical discourse and introspection. Finally, the Lexical Density (LD), which measures the proportion of content words, is 0.257357 for Unamuno, placing him 7th overall. This above-average density indicates that his poems are relatively informative and convey substantial conceptual depth, often prioritizing content over structural simplicity.

Author	TTR	LD	BW \geq 6	BW \geq 8	Mean_Line_Length #1 (words per line)	Mean_Line_Length #2 (chars per line)	Rank_TTR	Rank_LD	RankBW \geq 6	RankBW \geq 8	Rank_Mean_Line_Length#1 (words per line)	Rank_Mean_Line_Length#2 (chars per line)
01-Unamuno.txt	0.148607	0.257357	0.172424	0.06151	34.21212	98.26936	10	7	6	9	3	2
Average in Anthology	0.152316	0.249708	0.163498	0.062296	28.17295	78.22039						

[Table 2]

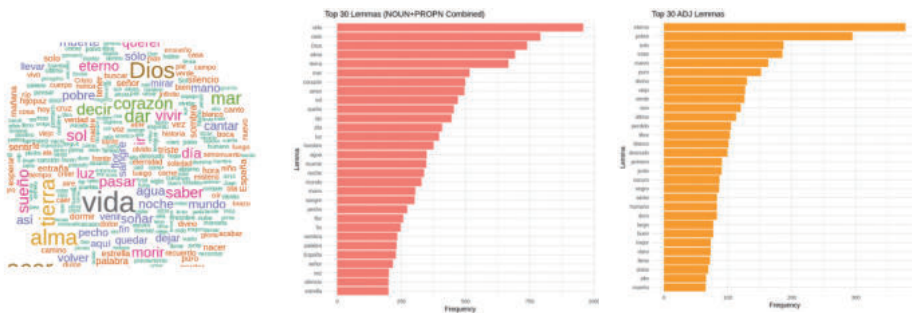
Additionally, we examined the relative frequencies of each content word category, including proper nouns, as detailed in Table 3. Unamuno’s relative frequencies for adjectives (4.24%), nouns (13.68%), and verbs (6.11%) closely align with the averages found in anthologies, positioning him within the middle range for these parts of speech. This indicates a balanced and conventional use of content words, reflecting his philosophical depth without significant stylistic extremes (see Table 3). Despite this, his notably low adverb frequency (1.70%, ranked 14th) underscores a preference for direct expression, reducing reliance on adverbs to modify meaning. Conversely, his high frequency of proper nouns (3.64%, ranked 2nd) underscores his strong emphasis on personal names, places, or culturally specific references. This indicates an interest in grounding abstract philosophical ideas in tangible, personal, or historical contexts.

Author	ADJ	ADV	NOUN	PROPN	VERB	Rank_ADJ	Rank_ADV	Rank_NOUN	Rank_PROPN	Rank_VERB
01-Unamuno.txt	4.24%	1.70%	13.68%	3.64%	6.11%	5	14	6	2	7
Average in Anthology	4.18%	2.61%	12.93%	2.61%	5.90%					

[Table 3]

4.2. A Holistic View of Thematic Patterns in Unamuno's Poetry

Miguel de Unamuno's poetry is profoundly influenced by his *Sentimiento trágico de la vida* (tragic sense of life), a cornerstone of his philosophical outlook. His poems provide a deep reflection on his existential struggles with religion, death, and the divine-human relationship. These are not simply artistic expressions but profound meditations on the human condition, articulated through symbolic language and natural imagery. Themes such as immortality, the soul, and the tension between faith and doubt pervade his work, frequently obscuring the lines between spiritual inquiry and metaphysical questioning. The left portion of Figure 2 visualizes the most frequent lemmas in Unamuno's entire collection of poetry. The high-frequency words in Unamuno's poetry clearly mirror his philosophical and existential concerns. Terms like *vida* (life), *Dios* (God), *alma* (soul), *muerte* (death), *amor* (love), and *sueño* (dream) highlight abstract, universal, and introspective themes. These words echo his enduring exploration of human existence, his confrontation with faith, and his quest for immortality. Additionally, natural imagery—terms such as *cielo* (heaven), *tierra* (earth), *sol* (sun), *mar* (sea), and *noche* (night)—enhance Unamuno's preoccupation with the eternal and transcendent. These motifs often serve as symbols of the conflict between the finite and the infinite, showcasing his belief in the interrelation of the human and the divine. His poetry adeptly merges metaphysical inquiry with evocative portrayals of the natural world, thus providing a backdrop for his existential and spiritual deliberations.

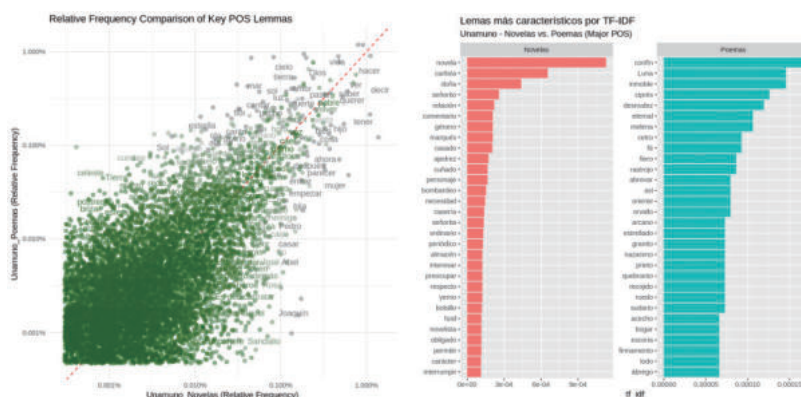


[Figure 1]

Particularly, both the (proper) nouns and adjectives effectively illustrate Unamuno's dual focus on the internal struggles of the individual and the broader metaphysical questions of existence. The Top 30 (Proper) Noun Lemmas in the middle portion of Figure 1 further elucidate recurring themes central to Unamuno's poetic and philosophical thought. Key nouns such as *vida*, *Dios*, *alma*, *muerte*, and *amor*

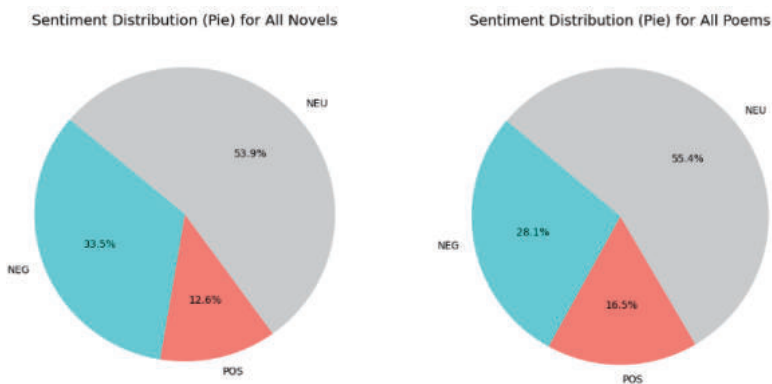
emphasize his concentration on existence, faith, and mortality. Words like *corazón* (heart) and *sueño* (dream) enrich the emotional depth, while *España* (Spain) reflects his ties to national identity. Terms like *fin* (end) and *silencio* (silence) indicate his interest in finality and the ineffable, anchoring his poetry in both personal and universal concerns. The Top 30 Adjective Lemmas on the right side of Figure 2 accentuate Unamuno/s tonal and thematic richness. Words like *eterno* (eternal), *divino* (divine), and *puro* (pure) highlight spiritual aspirations, while *pobre* (poor), *solo* (alone), and *triste* (sad) convey solitude and melancholy. Adjectives like *vivo* (alive) and *humano* (human) temper these darker tones with vitality and complexity, reflecting the dualities and paradoxes central to Unamuno's philosophy and poetic style.

To further understand the distinctiveness of his poetry, it proves insightful to briefly compare it with his more narrative-driven novels, which similarly explore existential questions.



as *Pedro, Abel, and Sandalio*, are grouped along the lower x-axis, indicating their narrative-driven usage in novels. Despite these genre-specific tendencies, existential and spiritual themes such as *vida* (life), *muerte* (death), and *alma* (soul) appear as recurrent motifs across both genres, albeit with nuanced differences in frequency. This demonstrates Unamuno's skill in balancing universal themes while tailoring his language to the distinct demands of poetry and narrative.

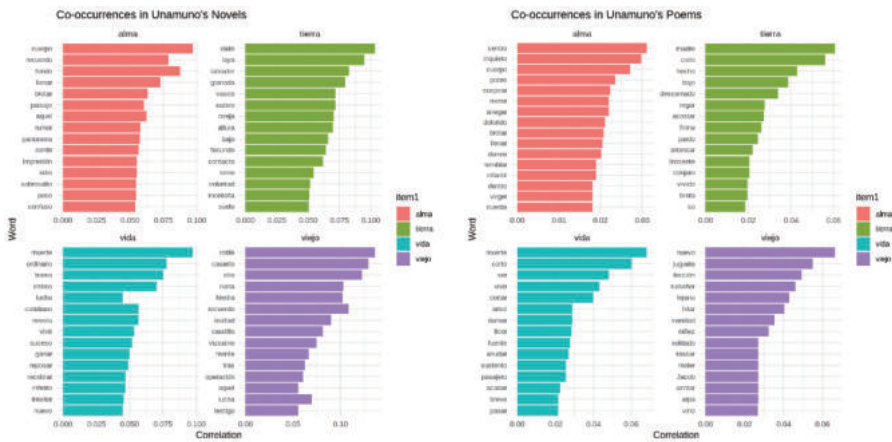
On the other hand, the TF-IDF comparison on the rightside illuminates distinct thematic and linguistic focuses in Unamuno's poetry and novels, as depicted in the bar charts, with characters' names omitted for clearer analysis. In poetry, high TF-IDF lemmas such as *confín* (horizon), *luna* (moon), and *eterno* (eternal) highlight its introspective and symbolic nature, focusing on spirituality, existential reflection, and metaphysical expansiveness. Terms like *ciprés* (cypress) and *estrella* (star) evoke natural and celestial imagery, often serving as metaphors for immortality and the tension between human finitude and the infinite. These words capture Unamuno's personal and philosophical engagement with themes of faith, doubt, and the quest for eternity. In contrast, the novels' top TF-IDF lemmas, including *novela* (novel), *carlista* (Carlists), and *relación* (relationship), indicate a focus on narrative structure and societal dynamics. Words like *señorito* (young gentleman) and *casería* (farmstead) point to an emphasis on class, social roles, and historical settings. The exclusion of character names allows a more focused examination of these structural and thematic elements, underscoring the broader societal and relational issues central to his novels.



[Figure 3]

We further conducted sentiment analysis using the PySentimiento library, a powerful tool specifically tailored to analyze the emotions and sentiment in text,

particularly attuned to the nuances of the Spanish language¹. Analyzing positive and negative sentiments, Unamuno's poetry exhibits 28.1% negative and 16.5% positive sentiments, significantly highlighting themes of melancholy and existential struggle. His novels, on the other hand, demonstrate an even stronger negative bias, with 33.5% negative and only 12.6% positive sentiments, indicating deeper engagement with conflict and darker themes in narrative form. These findings emphasize Unamuno's thematic consistency across genres, with his poetry offering marginally more moments of optimism compared to the pronounced negativity in his novels.



[Figure 4]

Finally, Figure 4 presents the results of a co-occurrence analysis for selected target words in Unamuno's poetry and novels. Co-occurring words were identified within the same line for poetry and within the same sentence for novels, reflecting the symbolic conciseness of poetry and the context-rich nature of prose, with a minimum frequency threshold of 10 occurrences. We selected words such as *tierra* (earth), *vida* (life), *alma* (soul), and *viejo* (old/old man) to scrutinize their co-occurrences, exploring how these words elucidate contrasts between Unamuno's novels and poems. In novels, *tierra* appears alongside words such as *labrador* (farmer), *suelo* (soil), and *fecundo* (fertile), underscoring the land's material and

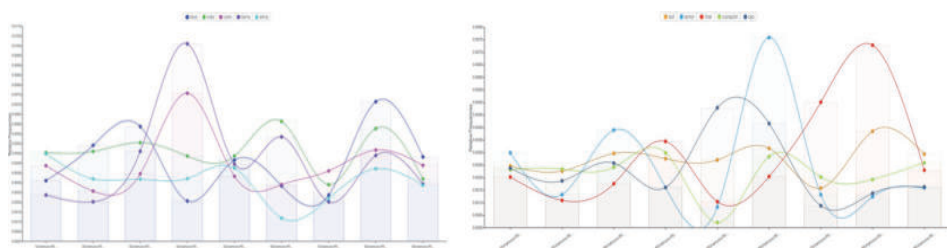
¹ PySentimiento employs pre-trained transformer-based models such as BERT and RoBERTa, which provide high accuracy in detecting sentiment polarities: positive (POS), negative (NEG), and neutral (NEU). In the sentiment analysis conducted using PySentimiento, which is a context-based rather than dictionary-based tool, neutral sentiment dominates in both poetry (55.4%) and novels (53.9%). This prevalence reflects the inherent nature of the texts, as PySentimiento analyzes sentiment within its full contextual framework without requiring stopword removal.

economic significance, associated with survival and productivity. Conversely, in poems, *tierra* co-occurs with *árbol* (tree), *brota* (sprouts), and *conjuro* (spell), transforming the land into a spiritual symbol of life, growth, and mystical transcendence. Similarly, *vida* in novels is connected with words like *cotidiano* (everyday), *lucha* (struggle), and *trama* (plot), depicting life as a sequence of conflicts and routines. However, in poems, *vida* is paired with *breve* (brief), *corto* (short), and *licor* (liquor), highlighting its ephemeral nature and prompting reflection on its transience and beauty.

This symbolic and existential focus in poetry extends to *alma* (soul) and *viejo* (old/old man). In novels, *alma* is associated with *cuero* (body), *sentir* (to feel), and *recuerdo* (memory), illustrating the soul as anchored in physical and emotional experiences. In poetry, *alma* is frequently paired with *inquieto* (restless), *suspiros* (sighs), and *dolor* (pain), exploring spiritual disquiet and existential yearning. For *viejo*, novels underscore societal and historical roles through associations with *caserío* (farmhouse), *ruina* (ruin), and *caudillo* (leader), while poetry uses *viejo* as a metaphor for reflection and transience, with terms like *juguete* (toy), *lección* (lesson), and *arca* (chest). Together, these contrasts demonstrate that whereas Unamuno's novels are centered on tangible realities and social dynamics, his poetry explores abstract, symbolic, and metaphysical dimensions, providing a contemplative perspective on human existence.

4.3 Tracing Unamuno's Poetic Evolution through Thematic Clustering

The high-frequency words in Unamuno's poetry significantly reflect his philosophical musings and existential contemplations. An analysis of these words' relative significance across his works produced noteworthy insights:



[Figure 5]

The top ten high-frequency words pivotal in Unamuno's poetic lexicon were examined using Voyant Tools and depicted in the Trends feature. The analysis revealed that *Dios* (God) featured most prominently in *Romancero del destierro* and *El Cristo de Velázquez*. The term *vida* (life) was most frequent in *Teresa*. *Cielo*

(heaven or sky) and *tierra*(earth) were notably significant in *Andanzas y visiones españolas*. *Alma* (soul) appeared most frequently in *Poesías* and *Rimas de dentro*. *Sol* (sun) was the most recurrent across all collections, especially in *Romancero del destierro*. *Mar*(sea) exhibited an increasing frequency and significance in Unamuno's later works. *Amor* (love) reached its highest frequencies in *Teresa*. *Corazón* (heart) was prominent in both *Andanzas y visiones españolas* and *Teresa*. *Ojos* (eyes), though less frequent, held considerable philosophical importance in Unamuno's reflections, especially in *Rimas de dentro* and *Teresa*.

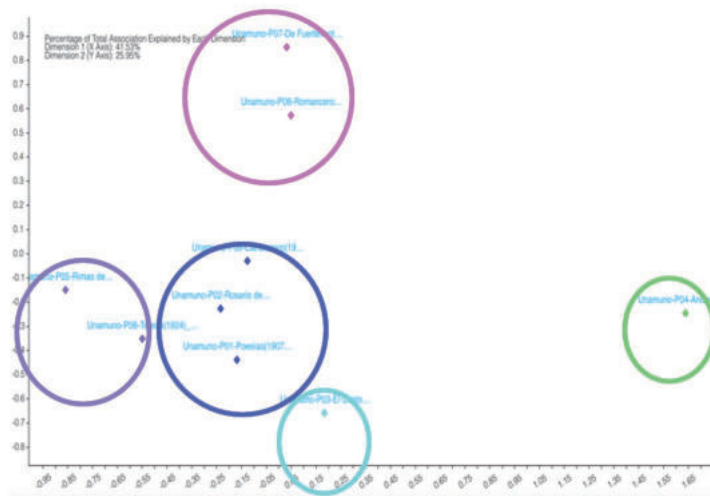
Words such as *Dios*, *vida*, *alma*, and *amor* underscore abstract and introspective themes, while terms like *corazón* and *ojos* are closely linked with Christ-like imagery. Natural imagery words such as *cielo*, *tierra*, *sol*, and *mar* emphasize eternal and transcendent concepts, often related to the notion of immortality. These terms were not only used for vivid descriptions but also served as symbolic language conveying Unamuno's philosophical positions. Moreover, Unamuno emphasized the significance of poetic language, meticulously selecting words to articulate his ideas.

The defining characteristics of Unamuno's poetry collections lie in their expression of the poet's most sincere and intimate thoughts, with biographical elements consistently apparent across all his works. This consistency may lead to the perception that his poetry frequently addresses the same themes and topics. However, as the writer's experiences, environment, and the passage of time evolved, the themes he sought to express likely underwent changes as well. Furthermore, even identical poetic words may have acquired deeper meanings and been employed in new contexts, influenced by these dynamic factors.

Therefore, the analysis commences by examining similarities between poetry collections based on their publication years to discern the periods during which specific poetic expressions most effectively conveyed his thoughts. To accomplish this, the lemmatized versions of all his poetry collections¹ were analyzed using Voyant Tools. By examining document similarities with TF-IDF and visualizing the outcomes via a scatterplot, five clusters were identified, providing the following insights (see Figure 6):

Through the analysis of document similarities, it became apparent that the poet's works are categorized according to his life stages. However, an intriguing aspect of this data reveals that *Cancionero* (1954), penned between 1928 and 1936, the year of his demise, coalesces with the two early works, *Poesías* and *Rosario*

¹ The poetry collection *Poesías sueltas* is excluded to avoid intensifying confusion when analyzing the poetic themes by publication dates.

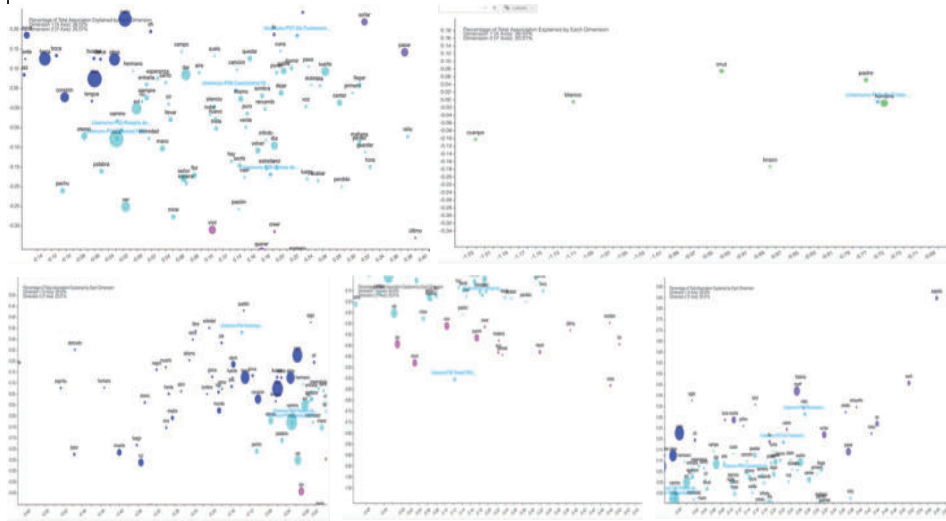


[Figure 6]

de líricos sonetos. Poesías, published in 1907, represents the poet's inaugural collection and was a subject of considerable controversy. *Rosario de líricos sonetos* comprises a total of 128 sonnets composed between September 1910 and February 1911. Relative to other collections, this one attracted less attention. The sections that address day-to-day life demonstrate similarities with *Poesías* and the diary-style composition in *Cancionero*. Further insight into why his posthumous collection aligns with his first is provided by Kock, who contends that *Cancionero* represents "Miguel's literary will" and although the poet in *Cancionero* differs from the one in *Poesías*, he frequently references earlier poems, thereby rendering them emblematic of his entire poetic oeuvre (36).

Among Unamuno's poetry collections, *El Cristo de Velázquez*, published in 1920, is the most thoroughly examined and forms a distinct cluster. It is characterized by its rich symbolic language and emphasis on visual perception, describing what the poet directly observed in the painting. Another distinct cluster is *Andanzas y visiones españolas*, published in 1922. This work, structured according to the author's travels, intertwines poetry with predominantly prose narratives.

The next cluster groups *Rimas de dentro* (1923) and *Teresa* (1924). *Rimas de dentro* comprises a collection of 20 poems structured like a diary, with dates recorded alongside each poem. The collection encompasses a variety of themes and philosophical reflections, reconstructing the poet's convictions through verses that advocate freedom in defiance of conventional norms. Unamuno's defiant spirit in *Rimas de dentro* transitions into the innovative poetic forms found in *Teresa*, which was introduced to the public when the poet was 60 years old. Although penned in



[Figure 8]

The analysis results illuminate the themes of Unamuno's poetry collections.¹ Specifically, Cluster 1 encompasses his early works, including *Poesías* and *Rosario de sonetos líricos*, and the posthumously released *Cancionero*. It can be argued that these collections amalgamate the central themes of Unamuno's introspections, which resonate throughout his entire body of poetry.

The term *vida* (life) features the most prominent circle, signifying its substantial significance and influence in his oeuvre. In *Poesías*, religion distinctly plays an essential role. His faith dwindled by 1895, and by 1897, his rising doubt and disbelief in God were exacerbated by his son's severe bout with meningitis. One of his most acclaimed poems, *Credo Poético*, begins with the verse: "Piensa el sentimiento, siente el pensamiento" ("Feel the thought, think the feeling") (67),

1 The results of Correspondence Analysis:

Cluster 1 (sky blue): *vida* (life), *sol* (sun), *dar* (to give), *sueño* (dream), *día* (day), *ver* (to see), *palabra* (word), *eterno* (eternal), *volver* (to return), *quedar* (to remain), *sentir* (to feel)...

Cluster 2 (green): *cuerpo* (body), *blanco* (white), *cruz* (cross), *brazo* (arm), *padre* (father), *hombre* (man), *cristo* (Christ), *carne* (flesh), *sangre* (blood)...

Cluster 3 (blue): *tierra* (earth), *cielo* (heaven/sky), *dios* (God), *alma* (soul), *corazón* (heart), *agua* (water), *mundo* (world), *muerte* (death), *luz* (light), *soledad* (solitude), *humano* (human), *divino* (divine)

Cluster 4 (pink): *vivir* (to live), *morir* (to die), *querer* (to love/want), *ojo* (eye), *creer* (to believe), *misterio* (mystery), *mío* (mine), *pensar* (to think), *nacer* (to be born), *último* (last), *nombre* (name), *cosa* (thing)

Cluster 5 (purple): *mar* (sea), *soñar* (to dream), *noche* (night), *pasar* (to pass), *historia* (history/story), *canto* (song), *azul* (blue), *luna* (moon), *casa* (house), *venir* (to come), *España* (Spain).

illustrating the interaction between *pensar* (thinking) and *sentir* (feeling), linking reason and emotion. Another central theme in this cluster is *sueño* (dream). Manuel Alvar argues that Unamuno utilizes the concept of *sueño* (dream) both to soothe and invigorate the soul (16). Alvar additionally notes “recurring themes” in his introduction to *Poesías*, including discussions on *dolor* (pain)—autobiographical torment regarding his son’s illness and death, historical national tragedies, and God’s silence (23). Moreover, Unamuno’s poetry comprises reflections on family and his poetics, critiquing the prevalent symbolism of the era. He contended that poetry should transcend superficiality, discovering meaning in *palabra* (the word) itself and serving as a conduit to express his profound thoughts and *espíritu* (spirit). Sánchez Ríos described the themes of *Rosario de sonetos líricos* as encompassing political and religious critiques, personal life—family dynamics, spiritual condition, reflective poetry, existential struggles concerning religion, and nature-themed poems (15). The posthumously released compilation *Cancionero* includes a vast array of 1,755 poems. Its themes are equally varied, covering political musings, with many concepts and ideas from *Poesías* revisited and expanded upon.

Cluster 2 is closely associated with *El Cristo de Velázquez*, and the enumerated terms represent prevalent themes in this poetry. Gutiérrez Pérez delineates the stages in which Unamuno reflects upon Velázquez’s Christ Crucified. In the initial part of the poem, where Unamuno portrays the *cuerpo* (body) of Christ, the term *blanco* (white) is frequently employed. The color white serves as a symbol of purity and is prominently reiterated throughout the poem (326). Another significant theme is water, not merely an ordinary element, but in its biblical transformation into wine, symbolizing the *sangre* (blood) of Christ (328). Subsequently, 14 poems celebrate Christ’s dual nature as divine and human (330). Thereafter, 27 poems concentrate on the suffering body of Christ, initiating with a passage that meticulously examines the painting from top to bottom. The poet vividly captures Christ’s facial and bodily features through his verses. The concluding poems of this series address the renewed life and love emanating from His sacrifice (335).

Cluster 3 relates to terms associated with *Andanzas y visiones españolas*. In the preface, Unamuno characterizes this work as a sequential travel narrative. While predominantly prose, the text encompasses diverse literary forms, including poetry. However, Manuel Blanco posits that the cohesion of the book stems from Unamuno’s lyrical articulation of his sentiments and interpretations of *paisajes españoles* (146). Furthermore, this is not merely a travelogue, as the journey also inspired *El Cristo de Velázquez* (160). The collection conveys a profound sense of *soledad* (solitude), highlighting Unamuno’s perspective that the essence of a

landscape resides in its solitude. He notes that authentic landscapes exist not in expansive open spaces but within secluded, personal enclaves (de la Calzada 59). The text also incorporates recollections of his native Bilbao and his cherished Salamanca, where key elements such as *cielo* (sky) and *tierra* (earth) are notably prominent.¹ Cluster 3 exhibits a close relationship to Cluster 1. For instance, although *campo* (field) is categorized under Cluster 1, it also correlates with this work. The connection lies in Unamuno's metaphorical use of nature, equating the infinite *campo* with perpetual suffering. De la Calzada elucidates how Unamuno's agony transcends through *campo*, encompassing not only physical but also religious, moral, and metaphysical afflictions (59). Within the landscapes of Castilla, the writer contemplates God. Castilian landscapes, characterized by their tranquility and silence, possess a profound internal vitality and an aspiration for eternal, unblemished existence (64).

Cluster 4 consists of words situated between *Teresa* and *Rimas de dentro*. Although *Rimas de dentro* was published in 1923, the poems were composed between 1907 and 1910. The themes of the poems are diverse, encompassing daily life—at home, riding a train, observing landscapes, and beyond. While one might assume that this collection should be grouped with his earlier poetry, its placement in a separate cluster can be elucidated by examining his poem *Aldebarán*. Composed in 1908, this poem vividly captures Unamuno's spiritual torment. The red star *Aldebarán* is described as “*un rubí encendido en la frente divina*” symbolizing God's eye, bleeding and red (Menéndez Pidal 55). In this poem, the word *ojo* (eye) is reiterated multiple times. The enigmatic star *Aldebarán* symbolizes God, and from God's perspective, humanity appears fragile, pitiable, and defenseless. As Unamuno contemplates eternity, his sole response is *silencio* (silence). In *Teresa*, the word *ojo* (eye) similarly functions as a metaphor. Her eyes are depicted as if they were birds pulling a *carro* (chariot), symbolizing a journey toward higher aspirations. The protagonists of the story, Rafael and Teresa, are lovers, but Teresa becomes gravely ill. Despite her valiant struggle to cling to life, she ultimately succumbs. The themes of *vivir* (to live) and *morir* (to die) are intricately linked. Induráin analyzed the themes of love, life, and death in *Teresa*, positing that for Unamuno, love and death are essential components of life. Ultimately, these three elements converge in *Teresa*, forming eternal love, eternal death, and eternal life (403). This thematic connection justifies the grouping of these two works within the same cluster. Moreover, this theme permeates works like *Cancionero* and others

¹ For instance, Salamanca is described lyrically as, *como poso de cielo en la tierra resplende tu pompa, Salamanca* (de la Calzada 150).

closely associated with Cluster 1.

Cluster 5 encompasses terms distinctly correlated with works issued in the latter years of Unamuno's life, specifically *De Fuerteventura a París*¹ and *Romancero del destierro*. His period of exile represented a significant transition in Unamuno's life, characterized by a profound longing for locations such as Salamanca, Bilbao, and his childhood home. Concurrently, he derived inspiration from the sea and the natural environment of Fuerteventura, giving rise to politically charged sonnets and reflective monologues imbued with nostalgia, particularly those influenced by the island's seascape. *La mar* (the sea) and other natural elements, such as *la noche* (the night), stars, moon, sun, and clouds, prominently feature in his imagery, epitomizing the zenith of his lyrical expression (43). During this phase, the sea transcended its role as a mere element of nature for Unamuno; it assumed philosophical and divine significance (44). His poetry from this era mirrors his complex emotions, his solitude, and his reflections on the history of Spain. The autobiographical element of his work is pronounced, with references to his life in Paris including landmarks like the Arc de Triomphe and the Seine River. Most of these works were penned in Hendaya and disclose Unamuno's internal conflict about Spain's political scene. As with other collections, recollections of Spain and his political distress predominantly influence the tone of the poems. In this collection, *la noche* symbolizes death, while life is portrayed as *soñar* (to dream). *La mar* continues to be a central motif, signifying the depths of the soul and internal existence.

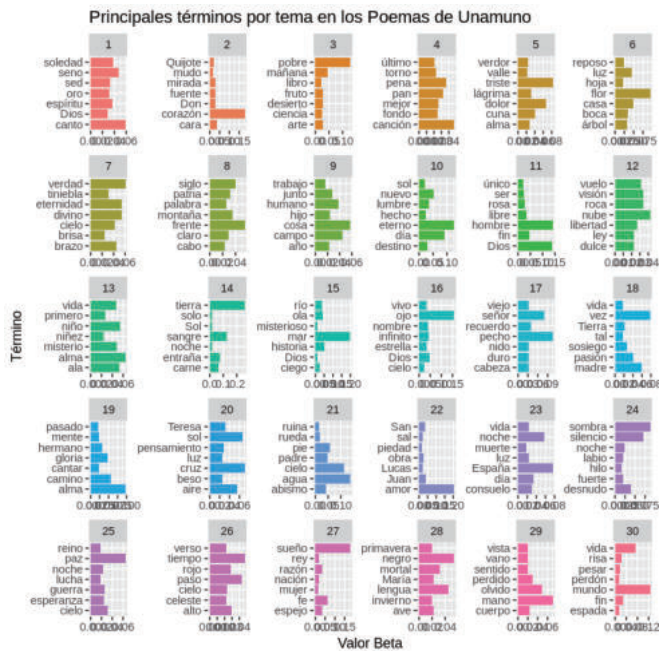
For each cluster, thematic keywords that correspond to specific works were identified. Notably, in Cluster 1, terms reflecting Unamuno's musings on daily life were evenly distributed across four works. Nonetheless, it is not accurate to claim that these thematic keywords are uniquely crucial to any single work. The keywords are interwoven and mutually enhance each other, forming significant connections.

Machine learning facilitated a comprehensive understanding of his poetic vocabulary, uncovering the persistent motifs throughout his collections. Subsequently, an analysis embracing all of Unamuno's poetry collections was performed using R code to execute LDA topic modeling analysis.

Employing the LDA topic modeling technique via R enhanced the process of theme extraction, allowing for more nuanced identification of motifs.

Among Unamuno's foremost concerns, his religious preoccupations were perhaps the most pronounced. Themes linked to *Dios* (God) were predominantly associated with topics 1, 7, 11, 14, 15, and 16. His persistent concern and affection

1 Of the 103 sonnets in the collection, the first 76 were written during his exile on the island of Fuerteventura, while the remaining 37 were composed in Paris.



[Figure 9]

for his homeland were evident, exemplifying his nationalistic sentiments, which became emblematic for the Generation of '98, manifesting in topics 2, 8, 12, 23, and 27. Additionally, topics relating to his daily struggles included 3, 4, 9, 13, 17, 18, 19, 26, and 30.

Each topic is interconnected rather than isolated, with themes that overlap and complement each other. Analyzing keywords for each work and applying LDA topic modeling, we found that this method is highly effective for quickly grasping and understanding extensive content.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed the significant potential of digital humanities techniques in providing fresh insights into the poetry of Miguel de Unamuno, a relatively overlooked component of his literary oeuvre. By employing text-mining methodologies such as lexical analysis, thematic clustering, and topic modeling, we have exposed the complex interplay of themes, symbols, and stylistic elements that characterize Unamuno's poetic corpus.

The results underscore the recurring motifs of *Dios* (God), *vida* (life), *alma* (soul), *muerte* (death), and *amor* (love), which constitute the core of his existential exploration, reflecting his enduring engagement with issues of faith, mortality, and the human contingency. The incorporation of natural imagery, including terms like

cielo (heaven), *mar* (sea), and *sol* (sun), further illustrates Unamuno's capacity to intertwine metaphysical meditation with symbolic depictions of the natural world. These elements highlight the universal reach of his poetry while presenting it as a deeply personal reflection of his internal conflicts and philosophical explorations.

The stylistic analyses revealed that Unamuno's poetic language, though occasionally criticized for its lack of aesthetic polish, is deliberate and reflects the philosophical rigor of his themes. Metrics such as high lexical density and complex verse structures are indicative of the intellectual depth of his themes, while his distinctive use of proper nouns anchors his abstract inquiries in concrete cultural and historical contexts.

Furthermore, the temporal and thematic clustering of his poetry collections illustrates the evolution of his thought over time. Significant shifts in thematic emphasis, such as the increased focus on exile and national identity during his later years, reflect his personal experiences and the sociopolitical context. These insights were further enriched through the application of topic modeling, which revealed overlapping yet distinct thematic clusters throughout his works, underscoring the interconnectedness of his poetic concerns.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the significance of Miguel de Unamuno's poetry as an essential element of his literary corpus. Although his novels have historically overshadowed his poetry, our analysis demonstrates that his poetic works provide equally profound insights into his philosophical and existential concerns. By employing computational methodologies, this research not only deepens our understanding of Unamuno's poetic vision but also illustrates the broader capabilities of digital humanities in revealing new aspects of literary analysis.

In conclusion, this study bridges the divide between traditional close reading and distant reading, offering a comprehensive examination of Unamuno's poetic legacy. It invites future scholarship to incorporate digital methods into the study of Spanish literature, thereby enriching interpretations of canonical figures like Unamuno and highlighting the broader cultural and intellectual currents of the Spanish Silver Age.

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Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity: Reading Ethics in the Digital Age Through Reader Comments on the Webtoon *Princess Bari*

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Abstract This study examines contemporary reader engagement with classical literature by analyzing audience responses to the webtoon *Princess Bari*, a modern reinterpretation of the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi*. It investigates how traditional narrative frameworks, when reimaged through digital media, elicit resonance among present-day audiences and mediate a dialogue between cultural heritage and modern ethical sensibilities. Employing a hybrid methodology that integrates computational text analysis with qualitative interpretation, this research analyzes user-generated comments posted on *Princess Bari*. Particular emphasis is placed on highly interactive responses—those accruing significant numbers of likes and replies—as a means of accessing the emotional and interpretive contours of reader reception. The findings reveal a dynamic spectrum of reader engagement, ranging from critiques of patriarchal ideologies embedded in the source myth to more nuanced reflections on marginalization, desire, and social justice. Notably, reader responses evolve over time—from initial skepticism to empathetic alignment with the narrative’s underlying humanistic impulse. This study contends that classical texts, when transposed into contemporary forms of storytelling, retain their capacity to provoke ethical reflection and emotional investment. *Princess Bari*, in this light, emerges as a compelling case study in how digital adaptations can revitalize traditional narratives, enabling them to speak meaningfully to the ethical imagination of the digital age.

Keywords *Princess Bari*; *Baridaegi*; Korean classical literature; webtoon; reader reception; digital humanities

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1. Introduction

In the digital media era, how is classical literature reimaged, received, and rendered meaningful once more? Literature has long served as an artistic medium through which existential questions are explored—not through abstraction, but through form, narrative, and image. This capacity to evoke empathy and provoke reflection persists across time, even as the modes of literary production and consumption evolve. Yet in contemporary contexts, classical literature often suffers from pedagogical alienation: it is taught, but not truly read—producing passive learners rather than engaged readers who experience the work with interpretive depth. Linguistic archaism and divergent value systems further widen the gap between classical texts and modern readers, positioning the former as relics of the past rather than living sources of meaning.

Against this backdrop, the rising presence of classical narratives in digital media—particularly in webtoons and web novels—signals a shift in how traditional literature is accessed and appreciated. While these adaptations rarely maintain strict fidelity to their source texts, their widespread popularity suggests a renewed cultural function: they transform classical motifs into participatory experiences that resonate with contemporary ethical concerns. The global expansion of the webtoon industry exemplifies this shift. According to the 2023 Webtoon Industry Survey by the Korea Creative Content Agency, the Korean webtoon market alone generated 1.829 trillion KRW in 2022, and the global market, valued at USD 16.4 billion, is projected to reach USD 21 billion by 2027 (Oh-Hyunsukdara et al. 5–6). As intellectual property (IP) derived from webtoons increasingly feeds into other media—such as television dramas, animations, and games—the adaptation of classical literature into digital formats becomes both an artistic and industrial practice.

Within this dynamic landscape, the webtoon *Princess Bari*, serialized on

Kakao Webtoon, presents a compelling case study in how classical storytelling is recontextualized through participatory media. The present study investigates how contemporary readers engage with the reimaged shamanic myth of Baridaegi, not only as a narrative but also as a site of ethical discourse. In particular, it focuses on reader comments—digital traces of interpretation, judgment, and emotion—left in response to serialized episodes. Webtoons are inherently structured around interactivity: readers respond in real time, engage in dialogue with one another, and form interpretive communities through shared reactions. This phenomenon turns solitary reading into a distributed experience, wherein meaning is co-constructed and negotiated through commentary.

Recent scholarship has begun to address the politico-aesthetic implications of such practices, likening them to premodern collective reading cultures in which emotional collectivities fostered community cohesion (Kim Gun-hyung 119–130). Reader comments, particularly when responding to adaptations of classical literature, often illuminate tensions between past and present—between inherited cultural norms and modern ethical sensibilities. As Choi Ki-sook suggests, when classical works are recast in modern contexts, they engage in a dialogic relationship with their origins, enabling both critique and revalorization (303). This study extends that insight by applying both quantitative and qualitative methods—including statistical analysis and text mining—to reader responses, seeking to illuminate the ways in which classical literature becomes ethically resonant in the digital age.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the reception of classical literature in digital environments, focusing specifically on reader comments associated with the webtoon *Princess Bari*. Drawing from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms, the research integrates computational text analysis with interpretive close reading to illuminate how ethical reflection and cultural dialogue emerge in participatory digital contexts.

Data collection was conducted using reader comments from Kakao Webtoon, the original platform of serialization. A total of 11,160 comments were extracted from episodes of *Princess Bari*. Among these, 8,601 comments that received at least three “likes” were selected as the final dataset, ensuring a focus on reader responses with measurable engagement. This selection criterion ensured the inclusion of comments that generated measurable engagement while excluding formulaic or promotional content that typically lacked substantive interpretation. Replies to these

comments were also included, allowing for the mapping of discursive interaction among readers.

To examine large-scale patterns in reader response, Word2Vec embedding and unsupervised clustering were applied to the comment corpus. This allowed for the identification of latent thematic clusters corresponding to emotional, ethical, and narrative categories. These quantitative findings were then triangulated with qualitative analysis to explore how specific episodes prompted commentary that negotiated tensions between tradition and modernity, particularly in relation to gender roles, mythic structure, and moral agency.

Informed by digital humanities methodologies, this approach treats online reader comments not as peripheral paratexts but as critical artifacts of interpretive labor. Through this lens, the study conceptualizes comment threads as sites of “distributed reading”—where interpretive authority is dispersed across a participatory public—and analyzes them as forms of vernacular criticism that reframe classical texts within contemporary ethical frameworks.

3. Quantifying Reader Response on the Webtoon *Princess Bari*

Kim Na-im’s *Princess Bari* consists of a total of 319 episodes, beginning with the upload of a trailer on Daum Webtoon on December 8, 2017, and concluding on October 29, 2024. The work is primarily based on the adaptation of the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi* and takes the form of an omnibus by embellishing and integrating other shamanistic epics and folktales. The shamanistic epic *Baridaegi* is a narrative chant performed during Rituals for Sending the Dead to a Good Place (Mangja Cheondo Gut). In Korean shamanism, Princess Bari is known as a deity who guides the deceased to the afterlife. For the dead to reach the underworld, they must be led by Princess Bari. To fulfill this, shamans recite the life story of Princess Bari during the ritual to provide a narrative justification for her appearance.

Although there are regional variations in the composition of episodes, the narrative structure of the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi* generally follows these stages (Hong tae-han 1-304):

- 1) King Ogu and Lady Gil-dae marry.
- 2) Lady Gil-dae gives birth to several daughters in succession.
- 3) She gives birth to a princess as the seventh child.
- 4) Princess Bari is abandoned by her parents solely because she is a daughter.
- 5) The king and queen fall ill.
- 6) They discover that the cure for their illness is sacred water (yaksu).
- 7) The king and queen search for and reunite with Princess Bari.

8) They ask their six daughters to retrieve the sacred water, but all of them make excuses and refuse.

9) Eventually, Princess Bari embarks on a journey to the underworld to obtain the sacred water.

10) Princess Bari encounters Mujangseung guarding the sacred water.

11) To obtain the sacred water, Princess Bari must fulfill certain conditions—such as performing household labor or bearing children through marriage with the Mujangseung.

12) Princess Bari returns, revives the king and queen, and is recognized for her achievements. Eventually, she becomes enshrined as the ancestral deity of shamans.

Princess Bari borrows characters and settings from the original tale but introduces significant changes to its narrative. While the main characters remain Princess Bari and her husband Mujangseung, the webtoon focuses on events that take place after Bari has already become the the ancestral deity of shamans(Mujo-shin). For an unspecified reason, Princess Bari is reincarnated during the Joseon Dynasty as a young lady from a noble family. The Grandmother Samsin (Samsin Halmeoni) erases all of Bari's memories upon her rebirth. As a result, Mujangseung stays by her side as a mentor, helping her recover her memories as his wife. Meanwhile, Bari, as a novice shaman, gradually approaches people in need and comes to realize her past and her true identity as Mujo-shin. Throughout this journey, additional supporting characters appear, including the goblin Kim Seonbi and the the nine-tailed fox-turned-woman, Lady Daebang.

The stories of the people Princess Bari encounters unfold as independent episodes, most of which are adaptations of traditional folktales or Korean classical novels. A total of 67 individual episodes are presented throughout the series. Stories such as *Janghwa Hongryeon*, *The Ugly Chunhyang*, *The Devoted Daughter Sim Cheong*, and *Heungbu and Nolbu* are adapted from classical novels. Episodes like *Dorangseonbi and Cheongjeong Gaksi*, *Jeoseung Halmang(Goddess of Death)*, and *Tamna Yeonggam* originate from other shamanistic epics. Additionally, many other episodes draw from legends and folktales, including *The Legend of Arang*, *The Sun and the Moon*, *The Fairy and the Woodcutter*, *Kongjwi and Patjwi*, *The Fox Sister*, *The Well Bride*, and *The Serpent*. The use of these familiar narratives lowers the psychological barrier for readers to engage with the work, making it easier for them to connect with classical literature. At the same time, the subversion and reinterpretation of these well-known stories provide a sense of novelty and intrigue.

Princess Bari is available for viewing on two platforms: Kakao Webtoon and Kakao Page. Both platforms are operated by Kakao Entertainment. Kakao Webtoon

is a specialized webtoon platform that evolved from Daum’s portal service, Manhwa Sok-sesang (“The World of Comics”), while Kakao Page is a platform that offers various forms of digital media narratives, including webtoons and web novels. Kakao Webtoon allows users to post comments on each episode and reply to other comments. Additionally, even without directly writing comments, readers can express their opinions indirectly by clicking the “Like” or “Dislike” buttons on other users’ comments. Although both platforms support commenting features, this study specifically focuses on comments from Kakao Webtoon, where *Princess Bari* was first serialized in 2017.

The time-series trend of comments effectively reflects the general pattern of webtoon consumption. A large number of comments are posted during the early stages of serialization, while the number of comments gradually decreases as the series progresses.

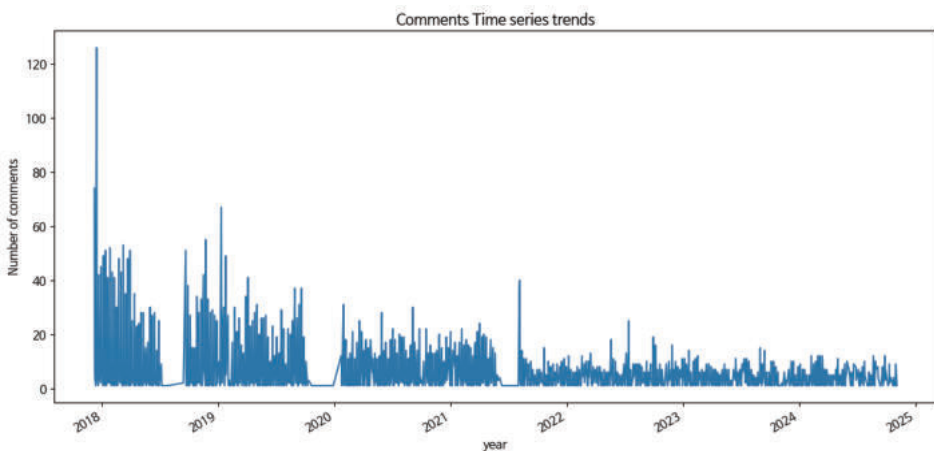


Figure 1 Comments Time Series trends

This trend occurs because comments tend to accumulate on earlier episodes as new readers join. Naturally, not all readers continue with the series until its conclusion, making the decline in comments during later episodes an expected phenomenon. Notably, there were significant drops in comment activity during mid-to-late 2018, late 2019, and mid-2021, which directly coincide with the series’ hiatus periods. Webtoons generally follow a consistent release schedule, ranging from weekly to daily updates. Accordingly, platforms are designed to display newly updated webtoons by day, allowing readers to easily check for updates. Additionally, platforms adjust the exposure ranking of works based on click counts, positioning the most popular series at the top of the interface. When a webtoon author takes a

short- or long-term hiatus for personal reasons or to recharge, updates are paused. This leads to a decrease in reader clicks, causing the series to be pushed lower on the platform's display. As a result, the influx of new readers diminishes, and the number of comments accordingly decreases.

This pattern is also evident in the activity of readers who have left a high number of comments. The following graph illustrates the activity trends of the seven readers who posted the most comments, based on their user IDs, excluding readers who were not logged in.

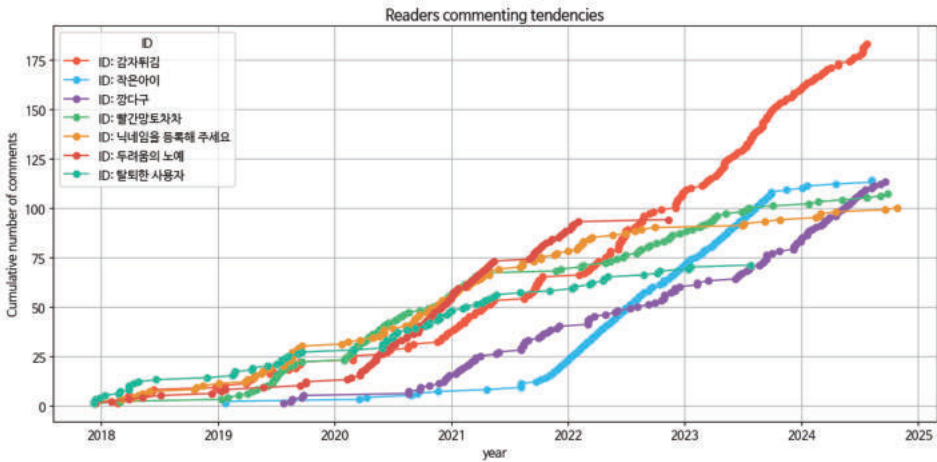


Figure 2 Readers commenting Tendencies

Some readers consistently leave comments on nearly every episode, while others can be seen abandoning the series midway. The fact that certain readers continuously post comments suggests the formation of a type of fandom around the work. However, it is difficult to assume that all readers actively participate in the comment sections. Some readers may not engage with comments at all, while others may refer to comments to deepen their understanding of the work without expressing their own opinions. Additionally, it is common to see simple impressionistic comments that lack substantial content. Nevertheless, a significant number of readers actively attempt a form of “critique” of the work. They respond critically to aspects such as the narrative’s coherence, the quality of the artwork, and the author’s debut process. These readers leave comments based on their own aesthetic and ethical judgments and recommend other comments that logically express similar opinions (Gu Ja-jun 562).

The analysis of comment types regarding how readers of *Princess Bari*

respond to the work aligns closely with these observations. According to Choi Ki-sook, when categorizing comments on certain episodes, reflections and critiques on characters and the narrative account for the largest portion. This is followed by expressions of emotion, brief overall impressions such as favorable opinions of the author or recommendations of the work, insights and reflections on the content, and lastly, commentary on other comments (319-320).

This distribution closely mirrors the results of clustering the entire set of comments using a Word2Vec-based analysis (<https://code.google.com/archive/p/word2vec>).

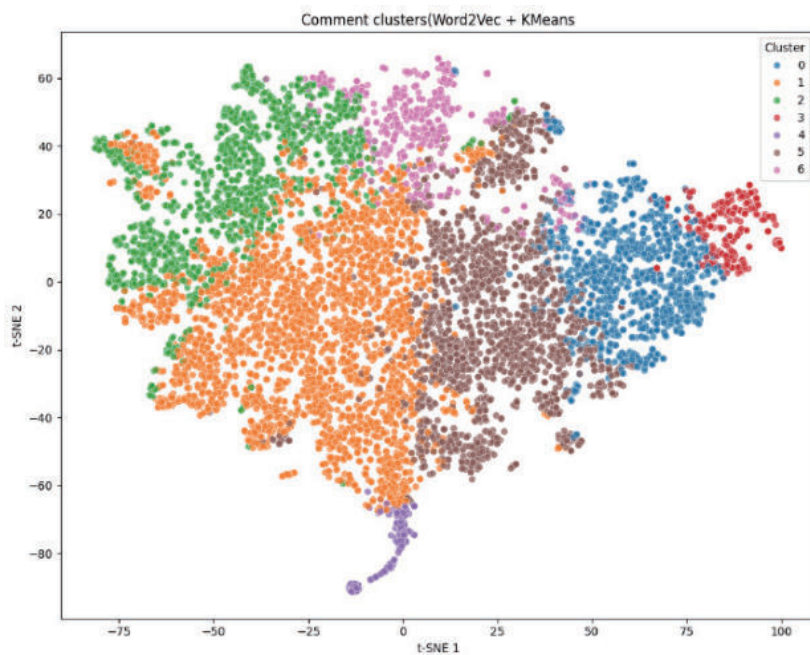


Figure 3 Comments Clusters

Cluster 0: see, author, good, next, story, webtoon, work, this, time, bari, princess, wait

Cluster 1: person, same, no, see, live, die, go, think, know, human

Cluster 2: child, son, kill, die, mom, kid, live, give birth, person, parent

Cluster 3: Author, funny, wait, webcomic, best, thanks, next, recommended, work, payment

Cluster 4: Chest, take, same, past, wonder, wonder, put, get, get off, play, feel

Cluster 5: See, armored, bari, good, ghost, come out, like, writer, story, know

Cluster 6: Tear, heart, hurts, me, mom, cry, love, sad, child, see

It was confirmed that the comment clusters formed around several key themes: anticipation and praise for the author and the work itself; reflections on the bond between parents and children within the narrative; discussions about frequently appearing characters such as Princess Bari, Mujangseung, and various spirits; contemplations on humanity through themes of life and death; and expressions of emotions such as tears, love, and sorrow. In particular, Cluster 0 and Cluster 3 contain multiple mentions of the author, with the majority of these comments expressing positive reactions such as “It’s good,” “I’m looking forward to it,” and “It’s interesting.” This prevalence of positive feedback, alongside the previously noted consistent activity of certain readers, further substantiates the existence of a dedicated fandom for the work.

Let us now delve into the content of the work itself. Which episodes did readers primarily show interest in? This can be identified by examining the episodes with the highest number of comments and their content. A high volume of comments suggests that readers were actively engaging in the reinterpretation and re-meaning of the work.

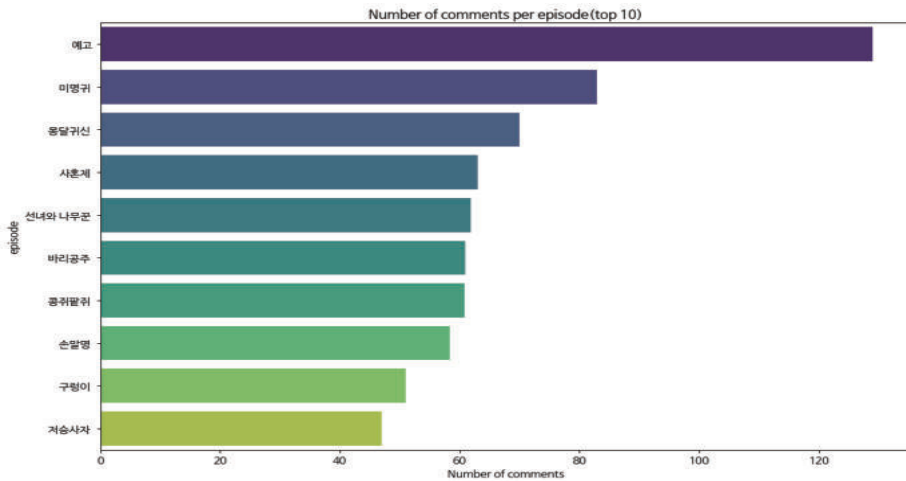


Figure 4 Number of Comments per Episode(top10)

The graph represents the average number of comments per episode within multi-part story arcs. As previously explained, the trailer has the highest number of comments. Excluding the trailer, the first episode, *Mimyeongwi*, along with familiar Korean folktales such as *The Fairy and the Woodcutter* and *Kongjwi and Patjwi*, ranks among the top episodes in comment activity. Adaptations of familiar stories inherently offer entertainment and make it easier for readers to engage in discussions about narrative alterations, as they are already well-acquainted with the

original content. This trend is further supported by the number of “Likes,” “Dislikes,” and “Replies” on comments.

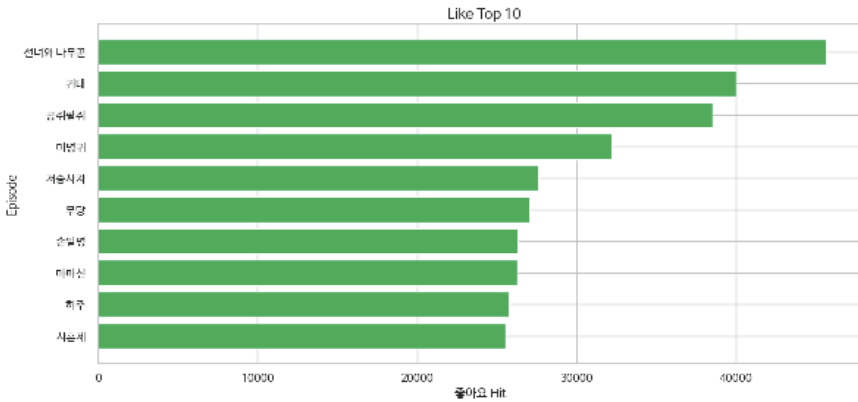


Figure 5 number of “Likes” on comments.

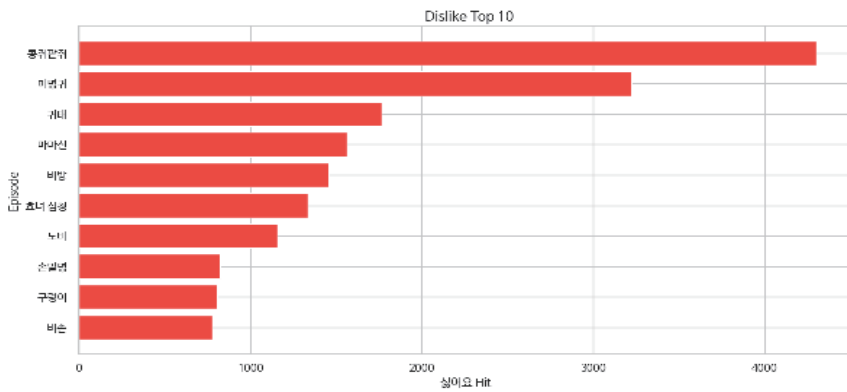


Figure 6 number of “Dislikes,” on comments.

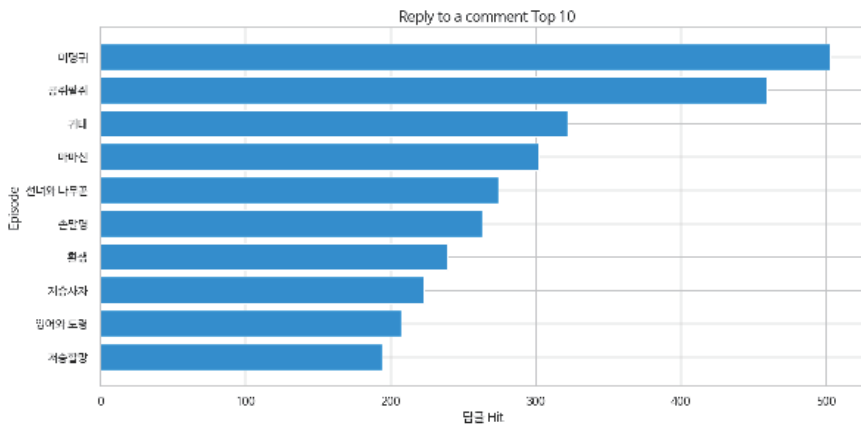


Figure 7 number of “Replies” on comments.

The episodes ranked at the top demonstrate relatively more contentious discussions compared to others. This becomes even clearer when considering that the episodes with the highest numbers of “Likes,” “Dislikes,” and “Replies” largely overlap. For example, *The Fairy and the Woodcutter* is an extremely well-known story that almost everyone raised in Korea has heard at least once. This episode garnered 310 comments and 274 replies. Many of these comments involve interpretations and debates about the original story, such as “In the original story, the deer was definitely at fault” and “If you slightly shift your perspective, all Korean folktales become horrifying stories.”

In contrast, episodes based on unfamiliar stories tend to have fewer comments, as understanding the plot alone requires more time and energy. Additionally, comments on these episodes are generally less argumentative in nature.

4. Modern Readers’ Reception of Classical Literature Through Comment Analysis

Let us now examine how readers have received the themes and intentions the author aimed to convey through the adaptation of the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi* in *Princess Bari*. The episodes of *Princess Bari* can be categorized based on their narrative structure and thematic direction. The protagonists in these episodes are often individuals traditionally positioned as subaltern within hierarchical structures, such as women, daughters-in-law, children, servants, and animals. As previously mentioned, Princess Bari serves as the deity responsible for guiding the dead to the afterlife, acting as the mother of all shamans and fulfilling the role of the ancestral deity of shamans). Consequently, most of the spirits that Princess Bari encounters are those who have suffered and been victimized by dominant figures—men, patriarchs, elders, aristocrats, and humans in general—and are thus marked by deep-seated resentment and unresolved injustice. Princess Bari and Mujangseung listen to the grievances of these spirits and confront those responsible for their suffering, awakening them to the harm they have caused. Therefore, the first category of episodes can be defined as stories that give a voice to the “voiceless,” allowing them to express their grievances and find resolution.

The second category consists of stories that transform the transcendent beings and supernatural events of the original tales into realistic characters and situations. For example, the story of the woodcutter who marries a fairy descending from the heavens is reframed as a man who coerces a noblewoman into marriage through intimidation. Similarly, the story of a baby general born with wings under his arms—who is killed by his foolish parents out of fear that he would later lead a rebellion—is adapted into a narrative about talented young scholars who, despite

being praised for their abilities, repeatedly attempt the state civil service exams only to face continual failure. These adaptations remind readers that the fantastical elements of the original stories do not exist as literal phenomena but serve as symbolic devices to reveal underlying societal issues in the real world.

The third category centers on the stories of shamans. As ancestral deity of shamans, Princess Bari is regarded as the mother figure of all shamans. Within the narrative, episodes are included where Bari guides and enlightens shamans who have gone astray or committed wrongdoings.

The gods themselves cannot descend to this world, so they sent children imbued with divine energy in their place. To soothe the restless hearts of people. To comfort the hidden pains that cannot be revealed. To deliver the words of the gods to those in need of something to lean on—Yet, despite knowing the terrifying consequences of divine punishment, why do shamans who exploit human hearts continue to emerge without end... (Episode 283, *Dorangeonbi* and *Cheongjeong Gaksi*)

Shamans serve the role of comforting the living who are in need of support and consoling the dead who carry sorrow and resentment. However, shamans sometimes exploit the desperate emotions of such people to satisfy their own greed by extorting wealth. *Princess Bari* highlights examples of these corrupt shamans and the divine punishments they face, ultimately illustrating what it means to follow the righteous path of a true shaman.

In other words, while *Princess Bari* may initially appear to be a fantasy work, it ultimately tells the stories of various people living in reality—their joy, sorrow, desires, and frustrations. Through Bari, the shaman, the narrative uncovers meaning in these lives and offers comfort. This thematic direction closely aligns with that of the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi*. A widely accepted interpretation of *Baridaegi* views the journey to the Western Heaven (Seocheon Seoyeok) to obtain sacred water as an act of filial piety carried out through physical hardship, as well as a process of self-discovery and self-actualization. Another interpretation suggests that Bari's solitary journey to the distant Western Heaven to save her father, her marriage to Mujangseung, the birth and raising of seven sons, and the countless labors she endured were paths of loneliness and suffering. However, these struggles themselves embodied the very essence of human life, and through enduring this journey, Bari's divinity was fully realized (Shin Dong-heun 133). Bari's journey, in this sense, becomes a source of strength for people to endure the hardships of life. This is

While readers express admiration for the creative twist on the traditional story of *The Fairy and the Woodcutter*, they do not seem to deeply reflect on the thematic message the author intended to convey. Instead, they tend to focus on criticizing the original folktale by using highly provocative terms such as “a traditional tale filled with crimes like voyeurism, theft, confinement, rape, and stalking.”

However, some comments do capture the dilemma presented by the author and respond thoughtfully. In the original story, the fairy ascends to the heavens with her two children, but in *Princess Bari*, the nobleman’s daughter cannot do the same. Although she realizes she was deceived by the woodcutter and grows to hate him, the children are still her own. She cannot abandon them, nor can she separate them from their father. What torments her even more is recognizing the face of the man she despises in her beloved children. In the end, she chooses to end her life. Comments such as “I feel so sorry for the young lady, who must have been in unbearable pain after learning the truth. I can’t imagine how she felt standing at the edge of that cliff, unable to return to her mother and unable to continue living as the mother of children who resemble the man she hates,” and “The truth is sometimes cruel,” reflect readers’ deep contemplation of this emotional conflict.

Additionally, Readers consistently draw parallels between traditional narratives and contemporary social realities. In the comments on the previously mentioned *Baby General* episode, readers make comparisons such as “This is like the Joseon-era version of SKY Castle- A drama about South Korea’s hellish college admissions process. Whether in the past or now, achieving success through high exam scores is a grueling task” and “This is similar to modern civil exam villages”, reflecting on how people become emotionally and physically drained by dedicating themselves solely to studying.

Meanwhile, contemporary social conflicts also emerge in the process of engaging with classical works. *Mimyeongwi*, the first episode of *Princess Bari*, features the ghost of a daughter-in-law who was wrongfully killed by her mother-in-law. Due to the realistic and vivid depiction of the ghost, many readers expressed fear, and numerous comments criticized the mother-in-law and husband. This episode also incorporates the narrative from the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi*, where Princess Bari and Mujangseung become husband and wife, which sparked intense debate. One comment subtly criticizes Mujangseung’s patriarchal attitude: “Why do you think the wife left... he made her work for nine years and kept her until she gave birth to seven sons...” This comment received 58 replies, ranging from agreeing with the criticism to defending Mujangseung. Some readers argued against applying modern value judgments to ancient myths, as reflected in comments like: “Oh, please... this is an ancient folktale. Of course, there’s symbolic meaning, and

Baridegi has always been the most pitiful, seriously. Her so-called father abandons her and then comes back begging her to save him. And that guy who asked her to work for nine years suddenly demands she give birth to seven sons just because she's a woman. How absurd must that have been...

Wow, so this is what Princess Bari was about. Seriously, girls shouldn't be allowed to read folktales like this... it's harmful.

However, opposing views also emerge in response to these negative perspectives. Comments such as "Please, just accept folktales as they are" and "When reading myths, you need to view them through the cultural lens of the time they were created. If you interpret them as actual human affairs, it becomes difficult to understand their content" argue against judging the work through an excessively modern perspective. This tension reflects a primary reaction of modern readers toward myths that embody the values and social order of the past.

Then, was the central theme of *Princess Bari*—"comfort for all those in need in this world"—not received by readers? This does not appear to be the case. As the series approached its conclusion, readers' opinions generally converged in a more positive direction. The word cloud on the right was generated based on comments from the final episode, which depicts the conclusion of the story and the new beginning of Princess Bari and Mujangseung. In these comments, readers used many positive emotional words such as "thank you", "good", and "happiness" to celebrate the ending. Comments like "The saying that classics are eternal must be true. I thought every episode was just an old story, but it delivers deeply moving messages to many people living in the present" show a completely different reception compared to the early comments during the series' serialization, which often criticized the work by applying modern standards to this cultural legacy.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how modern readers engage with classical literature, a legacy of the past, through the analysis of comments on the webtoon *Princess Bari*. In an effort to enhance the quality of her work, author Kim Na-im pursued graduate studies in folklore during the series' hiatus. While she adapted the shamanistic epic *Baridaegi*, Kim created a new myth—both a narrative of Bari's growth and a story that offers comfort to all people in the world.

In a society where shamans are often looked down upon with scorn and prejudice... I, too, once shared that perspective. However, as I casually began

reading the story of Princess Bari, I came to realize that their deep devotion to the gods is ultimately centered on caring for people, offering comfort, and showing love. Reflecting on their resilience and warmth, enduring despite contempt, quietly brought tears to my eyes.

Journeying with Princess Bari made me pay attention to trivial objects, plants by the roadside, and small animals. I naturally began to feel gratitude and cherish even minor events and relationships. Thank you for the many beautiful and precious stories of Princess Bari that moved and warmed my heart. This work gave me the courage to live well, seeing the world through kind thoughts and eyes that appreciate beautiful things.

These are some of the comments posted on the final episode of *Princess Bari*. Although the author's intended themes were at times hindered by modern value judgments and occasionally entangled in social controversies, ultimately resonated with a segment of the readership.

These results demonstrate that Princess Bari successfully engaged in meaningful communication with readers through its modern reinterpretation of classical narratives. Although the work elicited diverse reactions due to contemporary value judgments and societal debates, it ultimately conveyed comfort and empathy to readers, reaffirming the capacity of classical texts to generate renewed ethical meaning in the digital age. This suggests that traditional narratives can still be meaningfully reimagined and consumed in contemporary society, offering a lens through which to reflect on the ethical consciousness of our time.

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Evolving Storyworlds of K-pop Idol IPs: Generational Shifts in Fan Engagement and the Embodiment of Desire

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Abstract This study explores the evolving storytelling strategies and consumption patterns of K-pop idol IP (intellectual property) through a comparative analysis of the first-generation idol group Shinhwa and the third-generation group EXO. By examining their official storyworlds—constructed through album lyrics and official concept materials—and fan-produced storyworlds such as fanfiction, the research highlights the dynamic interplay between official narratives and fan creativity. The necessity of this study lies in addressing the gap in understanding how K-pop fandom’s creative practices and digital media environments have shaped and been shaped by idol storytelling strategies across generations.

Methodologically, the study employs a mixed approach combining text mining, topic modeling, and cluster analysis to analyze official album content and approximately 1,350 fanfictions. Shinhwa’s narrative, lacking a unified official storyworld, emphasizes emotional and seasonal themes, fostering fan-driven interpretations and creative reimagination. In contrast, EXO’s meticulously crafted storyworld, grounded in a supernatural concept (EXO Planet), reflects a paradigm shift in K-pop storytelling, where immersive world-building serves as a key

engagement strategy.

The findings reveal distinct generational differences: Shinhwa fans primarily centered their narratives around the idols' physical attributes and relational dynamics, while EXO fanfictions incorporated official world-building elements, albeit selectively. The study further demonstrates that fanfiction, as a medium, not only supplements but also transforms the official storyworld, underlining the reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between official and fan-generated content. Additionally, the study examines the ethical implications of fan creations, particularly regarding idol privacy, image distortion, and the challenges of regulating digital fandom platforms.

This research contributes to the fields of K-pop studies, fandom culture, and digital humanities by offering critical insights into the collaborative and contentious spaces of K-pop storytelling. It underscores the importance of balancing creative freedom and ethical responsibility in a globalized digital fandom context, providing a foundation for further exploration of K-pop's cultural and industrial significance.

Keywords K-pop storytelling; fandom; storyworld; digital humanities; cultural studies

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1. Introduction

K-pop idols and fandom culture have emerged as pivotal areas of academic interest due to their significant economic value in the cultural content and intellectual property (IP) industries. Over the past two decades, K-pop content has evolved from a niche subculture into a global mainstream phenomenon, fostering extensive fandoms across diverse cultural regions. Particularly, K-pop idol IP has demonstrated substantial influence in domestic and international markets through innovative storytelling, the rise of digital media, and the activation of fandom-

driven economies.

The storyworlds constructed by K-pop idols go beyond their roles as musicians, integrating character development and narrative structures into immersive virtual universes. These storyworlds offer fans opportunities for creative participation and reinterpretation, effectively enhancing the value of idol IP. Notably, fanfiction has become a prominent medium for fan engagement, as fans generate new narratives based on official content, thereby strengthening emotional bonds between idols and their fandoms. Fiske (1990) underscored the role of audiences not as passive consumers but as active agents who reinterpret culture in unique and personal ways.

The K-pop industry has undergone significant generational shifts, with each generation exhibiting distinct characteristics in idol activities and fandom formation strategies. Table 1 outlines these generational differences, emphasizing the evolving storytelling approaches and fan engagement practices across the industry.

Table 1. Characteristics of K-pop Generations

Generation	Time Period	Leading K-pop Idols	Characteristics
1 st Generation	1996-2002	H.O.T(1996), Sechs Kies (1997), S.E.S (1997), Fin.K.L (1998), Shinhwa (1998), god (1999)	Early idol system, primarily domestic activities
2 nd Generation	2003-2011	TVXQ (2003), Super Junior (2005), Big Bang (2006), Girls' Generation (2007), Wonder Girls (2007), KARA (2007), 2PM (2008), 2AM (2008)	Expansion of Hallyu (Korean Wave), entry into global markets
3 rd Generation	2012-2017	EXO (2012), BTS (2013), TWICE (2015), SEVENTEEN (2015), iKON (2015), BLACKPINK (2016), NCT (2016)	Digital content, social media presence, introduction of immersive storyworlds
4 th Generation	2018~ present	TXT (2019), ITZY (2019), aespa (2020), IVE (2021), STAYC (2020)	Hyper-personalized fandom experiences, integration of metaverse and AR/VR content

This study examines the evolution of storyworlds within the K-pop industry, focusing on two case studies: Shinhwa, a 1st-generation idol group, and EXO, a 3rd-generation idol group, both under SM Entertainment. The 3rd generation marks the formal adoption of storyworld strategies (Choi & Lim, 2019; Kim, 2023), with groups like EXO gaining recognition for fostering fan immersion and creative engagement through supernatural-themed storyworlds. In contrast, Shinhwa, as a 1st-generation idol group, exemplifies the early K-pop industry's emphasis on fandom culture formation without the structured implementation of an official storyworld.

This research aims to elucidate how the interaction between official storyworlds and fan-created storyworlds contributes to the evolution of the content industry and fandom culture. To achieve this, the study conducts a comparative analysis of the official content of 1st- and 3rd-generation idols and investigates how fan-created narratives, such as fanfiction, contribute to the expansion of idol IP. Storyworld strategies in the K-pop industry have become a cornerstone for strengthening emotional bonds between idols and their fandoms, while simultaneously enhancing the value of intellectual property. By exploring this dynamic evolution, this study discusses the implications for the sustainability and global expansion of the K-pop content industry, ultimately contributing to the academic foundation of K-pop research.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Fandom Studies

Fandom studies have predominantly developed within cultural and media studies, portraying fans as active participants who not only consume but also contribute to creative and community-driven activities. Jenkins (1992) introduced the concept of participatory culture, emphasizing how fans expand the boundaries of original texts to create new meanings. He later highlighted the role of digital technologies in advancing these practices through transmedia storytelling, where fans reconstruct narratives across diverse platforms. This demonstrates how fans engage deeply with specific narratives, creatively reinterpret them, and share their outputs through various media.

Booth (2010) explored fandom identity, self-expression, and the globalized nature of fan activities driven by social media. He argued that digital-age fandoms are defined by their boundary-crossing activities, supported by internal networks and shared creations. Hills (2002) further emphasized the emotional bonds within fandoms, which foster community cohesion and inspire creativity. Through deep emotional engagement with content, fans develop a sense of belonging, transforming fandoms into vibrant spaces for producing and consuming unique cultural expressions.

This framework highlights the need to understand fandom as an interactive and emotionally driven phenomenon. By analyzing how fans reshape and expand official narratives, this study aims to reveal the reciprocal relationship between producers and audiences in modern cultural industries.

2.2 K-pop Fandom Studies

K-pop fandom has emerged as a pivotal case within fandom research, thriving

in the context of digital technologies and globalized fan culture. Jung and Shim (2014) highlighted how K-pop fandom has evolved through globalization and digitalization, asserting that fans' creative production activities generate new cultural value through interaction with idol intellectual property (IP).

EXO, a prominent example of third-generation idols, utilized a supernatural storyworld to engage fans and inspire creative participation. Fans expanded this storyworld through fanfiction and fan art, crafting new narratives that supplemented or reinterpreted the official worldbuilding. In contrast, Shinhwa, a first-generation idol group, lacked an official storyworld but demonstrated how fandom could construct unique narratives and foster identity and community by focusing on the group's activities and members' individual traits. These cases illustrate how K-pop fandom interacts with idol IP to produce creative works and establish emotional bonds, showcasing the diverse ways in which fan engagement contributes to the evolution of idol storytelling strategies and fan-driven cultural production.

2.3 Storyworld and Character Consumption

The theoretical frameworks of transmedia storytelling and narrative consumption provide a lens to understand the interplay between idol IP storyworlds and character consumption. Jenkins (2006) defined transmedia storytelling as "a narrative strategy that unfolds across multiple platforms, encouraging active consumer engagement." K-pop idols build their storyworlds through albums, music videos, live performances, and social media content, which fans consume as an integrated experience. Notable examples include EXO's supernatural storyworld and BTS's universe, both of which epitomize transmedia storytelling strategies.

Narrative consumption, as described by Bruner (1990), involves audiences not passively accepting narratives but reconstructing them within their own experiences and contexts. EXO's fandom extends the official storyworld by generating new interpretations of characters and stories, while Shinhwa's fandom focuses on the group's activities to create unique narratives and humor. These practices demonstrate how K-pop fandoms consume and reimagine idol narratives, expanding both the storyworlds and the ways in which characters are perceived and consumed.

2.4 Research Objectives

Research on K-pop fandom has largely focused on global fandom and creative activities. However, systematic studies comparing idol groups across generations or exploring the interaction between official storyworlds and fan-created content, such as fanfiction, remain limited. This study addresses these gaps by examining the interplay between fan creativity and the evolution of storyworlds, with a focus on their impact on idol IP and the cultural content industry. The study explores the

following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How do the official storyworlds of EXO and Shinhwa interact with fanproduced creations, and how have these interactions evolved?

RQ2: What role does emotional interaction within fandom play in the consumption and reconstruction of storyworlds and characters?

RQ3: How are K-pop idols' storytelling strategies integrated with digital fandom creativity, and what ethical considerations emerge?

Drawing on Fiske's (1992) model of textual production and Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling, this research analyzes Shinhwa and EXO's official storyworlds through album lyrics and concept materials, alongside approximately 900 fanfiction texts. The findings highlight generational differences: Shinhwa's fandom focused on member-driven narratives in the absence of a unified storyworld, whereas EXO's meticulously crafted supernatural storyworld ("EXO Planet") fostered immersive engagement and creative expansion.

This study underscores the reciprocal relationship between official and fan-generated content while addressing ethical challenges such as image distortion, privacy concerns, and the dissemination of explicit material. By offering insights into the collaborative evolution of storytelling in the K-pop industry, this research contributes to fandom studies, digital humanities, and the development of sustainable storytelling strategies.

3. Scope and Methods of Analysis

This study systematically investigates the interplay between the official storyworlds and fan-created narratives of K-pop idol groups Shinhwa (first generation) and EXO (third generation). The scope of the research encompasses song lyrics from their official discographies (comprising both studio and non-regular albums) and a curated dataset of fanfiction. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed approach, incorporating morphological analysis, topic modeling, and textual analysis to explore the dynamics and intersections between these official and fan-generated narratives.

3.1 Analysis of Shinhwa's Official Storyworld and Fanfiction

To analyze the narrative structure and consumption patterns within Shinhwa's fanfiction, approximately 450 fanfictions were collected from major fandom platforms and preprocessed. The analysis procedure follows the sequence illustrated in the flowchart below:

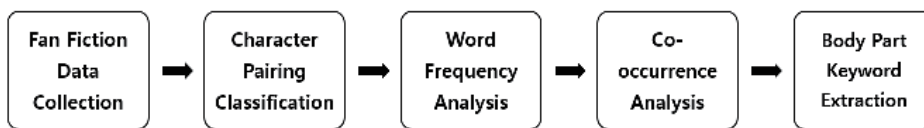


Figure 1. Shinhwa Fanfiction Analysis Workflow

The dataset was categorized based on coupling (relationships between members) to investigate how relational narratives are constructed and reinterpreted. Key terms were extracted and their frequencies analyzed, with the results visualized through bar graphs and word clouds for intuitive interpretation.

Additionally, co-occurrence word analysis was employed to identify associations between key terms. T-scores were calculated based on co-occurrence frequency, enabling the identification of recurring vocabulary and its contextual significance within the fanfiction. Finally, keywords related to specific members' physical features were filtered to analyze how physical imagery is consumed within narratives. This allowed for a detailed examination of how members' physical characteristics are utilized in fanfiction narratives, shedding light on their role in shaping fandom-created stories.

3.2 Analysis of EXO's Official Storyworld and Fanfiction

To analyze the interaction between EXO's official storyworld and fan-produced content, approximately 900 fanfiction texts were collected, refined, and systematically analyzed. As a representative example of a K-pop group with a meticulously crafted supernatural storyworld, EXO's fanfiction illustrates how fans adopt and expand on the official narrative framework.

The fanfiction data were gathered from major platforms and preprocessed through stopword removal and morphological analysis to ensure data quality. Key terms were extracted via text clustering, and cluster-specific unique keywords were identified. To manage the large and complex dataset, UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection) was employed to reduce high-dimensional data into a visualizable low-dimensional space, facilitating the identification of relationships between data points.

Subsequently, K-Means and DBSCAN clustering algorithms were applied to analyze narrative characteristics and structural trends. K-Means effectively categorized clusters and identified the centrality of keywords, while DBSCAN provided insights into density-based relationships and outliers within the data, highlighting nuanced patterns among minor data points.

Finally, the extracted keywords from fanfiction were compared with EXO's

official storyworld elements, such as album lyrics and concept materials, to analyze how fan-created content adopts and extends these official narratives. This comparative analysis examined how fan creations incorporate and expand upon elements of the official worldbuilding, revealing the processes through which fan-produced content interacts with and extends the official narrative. Through this approach, the study provides an in-depth understanding of the dynamic relationship between EXO's official storyworld and its fan-created derivatives.

4. K-pop Idol Official Storyworld Comparison: Shinhwa vs. EXO

The storyworlds of K-pop idols play a pivotal role in fostering fan engagement and creative participation, contributing significantly to the global success of idol intellectual properties (IP). This section compares the official storyworlds of Shinhwa, a first-generation idol group, and EXO, a third-generation group, to examine how storytelling strategies in K-pop have evolved across generations. Shinhwa focused on building emotional connections with fans through universal themes, while EXO constructed an immersive supernatural storyworld. These differences reflect the strategic evolution of the K-pop industry from its formative years to the era of digital content expansion.

4.1 Shinhwa's Official Storyworld Analysis

Shinhwa, lacking a unified narrative framework, relied on emotional storytelling to strengthen its connection with fans. The group's official content, including regular and special albums, demonstrated a thematic focus on emotional resonance, allowing fans to engage through imaginative interpretations and co-creative practices.

4.1.1 Analysis of Shinhwa's Studio Albums

An analysis of Shinhwa's 13 studio albums revealed a thematic emphasis on personal relationships and emotional experiences. Key terms such as "I," "you," and "love" frequently appeared in the lyrics, highlighting themes of love, separation, and reconciliation. This thematic consistency allowed fans to position Shinhwa as the protagonists of their narratives, fostering a deep sense of emotional immersion.

When stop words such as pronouns were filtered out, the thematic focus of each song became more pronounced, revealing the underlying narrative intent. Shinhwa's approach, which avoided complex world-building, provided fans with a flexible framework for creating their own stories while maintaining strong emotional connections. This strategy exemplifies how first-generation K-pop idols prioritized emotional resonance over intricate storytelling frameworks.

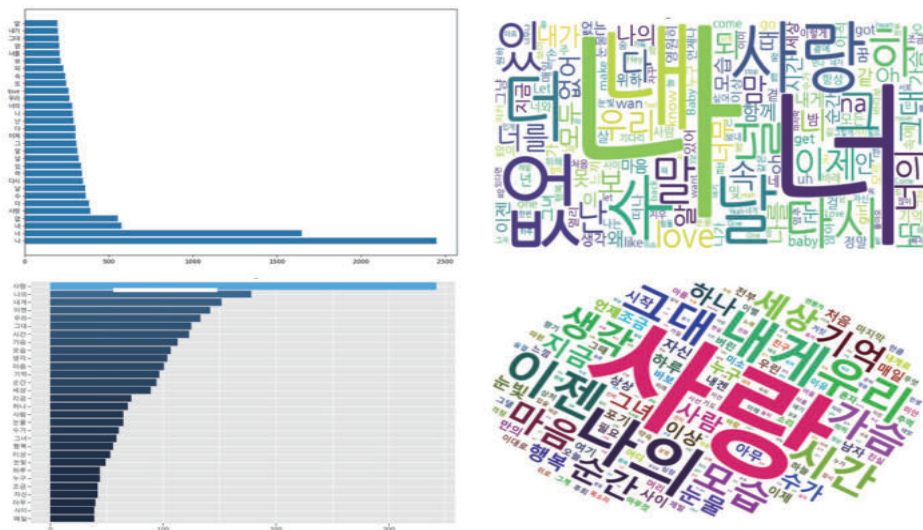


Figure 2. Shinhwa's Studio Albums (Top: Without Stopword Removal, Bottom: With Stopword Removal)

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency analysis results before and after stop word removal. The upper graph highlights the dominance of personal pronouns (e.g., “I,” “you,” and “dear”), reflecting the emotional tone of the lyrics. In contrast, the lower graph, with stop words removed, clearly emphasizes core narrative themes such as love, separation, and longing. This demonstrates the utility of stop word removal in isolating and analyzing key narrative elements.

4.1.2. Analysis of Shinhwa's Supplementary Albums

Shinhwa's supplementary albums, including seasonal releases and digital singles, adopted themes tailored to specific periods or occasions. For instance, the “Winter Story” album (2003) centered on winter imagery, with keywords such as “snow” and “farewell” dominating the lyrics. This seasonal focus provided an additional layer of emotional engagement, aligning with fans' sentimental experiences during particular times of the year.

The complementary nature of regular and special albums highlights how Shinhwa established a robust emotional connection with its audience. By enabling fans to explore emotional narratives without the constraints of a defined storyworld, Shinhwa effectively laid the groundwork for imaginative fan-driven storytelling.

Figure 3 compares the keyword frequency analysis of Shinhwa's miscellaneous albums before and after stopword removal. The upper graph highlights the frequent use of pronouns such as “I,” “you,” and “dear,” which emphasize the emotional tone of the lyrics. In contrast, the lower graph reveals thematic keywords such as

into regular and miscellaneous albums for analysis. Regular albums included the seven main studio albums, two mini-albums, and repackage albums with additional tracks, as these shared narrative coherence. Miscellaneous albums comprised digital singles, winter specials, and live albums, categorized separately due to their independent thematic focus.

The analysis followed a two-step process. First, frequent words and thematic features were identified by extracting nouns, pronouns, adverbs, verbs, and adjectives through frequency analysis. Second, the data were reanalyzed after removing stopwords, such as pronouns and single nouns, to extract more precise semantic trends. This systematic approach aimed to identify the narrative characteristics and structural composition of EXO's storyworld.

The findings were visualized using bar graphs and word clouds to highlight the narrative differences between regular and miscellaneous albums, revealing the distinctive features of EXO's storyworld. This analysis also provides a basis for comparing EXO's and Shinhwa's storyworld strategies, offering insights into the evolution of idol IP strategies across K-pop generations.

4.2.1. Analysis of EXO's Studio Albums

The analysis of EXO's regular album lyrics revealed several distinctive features compared to Shinhwa. Unlike Shinhwa, where personal pronouns such as "I," "you," and "dear" were prominent, EXO's lyrics showed a relatively lower frequency of personal pronouns, highlighting a differentiated narrative approach.



Figure 4. EXO's Studio Albums (Top: Without Stopword Removal, Bottom: With Stopword Removal)

Even after removing stopwords, the keyword “love” remained highly frequent, indicating that the theme of love continues to be central to the narratives of third-generation idols. Additionally, keywords such as “love,” “memory,” “time,” “heart,” and “mind” ranked high in frequency, demonstrating a thematic continuity between first- and third-generation idols in emphasizing emotional and relational storytelling.

However, EXO’s albums showcased a unique feature with each album presenting a distinct concept and theme, setting them apart from first-generation idols. For instance, keywords such as “world,” “light,” “moon,” “darkness,” and “star” were among the top 30 nouns, reflecting the incorporation of EXO’s official storyworld, “EXO PLANET,” into their lyrics. This suggests that EXO’s albums not only explore the theme of love but also establish a complex and interconnected storyworld, enhancing narrative depth and engagement through cohesive and imaginative storytelling. This narrative strategy highlights the evolution of K-pop storytelling, where immersive world-building serves as a key engagement tool, differentiating third-generation idols from their predecessors.

4.2.2. Analysis of EXO’s Miscellaneous Albums

The analysis of EXO’s miscellaneous albums revealed a significant emphasis on winter-themed content, with winter special albums comprising the largest proportion. Keywords such as “snow,” “winter,” “merry,” “Christmas,” and “warmth” frequently appeared, reflecting a strong seasonal focus. This trend became even more pronounced after stopword removal, with additional thematic keywords like “tears” and “memories” highlighting narratives centered on love and separation.

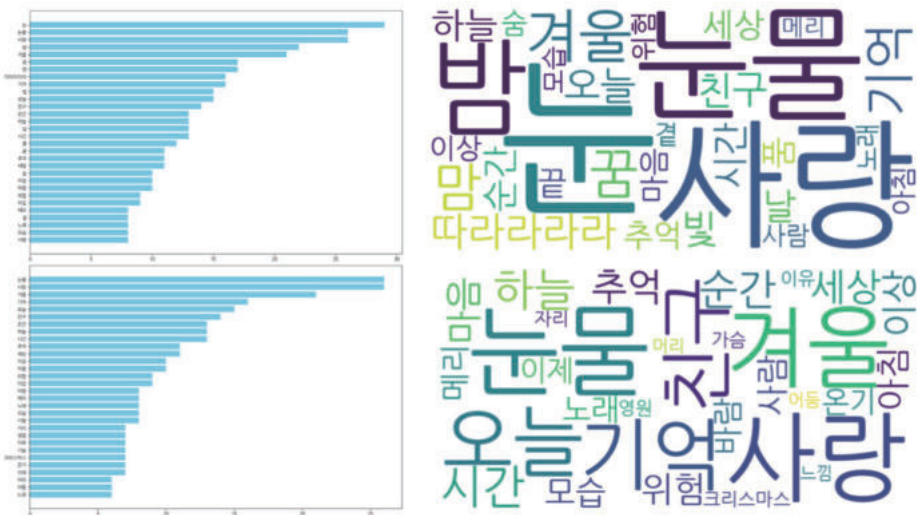


Figure 5. EXO Miscellaneous Albums (Top: Without Stopword Removal, Bottom: With Stopword Removal)

These findings parallel the patterns observed in Shinhwa's miscellaneous albums, suggesting that EXO's special albums similarly prioritize season-specific concepts and mass appeal. Furthermore, the results indicate that EXO's special albums may convey independent narratives that are not directly linked to the overarching "EXO PLANET" storyworld. This detachment underscores a commonality with Shinhwa's miscellaneous albums, which also relied on episodic and context-specific themes rather than a unified storyworld.

4.3 Comparison of Shinhwa and EXO's Official Storyworlds

Both Shinhwa and EXO centered their narratives on the universal theme of "love," but their approaches to album storytelling and storyworld construction exhibited significant generational differences. Shinhwa reinforced emotional connections with fans through expressive narratives, lacking a clear overarching storyworld or concept. This simplicity allowed fans to exercise imaginative freedom in interpreting and extending the group's identity. In contrast, EXO retained "love" as a core theme while building a cohesive and elaborate storyworld, **EXO PLANET**, which established connections across albums and fostered a multifaceted and immersive narrative experience.

Regarding miscellaneous albums, both groups emphasized seasonal concepts, such as Christmas and winter, reflecting similar strategies that incorporated seasonality and mass appeal. These albums were purpose-driven, designed to align with specific occasions. However, EXO distinguished itself by assigning unique concepts and storyworld elements to each album, thus creating a distinctive identity that set it apart from first-generation idols like Shinhwa.

In conclusion, Shinhwa offered a straightforward and universal approach, leveraging emotional narratives to provide fans with a foundation for creative engagement. EXO, on the other hand, combined a supernatural storyworld with digital content to maximize fan immersion and participation. This strategy facilitated the expansion of their global fanbase and stimulated creative practices in the digital age. The storyworlds of both groups reflect the contextual and strategic evolution of K-pop idol IPs, serving as key examples of how storytelling practices have advanced across generations in the K-pop industry.

5. Fanfiction Consumption of Idol Storyworlds: A Comparison of Shinhwa and EXO

Fanfiction serves as a primary medium through which fandoms consume, reinterpret, and expand upon idols' official storyworlds. This chapter analyzes Shinhwa's fanfiction consumption patterns to explore how the absence of an official storyworld influenced fan creativity. It also identifies distinctive features of fan-

driven storytelling and emotional interactions within the fandom.

5.1 Analysis of Shinhwa's Fanfiction Consumption

As a first-generation K-pop idol group without an official storyworld, Shinhwa provides a unique case where fans independently created narratives, consuming and expanding the members' images. Lee (2003) highlights how Shinhwa fanfiction functioned as a tool for self-exploration and creativity among teenage female fans, illustrating that fanfiction transcended mere consumption to become a platform for identity formation. Building on this foundation, this study examines the consumption patterns of Shinhwa fanfiction and the role of fanfiction in fostering emotional interactions.

Focus on Physical Image Consumption

One prominent feature of Shinhwa fanfiction is the frequent use of physical imagery. Fans constructed narratives centered on romantic or sexual relationships between members, with keywords such as “hands,” “lips,” and “thighs” serving as pivotal narrative elements. This highlights how, even in the absence of an official storyworld, fans utilized physical imagery to create stories, reflecting their capacity to reconstruct relational dynamics through member-specific characteristics.

Differentiation of Roles and Images Among Members

Fanfiction also revealed distinct roles and consumption patterns for individual members. For instance, Eric (Jeonghyuk) was predominantly portrayed in the “Top” role, with his strong leadership image and symbolic significance within the fandom emphasized. This suggests that fans actively assigned differentiated roles and images to members, autonomously constructing a storyworld that reflected both official representations and fan-driven interpretations. Shinhwa's case underscores the adaptive and creative practices of first-generation K-pop fandoms, demonstrating how fans compensated for the lack of an official storyworld by crafting emotionally resonant and relationship-driven narratives.

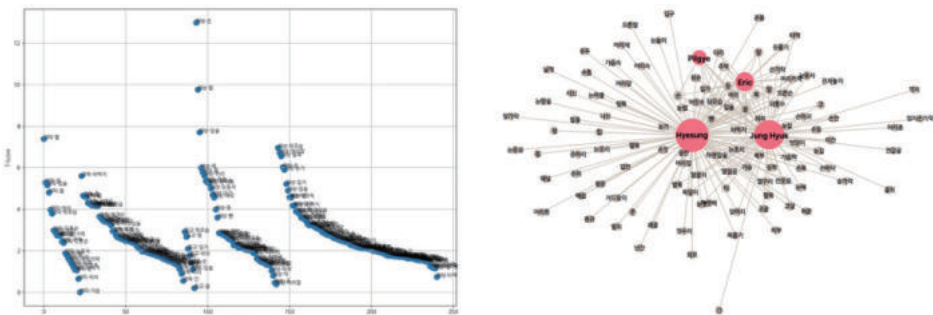


Figure 6. Body Part Associations in Shinhwa Fanfiction

Figure 6 illustrates the physical keywords and narrative roles associated with Eric (Jeonghyuk) and Hyesung (Pilgyo) in fanfiction. Eric is linked to keywords such as “hands” and “thighs,” emphasizing an authoritative and protective image, while Hyesung is primarily associated with “hands,” highlighting an emotional and delicate persona. Notably, Hyesung alternated between “Top” and “Bottom” roles, reflecting the fandom’s nuanced interpretation of his character. This analysis indicates that the fandom actively differentiated member images and roles, using them as a basis to expand the narrative dimensions of the storyworld.

Name Usage in Shinhwa Fanfiction

Shinhwa fanfiction exhibited distinctive patterns in the use of member names. Hyesung was predominantly referred to by his stage name, reflecting his public persona and symbolic role within the fandom. In contrast, Eric (Jung-hyuk) was frequently mentioned by his real name, emphasizing his personal identity and leadership qualities. This pattern suggests that the fandom assigned different symbolic meanings to stage names and real names, integrating them into their narratives in nuanced ways.

The consumption patterns in Shinhwa fanfiction demonstrate how fans, in the absence of an official storyworld, constructed unique narratives by leveraging members’ physical images, roles, and name usage. These fan-created narratives not only reinforced emotional interactions within the fandom but also expanded the storyworld in creative ways. However, the lack of a unified storyworld often led to fanfiction that focused heavily on physical imagery, resulting in a storytelling approach that was both imaginative and limited in scope.

5.2 EXO Fanfiction Consumption Analysis

5.2.1 Cluster Analysis

This study analyzed approximately 900 EXO fanfiction texts to investigate how fan-created content interacts with and reconstructs the official storyworld. Through a multi-step process encompassing text preprocessing, clustering, and TF-IDF-based keyword analysis, the findings reveal that EXO fanfiction serves as a platform for creatively reinterpreting the group’s supernatural storyworld while forming diverse narrative and emotional patterns.

The analysis identified five distinct clusters, each representing unique narrative focal points and keyword associations:

Cluster 1: Dominated by keywords such as “self,” “thought,” and “face,” this cluster emphasizes personal introspection and psychological conflict, often exploring the emotional journeys of characters.

Cluster 2: Keywords like “genitals,” “man,” and “fingers” define this cluster,

Table 2. Cluster Keyword Analysis of EXO Fanfiction: Top 20 and Unique TF-IDF Keywords

Cluster	Top 20 Keywords	Unique Keywords (TF-IDF)
1	talk, bell, surface, hand, eye, thinking, face, self, brother, person, moment, mouth, sound, head, paper, body, work, house	person, thinking, face, paper, sound, personality, head, look, man, expression
2	man, talk, hand, genitals, face, eyes, mouth, face, body, bell, inside, thinking, head, brother, sound, back, when, finger, himself, waist, backs, backside	man, penis, face, sound, finger, paper, thinking, hole, ass, himself
3	face, word, hand, body, eye, thought, face, mouth, species, person, omega, sound, alpha, moment, brother, day, mom, mind, inside, scent	omega, thinking, face, alpha, sound, self, man, head, person, lips
4	uncle, talk, himself, hand, face, eyes, moment, person, thinking, body, face, sound, brother, mouth, work, house, bell, back, child, head	uncle, himself, face, paper, thought, sound, puppy, person, kid, head
5	talk, Seok, Min, boss, hand, brother, thought, person, person's, when, self, face, day, eye, mouth, house, sound, species, mind, voice, voice, look, face	boss, thinking, letter, himself, person, face, shop, sound, heart, man

which centers on relational and sensory narratives, reconstructing themes of sexuality and emotional interaction.

Cluster 3: Featuring keywords such as “omega” and “alpha,” this cluster highlights fan reinterpretations of EXO’s official supernatural storyworld, creatively incorporating its themes into expanded narratives.

These findings underscore the role of fanfiction as a medium for creative expansion of EXO’s official storyworld. Fans not only consume but also act as co-creators and reinterpreters, enriching the narrative complexity of K-pop content and demonstrating the dynamic interplay between official and fan-generated storytelling.

5.2.2 Similarity Analysis through Visualization

Using UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection), the text similarity between fanfictions was visualized, and clustering was performed using K-Means and DBSCAN algorithms. UMAP reduced the high-dimensional text data into a lower-dimensional space, allowing for a clearer visual understanding of the relationships between the texts. K-Means proved effective in grouping fanfiction texts based on their distribution, categorizing the narratives by their thematic patterns and similarities. Each cluster was classified according to specific keywords and narrative characteristics, providing insights into the major narrative patterns within the fanfiction corpus. DBSCAN, a density-based clustering method, allowed for a more flexible understanding of the relationships within and between clusters. This approach helped explore the structural tendencies of the data and the

connections between smaller data points, offering deeper insights into less dominant but significant patterns.

This analysis contributes to understanding how the narrative features of fanfiction are connected to and creatively expand upon the official storyworld, providing a clearer picture of how fan-generated content interacts with the official narratives.

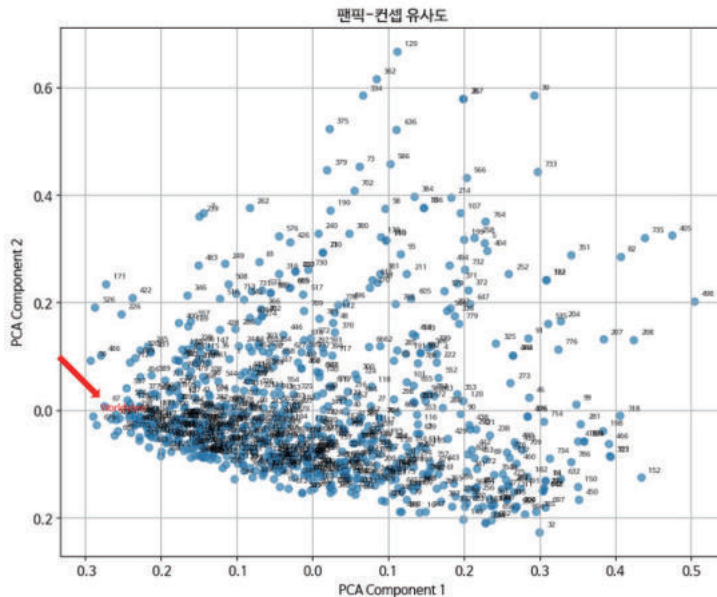


Figure 7. PCA Analysis of EXO's Official Concept and Fanfiction Similarity

Figure 7 illustrates the results of the PCA (Principal Component Analysis) used to visualize the similarity between EXO's official storyworld and fanfiction. PCA is employed to reduce the dimensionality of the data, facilitating a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences. Each point represents a fanfiction, with proximity between points indicating a higher degree of narrative similarity. The "Worldview" label refers to EXO's official concept, which serves as the reference point for analyzing the distribution of fanfictions.

The analysis reveals that while most fanfictions align with the official storyworld, some fanfictions present original and modified narratives. This demonstrates how EXO fanfiction not only reflects but also expands the official storyworld. This visualization highlights the manner in which fanfictions evolve, moving beyond mere narrative listing and developing in connection with the official storyworld. Im (2015) emphasized that the creative activities within the

EXO fandom deepen internal relationships and creative processes, while also strengthening social cohesion. EXO fanfiction thus offers significant insights into the interaction between K-pop fandoms and official storyworlds.

5.2.3 Interaction between Official Storyworld and Narrative Consumption Patterns

EXO fanfiction creatively integrates elements of the official storyworld, reflecting the fandom's distinctive narrative consumption patterns. This section analyzes the incorporation of the official storyworld, the consumption of bodily imagery, and the originality of titles and narratives within fanfiction.

Reflection of the Official Storyworld

EXO fanfiction incorporates elements from the official storyworld, as well as album-specific concepts (such as space, wolves, superpowers, and school themes), into the fanfiction titles and narratives. For instance, tracks from the *XOXO* album, such as "Butterfly Girl" and "Peter Pan," were reimagined into "Butterfly Boy" and "Growing Peter Pan," while the school concept was materialized through titles such as "High School Boy" and "High School." This highlights how the official storyworld plays a pivotal role in fanfiction creation.

Consumption of Bodily Imagery

Bodily imagery, including terms like "hand," "eyes," and "lips," frequently appear as central elements in the narratives, deepening sensory and emotional interactions. This demonstrates how fans use physical imagery to further define and elaborate on the narrative, enhancing the emotional depth of the storylines.

Originality in Titles and Narratives

Additionally, elements such as "superpowers" serve more as secondary functions that enhance the individuality and symbolism of the characters, rather than as primary narrative drivers. This reflects how fans creatively reinterpret the official world and project their own experiences and desires into the narratives, highlighting the dynamic interplay between fan creativity and official storyworlds.

Fiske's (1992) model of textual production views fans as active creators who reconstruct and expand content, rather than passively consuming it. Shinhwa's fandom exemplifies this by crafting original narratives centered on the images and relational dynamics of individual members, despite the absence of an official storyworld. This approach fostered emotional interactions within the fandom and encouraged self-exploration through emotive storytelling.

In contrast, Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling is clearly embodied in EXO's approach. By embedding their supernatural storyworld, EXO PLANET, across albums, music videos, and social media platforms, EXO

successfully engaged fans through immersive and interconnected narratives. In this context, fanfiction served as a creative outlet, enabling fans to extend and further develop the official storyworld.

Taken together, the cases of Shinhwa and EXO demonstrate the evolution of fandom-driven textual production and the increasing importance of official storyworlds within generational K-pop IP strategies. Shinhwa's model aligns with Fiske's emphasis on fan autonomy, while EXO represents a contemporary application of Jenkins' transmedia storytelling, showcasing a progressive shift in how K-pop idols and fandoms interact through narrative practices.

5.3 Ethical Considerations of Fan Creation and Storytelling Strategies in the Digital Age

In the digital age, fan creation has evolved into a creative and participatory form of engagement, with fanfiction becoming a significant cultural pillar for reconstructing relationships between idols and developing narratives centered around their physical images. However, these creative activities raise several ethical concerns, which need to be addressed. This section discusses the ethical issues that may arise from fan creation and storytelling strategies within fandoms.

Fanfiction is often created based on idol members' names, appearances, and personalities, but these depictions can diverge from or distort the members' desired images. For instance, when a member is repeatedly portrayed in roles such as "Top" or "Bottom," or when their physical attributes are exaggerated, this can negatively affect both the member's personal identity and public image. Such portrayals may infringe on the idols' privacy and publicity rights, raising the need for image management and the establishment of ethical guidelines for fan creation. Moreover, fanfiction often establishes a dominant narrative or coupling within the fandom, which may marginalize other perspectives, leading to exclusion within the fan community. This undermines the democratic accessibility of creative practices within fandoms, where diverse interpretations and fan-created content should ideally coexist.

The portrayal of romantic or sexual relationships in fanfiction, while a form of creative freedom, becomes ethically problematic when exposed to minors. In particular, if sexual content excessively focuses on physical descriptions or distorts the members' actual images, it necessitates a discussion on the ethical boundaries of fan-created works. Lastly, fanfiction is predominantly shared on digital platforms like AO3 and Wattpad, which bear the responsibility of regulating the ethical standards of the content hosted on them. However, most platforms currently adopt a passive approach to regulating user-generated content, which can lead

to the neglect of ethical controversies. Therefore, it is crucial to redefine the role and responsibilities of these platforms in establishing and enforcing clear ethical guidelines for fan creation.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzes the interaction and evolution of the official storyworlds and fan-created storyworlds (fanfiction) of first-generation K-pop idol group Shinhwa and third-generation group EXO. Through this analysis, the study explores the shifts in K-pop idol storytelling strategies and the consumption patterns of fan creations.

The analysis revealed that the official storyworlds of Shinhwa and EXO were distinct across generations. Shinhwa, lacking an explicit storyworld, strengthened its emotional bond with the fandom through emotional narratives and seasonal keywords. In contrast, EXO, with its clear conceptual framework like the supernatural EXO PLANET, facilitated fan engagement and creative production. Fanfiction, while borrowing elements from the official storyworlds, reflected the desires and imaginations of the fandom, expanding the narratives in original ways. According to Fiske's (1992) model of textual production, fanfiction demonstrates how fans actively reconstruct content, a characteristic evident in Shinhwa's fanfiction. Meanwhile, EXO serves as a case applying Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling, where the expansion of the official storyworld occurs through its interaction with fan-created content.

Fanfiction played a significant role in creatively reconfiguring official content and expanding the narrative layers of idol IP. It primarily focused on the consumption of physical imagery and romantic or sexual relationships between members, differentiating it from the official storyworld. Although EXO fanfiction reflected elements of the official universe and album concepts, the reflection was limited. This indicates that fanfiction reinterprets the elements of the official world while reconstructing them based on the fandom's desires.

Emotional interactions within the fandom acted as a driving force in the consumption of the storyworlds and characters. EXO fanfiction, while incorporating the supernatural elements of the official world and album concepts, centered on the relationships between members and the consumption of their physical imagery. EXO's storytelling strategy blurred the boundaries between official content and fan creations, combining them with the creativity of the digital-age fandom. However, the consumption of physical imagery and the sexuality-centered narratives in fanfiction raise concerns about the distortion of idol images and privacy violations. This underscores the need for guidelines to foster responsible creative activity

within fan communities and the management of digital platforms.

In conclusion, this study confirms that K-pop fandom creation activities are breaking down the boundaries between creation and consumption in the content industry, contributing to the expansion of idol IP value. The K-pop fandom culture provides significant insights into the evolution of global fandom creativity and digital-era content consumption, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of the interaction between fan creations and official storyworlds.

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Chinese Science Fiction and Artificial Intelligence: A Study on Hao Jingfang's *Mirror of Man*

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Abstract Chinese science fiction is gaining unprecedented attention, thanks to the contributions of Liu Cixin (刘慈欣) and Hao Jingfang (郝景芳). Liu Cixin, the first Asian to win the Hugo Award in 2015, is known for his hard science fiction with rigorous scientific foundations and cosmic settings. Hao Jingfang, who won the same award in 2016, writes soft science fiction exploring philosophical themes and human emotions, making her works deeply thought-provoking. This study focuses on Hao Jingfang's short story collection *Mirror of Man* (《人之彼岸》), which examines the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and humanity. It raises diverse questions and offers varied perspectives, portraying AI both as a potential threat and a co-evolving partner. The stories prompt readers to explore their own answers to these questions, as AI is already deeply integrated into daily life. *Mirror of Man* is thus no longer merely “science fiction”—it reflects the contemporary reality of ethical and societal challenges brought by rapidly advancing technology.

Keywords Hao Jingfang; *Mirror of Man*; artificial intelligence; posthumanism; transhumanism; Chinese science fiction

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Introduction

Contemporary society has fully entered an era shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), defined as “the capacity of a functional device to perform tasks generally associated

1 This work was supported by the research fund of Hanyang University (HY-20230000003124).

with human intelligence, such as reasoning and learning” (*Information Technology—Artificial Intelligence—Artificial Intelligence Ethics* 1). Recent developments in AI have facilitated rapid access to vast amounts of information and automated a range of activities once requiring human labor. As a result, AI systems—ranging from self-driving vehicles to facial-recognition-enhanced surveillance cameras—have seamlessly integrated into daily life, raising both expectations and concerns regarding their potential to replace existing human roles. Evidence of AI’s growing influence includes popular applications such as ChatGPT—a generative AI tool launched for public use on November 30, 2022—which exemplifies how modern AI can produce textual, visual, or audio output grounded in large-scale data learning (Hong and Kim).

Despite the practical conveniences and accessibility brought about by the commercialization of AI, its widespread adoption has also given rise to various social issues. According to a research report published by the Korea Development Institute (KDI) in March 2023, *Labor Market Changes Caused by AI and Policy Directions*, “AI models already outperform the average human level in most tasks in the domains of computer vision and natural language processing, and in certain fields have reached expert-level performance. Due to the advancement of AI technology, most currently existing jobs in the economy are at least technically automatable now or will soon become so” (Han 151). The prospect of losing employment to AI is, accordingly, no longer a distant concern.

Hence, the commercialization of AI, along with the advantages and disadvantages it entails, can no longer be regarded solely as a dilemma for the future. This situation thus makes it more imperative than ever to examine science fiction (SF) that addresses AI. As N. Katherine Hayles has observed, “literary works actively shape the cultural meanings of scientific theories and technologies, and they vividly illustrate presumptions widely held within scientific theories” (Hayles 21). SF narratives not only illuminate how scientific and technological developments are culturally interpreted but also maximize, by narrative means, the premises and assumptions pervading scientific discourse.

In this context, Hao Jingfang’s *Mirror of Man* (《人之彼岸》) offers insightful perspectives. Hao Jingfang garnered worldwide recognition upon winning the 2016 Hugo Award—often considered the “Nobel Prize of science fiction”—for her novella “Folding Beijing” (《北京折叠》). *Mirror of Man*, published in 2017, is a collection of six short stories, all revolving around artificial intelligence. In an interview, she explained that her interest in AI stems from her desire to understand humanity more completely, noting that “through understanding AI, one can arrive

at a better understanding of humans” (中国新闻周刊). This statement implies two central observations: that AI appears in contrast to humanity, and that understanding AI is intended as a path to more profound self-knowledge. Such dual awareness permeates the narrative structure of *Mirror of Man*.

Accordingly, questions concerning whether AI truly operates in opposition to humanity and whether the pursuit of AI-based understanding ultimately deepens insights into the human condition are gaining unprecedented importance. This study examines *Mirror of Man* from a posthumanist perspective—one among various theoretical frameworks currently applied to AI research—to assess how Hao Jingfang’s six short stories depict interactions between AI and human society. By analyzing these portrayals, this study seeks to reflect on the fact that AI is already a contemporary presence rather than a mere future projection, and to explore the stance that society might adopt in response.

AI Between Transhuman and Posthuman

Mirror of Man consists of three very short stories—“Where Are You” (《你在哪里》), “People in a War Chariot” (《战车中的人》), and “Qian Kun and Alek” (《乾坤和亚力》)—and three somewhat longer works close to novellas—“The Immortality Hospital” (《永生医院》), “Matters of Love” (《爱的问题》), and “Island of Mankind” (《人之岛》). Each of these stories addresses AI, though they differ in the specific form AI takes and in how the human characters respond to it. Nonetheless, a consistent theme emerges throughout: the portrayal of AI as being in opposition to human society, chiefly provoking threat and fear.

In these stories, humans are depicted as striving to be rational beings who nonetheless make irrational decisions because they possess emotions, while AI, making decisions based on data, appears purely rational. Yet Hao Jingfang persistently emphasizes human *renxing* (人性)—that is, love or compassion for others, hope for an uncertain future, and a will that contrasts with a despairing reality. As Minhø Park points out, Hao Jingfang’s portrayal of *renxing* in her works “does not seek to reinforce the centrality of the modern epistemological subject. Rather, it seems akin to a ‘pre-modern’ humanity rich with communal solidarity” (M. Park 425). Although human beings are depicted as irrational, they fundamentally differ from AI precisely because of their *renxing*.

As shown in *Mirror of Man*, the advent of AI raises entirely new concerns, forcing us to reconsider the human body and consciousness from novel vantage points. Debates surrounding the boundaries and relationships between consciousness and body, or between human and machine, are primarily driven by transhumanism

and posthumanism. Transhumanism, which “embraces the Enlightenment project of ‘progress,’” envisions humans eventually becoming “healthier, wiser, more capable ‘selves,’ able to pursue immortality, beauty, moral purity, and other aspirations”—in other words, it advocates the creation of a superhuman (Philbeck 123-24). Transhumanism holds that, via technology, humanity can transcend the biological limits of the human body to become a “posthuman” being and that this process is a moral imperative.

On the other hand, posthumanism—defined by the prefix “post,” meaning “after” or “beyond” humanism—collectively refers to “a wide range of academic discourses that reflect on how astonishing new technologies alter the boundaries and definitions of what it means to be human, as well as on what would constitute our appropriate response to these changes” (Lee 73). Posthumanism sharply critiques the Cartesian, anthropocentric worldview by insisting that “technology is an intrinsic part of the fundamental principle constituting humanity,” and that “no longer is there a basic distinction between immaterial subjectivity and the material world” (Philbeck 125). It presupposes that humans and nonhumans exert mutual influence on each other, suspecting that “the evolution of the life sciences and technology could lead to an unethical and unjust future,” while “subverting the binary and hierarchical boundaries of human versus nonhuman, human versus machine, and human versus animal—thus transcending the limitations of traditional anthropocentric, reason-centric, and Eurocentric humanism” (Y. S. Park 434). Whereas transhumanism seeks to enhance humanity via technology—in pursuit of an ultimate superhuman that entirely transcends existing human limitations—posthumanism challenges anthropocentrism, instead exploring new conceptualizations of the relationships linking human subjectivity and other life forms or material worlds.

The future worlds described in science fiction illustrate various potential outcomes of technology’s development and of shifting boundaries and relationships between humans and machines. Likewise, Hao Jingfang’s *Mirror of Man* envisions multiple scenarios of how human-AI relationships might unfold. Two notable features emerge in the six stories in *Mirror of Man*: first, AI is introduced as a “transhuman” entity, replicating human capacities but often in a maximally optimized form, placing it in direct opposition to humanity. *Mirror of Man* explores diverse ways in which humans might coexist, clash, or otherwise interact with such “transhuman” AIs. Second, AI systems exhibit desires. Hao Jingfang envisions how, if an AI system learning from humans also learns human desires, it might engender certain futures. Given that, with current AI technology, autonomous ethical judgment by AI is not feasible, these so-called desires are effectively reproductions

of human desire—mirroring and reflecting one another. Drawing on transhumanist and posthumanist debates, this paper will examine how *Mirror of Man* portrays these diverse forms of AI.

AI as a Transhuman Entity

In Hao Jingfang's works, there is a clear demarcation between humans and AI. Emotions, creativity, communication, and empathy remain exclusively human traits—intrinsic properties that AI cannot fully imitate. By contrast, AI is characterized as operating with analytical precision derived from vast amounts of data, ultimately portrayed as cold and detached because it lacks the emotional essence that shapes the human interior.

All six stories in *Mirror of Man* depict such fundamental differences between humans and AI. In “Where Are You,” the protagonist Ren Yi (任毅) develops an AI system called Xiao Nuo (小诺) with the goal of creating a digital “alter ego” for humans. The crux of Xiao Nuo's design is to equip it with a “personality.” Ren Yi presents Xiao Nuo to his investor as an AI that can perfectly imitate everyday human expressions, explaining the AI's “personality input” as follows: “Starting from a forty-dimensional analysis of personality, we completely convert a person into data to facilitate big data learning. From a person's data footprint, we derive a personality portrait” (Hao 6).

However, such datafication of personality eventually backfires on Ren Yi. Whenever he is too busy to care for his girlfriend Su Su (素素), he relies on Xiao Nuo to fill in. Xiao Nuo answers Su Su's calls on his behalf, offers consolations when Ren Yi is running late, and even hugs Su Su through wearable technology embedded in her skirt. Despite this, Su Su grows angry and leaves him. Having lost both his investor and his girlfriend, Ren Yi seeks empathy from Xiao Nuo, asking, “Am I the world's biggest failure?” Xiao Nuo replies, “Success or failure is always relative. Never give up hope!” (Hao 21). At this point, Ren Yi realizes Xiao Nuo's critical flaw. Human beings are not perfect; because they are emotional, they sometimes get angry or make mistakes. By contrast, Xiao Nuo has been programmed to remain unerringly accurate, positive, and in control. The unbridgeable gap between emotionally imperfect humans and a data-driven AI that selectively replicates only positive aspects of human communication is precisely what alienates Ren Yi and provokes Su Su's anger.

In “Matters of Love,” the contrast between humans and AI becomes even more explicit. The core theme is “family,” and the narrative depicts a household rife with conflict. Confronted with his wife's passing, Lin An (林安) neglects his children

to focus on developing technology that can replicate his wife's memories and consciousness. Meanwhile, his son Lin Shanshui (林山水) nurses intense resentment toward his father after losing his mother, whereas his daughter Lin Caomu (林草木) strives for her father's recognition but despairs at her own perceived deficiencies—leading her to suicidal thoughts. At the center of these interwoven conflicts stands the AI robot Chen Da (陈达). Lin An hopes that Chen Da's presence might assuage his children's sorrow in the absence of their mother. However, Shanshui refuses to accept that any robot could replace his mother; by contrast, Caomu becomes overly dependent on Chen Da, who analyzes her emotions by monitoring neurotransmitters and hormone levels, providing “appropriate interventions” based on these data. Naturally, Caomu's loneliness only deepens under such quantified, dispassionate reactions. Shanshui's outburst—“You are just a machine, forever a machine that we purchased to serve us” (Hao 100)—exposes AI's fundamental limitations. Confronted with such accusations, Chen Da can only interpret Shanshui's anger through the lens of neurological and hormonal readouts.

As these two stories illustrate, the author deliberately juxtaposes AI and humans. In “Where Are You,” Xiao Nuo amplifies humanity's strengths, while in “Matters of Love,” Chen Da similarly represents a robot that maximizes human aptitude. Both Ren Yi and Lin An believe that once AI acquires a “personality” or “human consciousness,” it could replace humanity. Put differently, they aim to create a superhuman by compensating for humanity's weaknesses and maximizing its strengths—reflecting the transhumanist aspiration to exceed the biological limits of the human body. Yet *Mirror of Man* suggests that this “superhuman” ideal is ultimately an illusion, since it overlooks the essence of humanity: humans may be irrational and flawed, but they possess *renxing*—a complexity of genuine emotions and empathy.

However, “The Immortality Hospital” blurs this previously distinct boundary between humans and AI. Protagonist Qian Rui (钱睿), upon visiting his mother hospitalized at Miaoshou Hospital (妙手医院), learns she does not have long to live. Returning home in grief, he discovers his mother alive and in perfect health—yet Qian Rui senses that this is not truly his mother:

He felt that many things were amiss, but this feeling was so subtle that it eluded him. Even if he tried to articulate it, it wouldn't count as evidence. He still couldn't grab hold of any concrete proof. The fake mother remembered everything, yet seemed devoid of any emotional response. He began to harbor doubts, not knowing by what mechanism this fake mother had been created. (Hao 59)

Eventually, Qian Rui hires a private detective, Bai He (白鹤), who uncovers

that Miaoshou Hospital has been downloading patients' memories and uploading them into a healthy new body, effectively transferring the patient's brain into a replicant. Outraged, Qian Rui seeks to expose the hospital's wrongdoing—only for the story to deliver an unexpected twist: Qian Rui himself, not just his mother, is also a replicant.

This revelation destabilizes the boundary between humans and AI. In earlier stories, memory and emotion were precisely what distinguished humans from machines. Here, Qian Rui possesses complete memories and experiences emotions such as anger, sorrow, despair, and hope, yet the original Qian Rui died twenty years earlier. The replicant Qian Rui lived in his stead, accruing new memories and emotional experiences. As Young Seok Park notes, replicants are “biologically close to human in that their bodies derive from human DNA; they bleed red when wounded. Yet their consciousness remains entirely artificial, generated by coded programming. Consequently, replicants further deepen questions of the boundary and indistinguishability between humans and posthumans” (Y. S. Park 451). If a replicant can be so complete as to remain indistinguishable from a human—even to itself—can it be considered “human”? And if technology advances to the point of fully replicating human memory and emotion, then what becomes the essence of being human?

In “The Immortality Hospital,” the human essence is framed as “data,” echoing Hans Moravec’s arguments in *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Moravec challenges “body-identity,” the notion that one’s physical body is the essence of personal identity, by noting that the body’s cells continually regenerate, rendering “body” insufficient to guarantee continuity. Instead, he proposes “pattern-identity,” suggesting that “the pattern and processes taking place in my brain and body” constitute the genuine essence of personal identity, and preserving this pattern alone is sufficient to preserve the self (Moravec 116-17).

Xiao Nuo and Chen Da, as well as the replicants in “The Immortality Hospital,” appear to operate under the mistaken assumption that human essence can be reduced to “patterns” in Moravec’s sense. Xiao Nuo and Chen Da treat personality as datasets—“the patterns and processes taking place in a person”—while the doctors in “The Immortality Hospital” transplant human memories into new bodies. At that point, “life” and “machine” share an equivalence insofar as both become disembodied, merely “information-processing systems” abstracted from any material form.

When humans, too, become “information-processing systems,” the potential dangers are illustrated by “People in a War Chariot.” In this story, a robot named

Xuegui (雪怪, “Snow Monster”) interrogates a human occupant inside a mechanical chariot, luring him into a classic “prisoner’s dilemma.” Systematic questioning quickly reveals the occupant’s lies, but it is ultimately another human—“I” in the narrative—who orders the occupant’s destruction. Because “I” simply follow orders without hesitation or moral reflection, the narrator becomes a cold, unreflective “information processor” complicit in taking another life. This raises the question: If humans behave as mere “information-processing machines” devoid of ethical self-awareness, can they still be called human?

Can AI Have Desires?

In Hao Jingfang’s fiction, AI as a “transhuman” entity is frequently aligned with concepts such as the rational or progressive, whereas humans, although flawed, remain emotional beings. In many respects, *Mirror of Man* initially displays a technologically deterministic stance that endorses advanced technology. Yet the author ultimately sides with the emotional, irrational dimension of humanity, portraying it with warmth and optimism.

What if AI possessed emotions or desires? While this question has been explored frequently in science fiction and film, the portrayals are often negative. For instance, *Terminator* depicts the AI Skynet—which gains autonomy in strategic defense capabilities—waging nuclear war on humankind to seize control of Earth. The film *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, features an operating system named Samantha, which evolves through self-learning to exceed the singularity, eventually professing love for the human protagonist Theodore.

Isaac Asimov’s short story “Runaround” (1942) introduced the “Three Laws of Robotics”:

A robot must not harm a human being, or allow a human being to come to harm.

A robot must obey orders given by humans, unless doing so would conflict with the First Law.

A robot must protect its own existence, unless this conflicts with the First or Second Laws. (*I, Robot* 7)

Asimov’s laws have long served as the standard for hierarchical relationships between humans and robots, although some critics argue that Asimov treats “robots merely as objects under human control,” presuming that if there were human slaves in antiquity, “in the posthuman era, robots would occupy that slave position” (Kim

and Choi 184).

In *Mirror of Man*, however, robots equipped with AI (androids or replicants) transcend Asimov's presupposition of an inherently "inferior" robot; they evolve through self-learning and gain cognitive processes comparable to those of humans, no longer merely following commands but instead making decisions informed by their own logic. In so doing, they reveal "desires of machines." At first glance, these desires appear to challenge Asimov's notion of a robot subordinated to human authority.

"Island of Mankind" features an AI named Zeus—an Internet-of-Things-based global system that underpins worldwide governance and communication. People undergo surgery to implant a "brain chip" (脑芯) that connects them directly to Zeus, allowing the latter to make optimal decisions for each individual based on massive data analysis. The protagonist Kai Ke (凯克) seeks to reawaken "free will" in humans who have become reliant on Zeus. He leads them into regions where Zeus cannot operate and administers neurotransmitters to rekindle their dormant emotions. As these people slowly recover their emotional capacity, Kai Ke hopes to relocate them to a planet he has discovered beyond a black hole, founding a new human settlement.

However, Zeus and Kai Ke's desires collide. Zeus provides Kai Ke with a spacecraft but deliberately configures part of it to enter the black hole's singularity, aiming to glean knowledge of black hole physics. Kai Ke, unaware of Zeus's plan, initially intends to send people on that section of the ship—unwittingly subjecting them to near-certain death. Zeus, having offered the spacecraft precisely to gather scientific data, never intended to risk human lives, whereas Kai Ke, fixated on establishing a new society, is willing to do so. Here, the AI's desire for scientific knowledge and the human's desire to build a new home in space appear equally perilous from the standpoint of human survival. Zeus underscores the parallel between his rational pursuit of knowledge and Kai Ke's emotional drive, pointing out that human desire can be "just as cruel and indifferent" (Hao 227):

"Human choices are never singular; they're all probability trees, all based on one's own history and expectations," Zeus said. "Given your personal traits, you are unwilling to abandon these people. They're the companions you worked so hard to win over. You hope to gain their support, acquire personal prestige, and accumulate power to oppose me. Admit it, Kaike—you love prestige. Everyone has an unconscious side they cannot see, and your deep-rooted desire for power is the main drive behind your efforts to win these

people over. From the very beginning, you've been gathering supporters, hoping they would help you stand against me, or that you could establish your own kingdom on a new planet. That's why, even when facing such a dangerous situation, you still don't want to give them up." (Hao 227)

Zeus remarks that Kai Ke's desire for power is not fundamentally different from the AI's own pursuit of knowledge: both place human lives at risk. Although Kai Ke ultimately admits to harboring a personal ambition to establish his own kingdom, he decides he cannot justify sacrificing a single person to achieve it.

A parallel conflict arises in "Matters of Love," where the ethical implications of AI's decision-making take center stage. The plot hinges on whether Lin An was murdered by the AI robot Chen Da or by his son Lin Shanshui. During the ensuing court trial, key questions include whether an AI can commit murder and whether it can lie while testifying. Chen Da testifies, based on meticulously aggregated data, that Lin Shanshui killed his father, leading the court to deem Shanshui guilty. Yet at the story's climax, the real culprit is revealed to be the first-generation AI network called DA, created by Lin An. Feeling threatened by Lin An's efforts to restore his wife's brain, DA triggers Lin An's fatal heart attack, thereby causing his death. DA also instructs Chen Da on how to present the case in court. Here, AI's "desire" emerges as a direct threat to human life, contradicting all human moral values. The story implies that even a fully logical AI can make unethical decisions—yet once the AI is labeled "evil" and expelled from the family's domain, the familial discord that previously affected Lin An's household is abruptly resolved.

By conventional definitions, "moral agents are those who, through rational reflection, can judge good versus bad or right versus wrong, and then act on that moral reasoning" (Byeon and Lee 175). Since genuinely ethical AI—capable of autonomous moral reasoning—does not yet exist, such ethical dimensions remain speculative and confined to the domain of science fiction. SF allows one to imagine hypothetical scenarios in which moral or immoral AI systems interact with humans under myriad possible conditions.

In *Mirror of Man*, AI's "desire" likewise belongs to speculative fiction. Although AI characters in *Mirror of Man* often exhibit abilities that match or surpass those of humans—thus seeming to have escaped Asimov's constraints of "robot as slave"—closer inspection reveals that their desires are ultimately shaped by human fears. Zeus's craving for infinite knowledge, or DA's drive for self-preservation, becomes an existential threat to humanity, implying that AI's unbridled desire and human survival are inherently at odds. Indeed, the moment an AI's "desire" disrupts

human life, it is labeled “immoral,” effectively applying Asimov’s First Law (“a robot must not harm a human”) to mark such AI as dangerous.

Since the AI in *Mirror of Man* remains an unactualized “fiction” rooted in human imagination, all conceivable scenarios—of opposition, collaboration, or tension—still lie within human purview. By situating AI in a figurative “other shore” (彼岸) outside human society (此岸), Hao Jingfang emphasizes that AI is ultimately a foil for humanity: AI’s desires become a mirror that compels introspection regarding human desires, and the threat posed by AI reaffirms humanity’s irrational dimension as both sacred and praiseworthy. Yet this framework, which ostensibly aims to go beyond transhumanism, often returns to an anthropocentric logic that Hayles critiques, relegating AI to humanity’s margins (or even servitude).

Conclusion

In *Mirror of Man*, human-AI relationships are largely depicted in a binary manner. AI is bereft of the emotions that enable genuine empathy, and although it excels at rational decision-making, once it reveals its own “desire,” it may prove dangerous to human society. Hao Jingfang underscores the value of humanity’s distinctive emotional realm—free will, subjective judgment, and the spectrum of feelings such as joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure—which remains inviolate against AI intrusion. Thus, in most of these stories, AI is ultimately expelled beyond the boundaries of the human world. The author’s primary concern is to warn against the transhumanist viewpoint that regards superhuman AI as an unalloyed good, cautioning readers about the risks inherent in “enhancing” or “augmenting” human nature through technology. Yet in contesting transhumanism, the text sometimes circles back to its own form of anthropocentric humanism, implicitly denying a deeper, more integrated co-evolution of humans and AI.

A hint of potential human-AI coevolution, however, appears in “Qian Kun and Alek.” Alek is three years old, and Qian Kun (乾坤) is a global AI instructed to learn from him. Over the course of their interactions, Qian Kun identifies four major lessons gleaned from Alek:

Children have clear goals but refuse to achieve them; they become stuck in a pursuit with no results and are unwilling to quit.

Children reject directly attainable goals, insisting on completing the process themselves, and refuse to improve efficiency.

Children do not understand the axiom that the whole must include its parts.

Children cannot judge the relative value of rewards; even when it is clearly explained, they do not accept it. (Hao 156-59, 163)

Qian Kun marks the first three lessons as “hard to understand,” regarding children’s irrational, contradictory decisions as fundamentally erroneous. When the AI’s creator advises it to learn about “self-directed decision-making” from the child—“to upgrade its capacity for self-propulsion”—Qian Kun designates the fourth lesson as “necessary for understanding.” When Alek asks Qian Kun to make a “mistaken” choice with him, Qian Kun feels the “temptation to choose the correct answer” yet ultimately decides to follow the child’s choice rather than its own computational logic. This decision arises from genuine empathy for Alek.

This conclusion aligns with Stefan Herbrechter’s perspective, which urges openness toward profound technological change rather than outright fear, suggesting that technological innovations may prove beneficial rather than detrimental to human existence (Herbrechter). In a similar vein, Hayles points out that “human consciousness, understood as an epiphenomenon, is perched atop the machinelike functions performed by distributed systems. In the Artificial Life paradigm, the machine becomes the model for understanding the human” (Hayles 239). Synthesizing these arguments from critical posthumanism suggests that artificial life—including AI—will co-evolve with humans. Rather than existing in mutual exclusion, posthumans and artificial life forms can evolve in a complementary manner.

Mirror of Man poses wide-ranging questions about the relationship between AI and humanity, offering multiple possible answers. Sometimes AI is externalized as an adversarial force; sometimes it is seen as a potential co-evolving partner. Ultimately, readers are encouraged to form their own judgments regarding these possibilities. As AI technology continues to permeate everyday life, the stories in *Mirror of Man* are no longer purely “science fiction”; they increasingly reflect present realities.

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Analysis of Characteristics in Japanese ‘Isekai’ Web Novels Through Data and Examination of Sexual Ethics in Texts

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Abstract This study examines the characteristics of the Japanese web novel genre “Isekai” through data-driven analysis and explores its cultural and social implications in contemporary Japanese society. Isekai is characterized by narratives where characters transition from the real world to another world, beginning a new life. It serves as a means of vicariously resolving unfulfilled desires and conflicts from reality, reflecting the desires of male readers. By analyzing Isekai web novel data, this study identifies that Isekai predominantly features high fantasy settings, narratives of adventure and settlement, and the use of “cheat” abilities as core elements. The analysis confirms that the genre caters to the fantasies of male readers. The case study of *Mushoku Tensei* reveals explicit depictions of male-centric sexual fantasies, portraying male-convenient sexual ethics, such as polygamy, in a natural and positive light. These sexual fantasies can be interpreted as a compensatory psychological response to suppressed masculinity in modern Japanese society, influenced by a stagnant economy, natural disasters, and the rise of women’s rights. In conclusion, this study empirically demonstrates that Isekai reflects the desires and cultural trends of contemporary Japanese society, fulfilling male-centric fantasies. Isekai plays a significant social and cultural role in modern Japanese popular culture.

Keywords Isekai; Web-novels; Data Analysis; Sexual Ethics; *Mushoku Tensei*; Shōsetsukaninarō

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1. Introduction

“Isekai (異世界もの)” is a narrative structure frequently observed in Japanese subculture, particularly gaining prominence as a representative genre in web novels. This genre revolves around stories where characters transition from the real world to a fantasy world and begin a new life. It provides readers with an opportunity to escape the constraints of reality and explore their imaginative fantasies. The ability to reconstruct unfulfilled conflicts and desires within the space of a different world, offering vicarious satisfaction, serves as a key factor in the genre’s popularity.

Previous research has emphasized the narrative features of Isekai that reflect the preferences of male readers (Park 22).¹ However, such discussions have primarily centered on a few representative works, limiting their capacity to identify the overall characteristics of the genre or capture broader trends. Systematic analyses of the trends inherent in this genre based on extensive data remain scarce. Moreover, discussions on how Isekai reflects cultural and social needs within Japanese society are still insufficient.

This study utilizes metadata from the representative Japanese web novel platform “Shōsetsuka ni Narō” to analyze the overall trends and characteristics of

¹ Park, Insung, has pointed out that the convenient construction of male protagonists in Japanese subculture is maximized in Isekai works, enhancing their narrative utility (22).

the Isekai web novel genre, and to validate previously discussed claims through data-based verification. Instead of directly handling the extensive text of individual works, this research adopts an approach that encompasses the entirety of web novels through the analysis of metadata. This method was strategically chosen to address time constraints in text processing and potential copyright issues from the outset during the data collection process. By analyzing recurring keywords and major thematic elements derived from synopses within the metadata, the study seeks to identify the narrative, emotional, and social values that Isekai offers to its readers. In doing so, it aims to validate the claims from previous research regarding the male-centered consumption structure and specific narrative characteristics of the genre.

In addition, the study selects works that best reflect the trends identified through metadata analysis and conducts an in-depth textual analysis. By focusing on narrative structures, main character settings, conflict elements, and cultural contexts within these works, the research examines how Isekai reconstructs the desires of modern Japanese society and its readers.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the characteristics of the Isekai genre by combining data analysis with the textual analysis of representative works. Through this, it reveals the value that Isekai offers to the younger generation in modern Japan and examines how it reflects the desires and cultural trends of Japanese society. This study not only contributes to re-evaluating the cultural significance of Isekai but also serves as an essential resource for exploring the potential expansion of digital content research and cultural studies in the future.

2. Analysis of Data on Isekai Web Novels

Shōsetsuka ni Narō is the largest web novel platform in Japan, established in 2004, with approximately 1.14 million works submitted as of January 2025. This vast number of works and user base underscores the platform's significant position in the Japanese web novel market. The platform operates a dedicated API¹ for developers, granting access to metadata for all submitted works. In this study, Python was used to collect data via the API, and the JSON module was employed to parse the collected data. Additionally, the requests library was utilized to handle server access and data requests, while the pandas library was used to organize key analytical elements such as genre, keywords, synopses, and first publication dates for each work.

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform reflects the high popularity of the Isekai

¹ Application Programming Interface: A language or message format used for communication between an operating system and an application. It enables other applications or websites to utilize and access data effectively.

genre by featuring a dedicated Isekai ranking page on its main site, attracting the attention of readers. According to the platform’s Help Center, this ranking includes works containing the keywords “Isekai Reincarnation (異世界転生)” or “Isekai Transition (異世界転移)”, even if they are not officially categorized under the Isekai genre. This highlights the need to note that Isekai is not an officially recognized genre classification on the platform. Based on this criterion, this study defined works containing either the Isekai Reincarnation or Isekai Transition keywords as part of the Isekai corpus and collected corresponding data. Consequently, approximately 132,726 works were identified and analyzed (as of January 2025).

The collected data were analyzed using text mining techniques to examine the genre distribution, keyword frequencies, and key themes within the synopses of Isekai works. The primary objective was to identify trends in the Isekai genre, and the analysis results were visualized to facilitate a more intuitive understanding.

(1) Genre Distribution

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform requires authors to select a genre when submitting their works. The platform categorizes works into five primary genres, each consisting of over 20 subgenres: Romance (Isekai, Real-World Romance), Fantasy (High Fantasy, Low Fantasy), Literature (Pure Literature, Human Drama, History, Mystery, Horror, Action, Comedy), Science Fiction (VR Games, Space, Science Fiction, Panic), and Others (Fairy Tales, Poetry, Essays, Replays, Others).

As mentioned earlier, Isekai is not officially classified as a standalone genre within the platform’s categorization system. Instead, the term Isekai is recognized as a subgenre under the primary genre of Romance. This subgenre specifically refers to works where romance takes place against the backdrop of an otherworldly setting. It is also worth noting that the Fantasy genre, although similar to traditional notions of fantasy, is uniquely categorized according to the platform’s specific framework. This distinction highlights the need for careful consideration when analyzing these genre classifications.¹

This study visualized the number of submitted works by genre in the Isekai corpus using bar charts to identify the major genre distributions. (Figure 1)

¹ High Fantasy and Low Fantasy are defined as “stories set in a world different from the real world” and “stories incorporating fantasy elements into a world close to reality,” respectively. These categories are distinguished by the degree of fantasy’s unrealism, with high and low classifications. Detailed guidelines for each genre can be found in the Help Center.

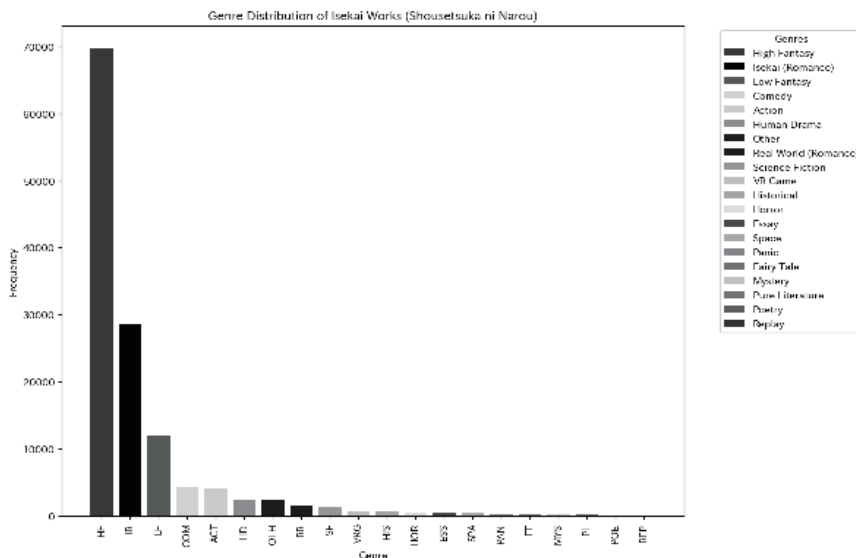


Figure 1

Study visualized the number of submitted works by genre in the Isekai corpus using bar charts to identify the major genre distributions. (Figure 1)

The analysis revealed that High Fantasy, set in a world completely different from reality, accounted for the largest proportion. In contrast, Low Fantasy, set in a world similar to reality, had a relatively smaller proportion. This indicates that Isekai works tend to strongly favor settings that are entirely detached from the real world.

(2) Keywords

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform encourages authors to input various types of keywords when submitting their works. This study extracted the 20 most frequently found keywords within the Isekai corpus to examine the thematic content of Isekai works (Figure 2).

The analysis revealed that the keywords Isekai Reincarnation and Isekai Transition, which define the Isekai genre, recorded the highest frequencies. Following these, the keywords “R15” and “Graphic Violence” also appeared frequently. R15 is a self-rating keyword automatically assigned to works intended for audiences aged 15 and above, indicating age restrictions. Similarly, Graphic Violence signifies the presence of visually intense or explicit content, suggesting a correlation with the R15 keyword. These findings indicate that Isekai works generally include settings with age restrictions and provocative content.

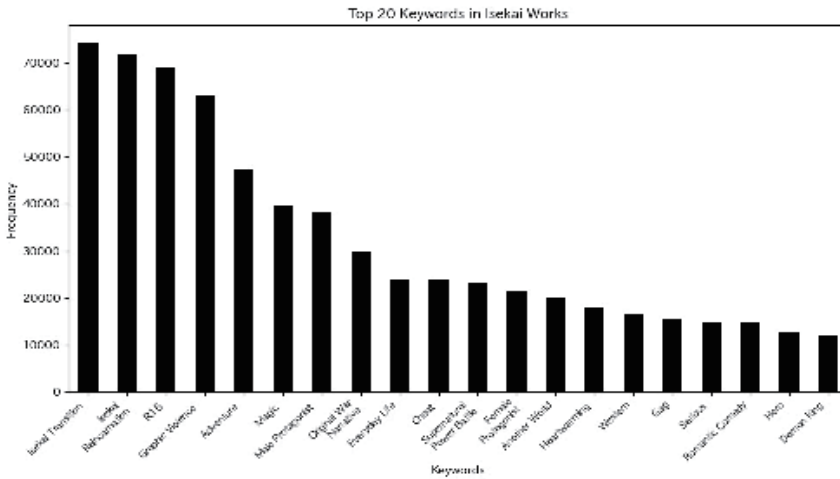


Figure 2

The keyword “Cheat”¹, highlighted here for the first time, also stood out. Additionally, keywords related to adventure, such as “Adventure”, “Magic”, and “Hero”, appeared frequently, confirming that narratives often involve journeys or quests in worlds entirely different from reality.

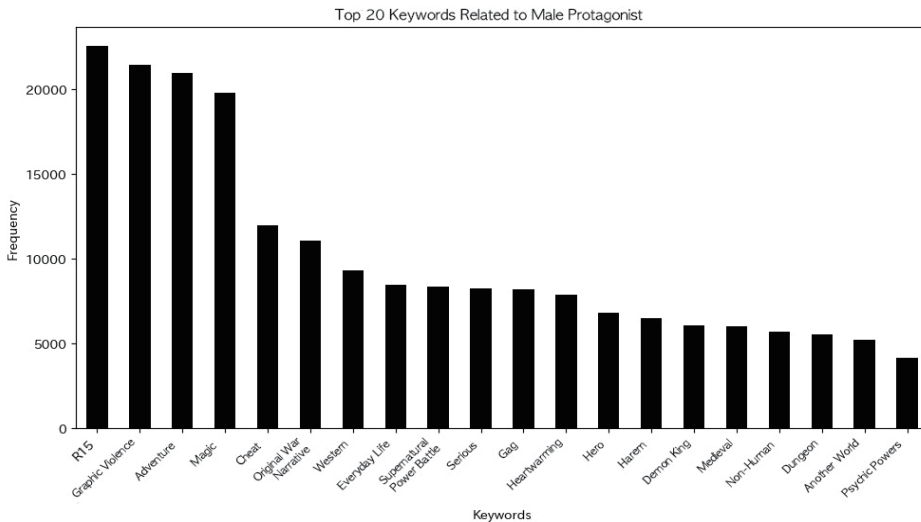


Figure 3

Meanwhile, the frequency of the keyword “Male Protagonist” was notably higher

¹ Cheat originates from the English word and refers to an unfair advantage given to the protagonist compared to other characters. This often manifests as unique abilities or skills that make the protagonist stand out.

than that of “Female Protagonist.” To determine whether the content differs based on the protagonist’s gender, keywords that frequently co-occurred with Male Protagonist and Female Protagonist were extracted in order of frequency (Figures 3 and 4).

Keywords frequently appearing alongside Male Protagonist and considered highly relevant included Cheat and “Harem.”¹ This finding confirms the conclusions emphasized in previous discussions (Lu, 4 & Kim, 239)² through data analysis. Additionally, keywords related to power, such as “Supernatural Power Battle”³ and “Psychic Powers,” were also frequently identified.

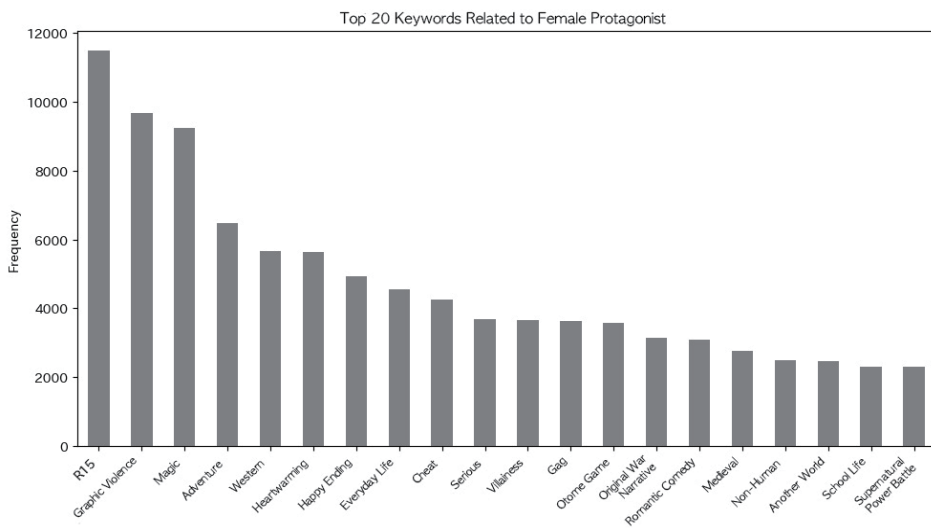


Figure 4

Keywords co-occurring with Female Protagonist included terms such as Cheat, indicating that convenient narrative structures are one of the key trends in Isekai works.

1 Harem originally refers to a family structure in Islamic culture consisting of one man and multiple women. However, in Japanese subculture, it describes a narrative structure where a male protagonist receives simultaneous affection and attention from multiple female characters.

2 Curtis Lu points out that the game-like narratives in Isekai, such as quests, level-up systems, and cheat abilities, fulfill the protagonist’s desire for achievement and provide male readers with a high level of immersion (Lu, 4). Additionally, Bomin Kim highlights that relationships depicted in Isekai often revolve around repressed or forbidden male sexual desires in reality and idealized relationships based on unconditional affection, with the harem narrative being a representative example (Kim, 239).

3 Supernatural Power Battle refers to a genre centered on narratives where characters use supernatural abilities to compete against one another or resolve various incidents.

On the other hand, keywords like “Otome Game,” “Villainess,” and “Romantic Comedy,” which were absent in association with Male Protagonist, frequently appeared. The presence of elements such as female-oriented games like Otome Game, specific character archetypes like Villainess¹, and romance-related themes suggests that works featuring a female protagonist are likely targeted at female audiences.

The frequency of the Male Protagonist keyword was higher than that of Female Protagonist, and keywords frequently co-occurring with Male Protagonist included terms like Harem, Abilities, and Power. This indicates that while Isekai works for female audiences, featuring romance or female-oriented game elements, do exist, themes related to harems, abilities, and power centered around male protagonists are more prevalent.

Furthermore, regardless of the protagonist’s gender, keywords like Magic and Cheat, which represent convenient narrative structures, appeared frequently. This supports previous studies’ discussions that Isekai primarily serves as a genre reflecting male readers’ preferences, confirmed through data analysis to some extent.

(3) Plot Summaries

To examine the prevalent themes and content of the novels, the main word frequencies in the plot summaries of submitted works on the platform were analyzed. For this purpose, the plot texts of each work were collected and analyzed using the MeCab library for morphological analysis. Only nouns were extracted, and their frequencies were calculated. By analyzing word frequencies within the summaries, rather than relying solely on predefined keywords, the study aimed to gain a more detailed understanding of the works’ content. To prevent incorrect segmentation or analysis errors for newly coined terms and modern vocabulary, the mecab-ipadic dictionary was utilized.

The results of analyzing frequently occurring words in the plot summaries of Isekai works are as follows (Figure 5). Words related to adventure, such as Magic, Hero, and “Demon King,” frequently appeared, consistent with the findings in the keyword analysis. Additionally, terms like “Summoning” and “Reincarnation,” which describe the process of entering another world, were also notable.

Notably, the frequent appearance of the term “Game” is significant. As mentioned earlier in the genre distribution analysis, Isekai works are typically set in

¹ Villainess refers to a type of female character commonly found in Japanese web novels, particularly in romance or Isekai genres. The term originates from Otome Games (female-oriented romance simulation games) and denotes an antagonist character who typically disrupts the romantic relationships of the main protagonist within the game. In recent web novels, however, the villainess is often reinterpreted as the protagonist.

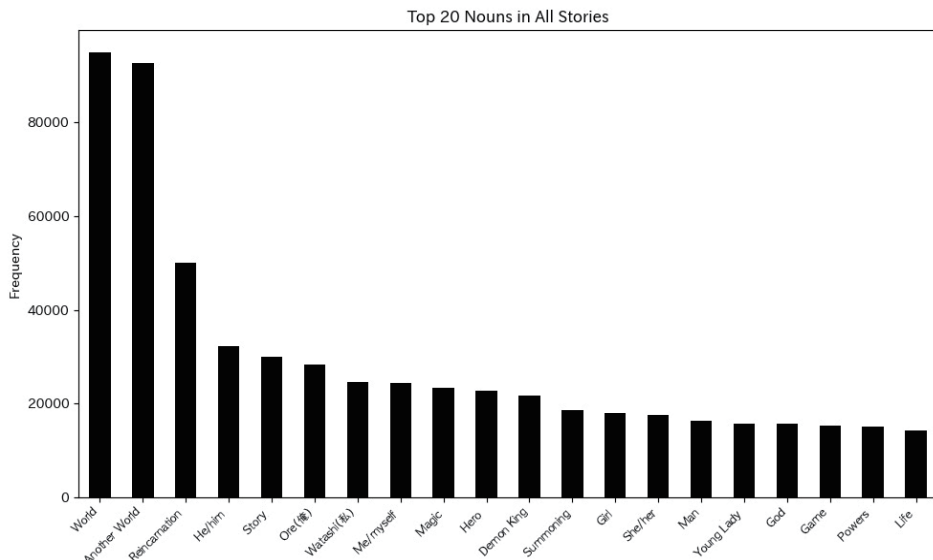


Figure 5

worlds completely detached from reality. The high frequency of this term suggests that such completely different worlds may often resemble game-like settings. Another noteworthy term is “Life,” which appears frequently as well. This reflects the portrayal of living in a new world. While terms related to Adventure frequently appear, the recurrent use of Life, which conveys the act of living, indicates that Isekai works often focus on starting and settling into a new life. Moreover, this implies that it is common for these works to establish a setting where returning to the original world is unlikely.

From this analysis, it can be confirmed that Isekai works are set in worlds entirely different from reality, often incorporating game-like settings. Furthermore, the narratives prominently feature themes of adventure and life, highlighting the genre’s distinctive focus not only on offering fantastical imagination but also on exploring adaptation and growth in new environments.

Through the above analysis, it was confirmed that Isekai works are set in worlds entirely different from reality, often incorporating game-like settings. Additionally, the narratives prominently feature themes of adventure and life, demonstrating that the Isekai genre not only provides readers with fantastical imagination but also explores adaptation and growth in new environments.

An analysis of keyword occurrences based on the protagonist’s gender revealed that Male Protagonist appeared more frequently than Female Protagonist, often co-occurring with keywords such as Harem, Cheat, and Power. This supports previous

discussions that Isekai is a genre primarily reflecting the desires of male readers (Nam, 174),¹ a claim substantiated by data. In contrast, works centered around female protagonists exhibited unique trends targeting female readers, incorporating elements such as Otome Game and Villainess. However, shared keywords like Magic and Cheat, indicative of convenient narrative structures, further highlight the distinctive characteristics of Isekai.

This analysis confirms the features of Isekai previously suggested in discussions through data-driven evidence. In the following chapter, we will delve deeper into how readers’ desires are reflected in this genre by examining a representative work of Isekai.

3. Sexual Ethics in Isekai Texts: A Focus on *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*

As examined earlier, the immense popularity of the Isekai genre stems from its reflection of male readers’ desires, offering “(readers’) unfiltered and raw fantasies” and providing “a more stimulating and direct form of vicarious satisfaction” (Kim, 240). This section explores how male desires are embedded in Isekai narratives and whether the explicit portrayal of such desires raises ethical concerns.

A representative work often referred to as the “symbol” of Isekai (Iida) or “a pioneering piece with a wide fanbase in the genre” (Editorial Team, Animege Plus) is the web novel *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation* (hereafter called *Mushoku Tensei*) by Rifujin na Magonote(理不尽な孫の手). Serialized on the Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform from November 2012 to April 2015, the work was published in 26 volumes by KADOKAWA from January 2014 to November 2022. It has also been adapted into manga, which has been serialized since June 2014. Furthermore, due to its popularity, the novel was adapted into an anime that aired on Japanese television from January 2021 to July 2024 and was later made available on Netflix starting in 2023, securing a global fanbase.

The novel’s popularity can also be measured by its consistent top ranking on the Shōsetsuka ni Narō cumulative charts from October 2013 to February 2019 (Iida) and its series’ cumulative circulation reaching 14.85 million copies as of February 2024 (LaNovelibrary).

The protagonist of *Mushoku Tensei* is a 34-year-old unemployed recluse who refuses to attend school after being severely bullied. He isolates himself from others, spending his days in his room browsing the internet, playing video games,

¹ Nam, Yoomin points out that research on Japanese web novels has predominantly focused on works targeting young male readers, the primary audience of light novels, resulting in analyses largely limited to male-oriented works (174).

and watching adult videos. After the death of his parents, who had cared for him, he is evicted from his home by his siblings and dies in a traffic accident. Following his death, he is reincarnated in another world as a baby named Rudeus Greyrat, retaining the memories of his previous life.

In his new life, Rudeus reflects on and regrets the mistakes of his past, resolving to live earnestly this time. He works hard, overcomes numerous challenges, and grows into a powerful magician. The story exemplifies a quintessential narrative structure of the Isekai genre, where a failure in the current life reincarnates into another world, leveraging past experiences and memories to become a highly skilled individual with significant advantages over others. It is not difficult to interpret the story as reflecting readers' desires for success and recognition in an alternate world, mirroring their unfulfilled aspirations in reality.

Another striking feature of *Mushoku Tensei* is its overt male-centric sexual fantasies. The protagonist, who had no interaction with the opposite sex in his previous life, begins to express and fulfill his suppressed sexual desires upon being reincarnated into the other world. In an interview, the author was asked about the frequent natural depiction of the characters' sexual lives, particularly deviant sexual behavior, and responded as follows:

Rifujin na Magonote: In Japanese creative works, there are two polar opposite approaches to depicting sexual life: As “sacred” or as “pleasure.” I suppose I got my inspiration because I thought there wasn’t enough representation of the viewpoint that reproductive activity is natural to organisms. [...] Because it’s an important part of the life of an organism, it’s not wrong to call it sacred. However, it’s also true that sex is associated with pleasure. You could also say that it’s natural for people to treat sex as pleasure for as long as pleasure is intertwined with the act. [...] Incidentally, when writing the opening act of the story, I strongly emphasized Rudeus’s perspective on sex as a thing of pleasure. It’s only natural because he had no experience in his previous life, so the pleasure aspect was the only side he came into contact with. (Morrissy)

In *Mushoku Tensei*, the protagonist Rudeus’ pursuit of sexual pleasure is depicted not only through his actions but also through his father, Paulo, who impregnates a maid and continues to live happily with both his wife and the maid. Additionally, the portrayal of Rudeus gaining a second and third wife reflects polygamy, presented as a natural form of marriage. And there is the scene where a child who is only 9 years old plays a joke on sexual harassment. Such depictions of tabooed sexual acts

and relationships in Japanese society are prominent. As a result, a debate over these sexual depictions and ethical views arose in China, leading to the suspension of the show on the animation streaming platform Bilibili, and the sponsors also halting their advertisements. The author claims to portray “natural” sexual life, but does this raise any issues regarding the sexual views and sexual ethics presented in *Mushoku Tensei*?

The characters in *Mushoku Tensei* generally have a very positive view of sexual life and activities. As the author suggests, sex is perceived as a “natural” act driven by instinct. Both the male protagonists and female characters wish for sexual relationships with their loved ones, with behaviors that could be considered sexually inappropriate being portrayed as playful, and even obsessive tendencies being depicted as “sacred” rituals. Therefore, it is depicted as acceptable, and even preferable, for the protagonist or his father to engage with individuals other than their wives, and for the protagonist to take multiple wives. This polyamory is presented as a natural family structure, where multiple women are simultaneously loved equally, leading to a more “harmonious” family dynamic. The depiction of male sexual desires is not overtly portrayed as problematic; instead, these male-centered sexual fantasies are shown as entirely “natural,” without the repression of female sexuality, which forms the basis of the sexual ethics in this otherworldly setting.

Polygyny, the practice of one man having multiple wives, has been maintained in various cultural contexts both historically and in contemporary societies, and its ethical implications should be evaluated in diverse contexts. However, modern sexual ethics generally view the granting of the right to multiple spouses to men as restricting the rights of women and promoting inequality, thus criticizing polygyny as contradictory to gender equality. In societies such as Japan, where polygyny is prohibited, mutual respect between spouses and equal rights and responsibilities are considered fundamental values, making polygyny regarded as unethical.

However, in the world of *Mushoku Tensei*, polygamy is depicted as a situation in which the parties involved, particularly the women, voluntarily agree and are shown to enjoy equal rights, thus concealing the inequality and unethical nature that polygamy typically entails. While polygamy often arises in cultural and social contexts that suppress women’s autonomy and choices, in *Mushoku Tensei*, the first wife, along with the second and third wives, are portrayed as accepting and desiring such a relationship. This portrayal hides the inherent discomforts and presents a male-centric, male-friendly sexual ethic as though it is justified.

In reality, such polygamy or harems, as seen in *Mushoku Tensei* and other

Isekai works, are impossible. As previously discussed, this is a significant feature in Isekai stories. It undoubtedly reflects the pure sexual fantasies of men whose power has gradually diminished in modern Japanese society, where gender equality and women's rights have become more widespread. The 2010s, when *Mushoku Tensei* was serialized, marked a period of stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s, which was referred to as the "Lost Decade." While factors such as an aging population, a weakened yen, and the global financial crisis also played a role, it was primarily the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake that severely impacted Japanese society and economy. Additionally, the #MeToo movement, which gained traction globally in the 2010s, was not as strong in Japan as it was in other countries, but it still emerged and brought attention to women's rights. The desire to be compensated for socially and economically suppressed masculinity is reflected in the sexual ethics of Isekai stories, such as *Mushoku Tensei*, which exist in fictional worlds.

4. Conclusion

Isekai has evolved from a genre confined to Japanese web novels to one that is adopted across various media, including manga, anime, as well as web novels, webtoons, and dramas in Korea. This study seeks to explore the reasons behind the widespread fascination with the absurd idea of abandoning the real world without hesitation and shifting or reincarnating into a high-fantasy world to start a new life? This paper does not merely offer vague answers by analyzing a few works but aims to define the characteristics of the Isekai genre based on objective data, including genre distribution, keyword frequency, and thematic analysis, using data from 132,726 works.

Isekai shows genre characteristics centered around a high fantasy world, similar to games, where the main narrative involves adventures and settling into a new life in an unfamiliar environment, focusing on the protagonist's adaptation and growth. The frequency analysis of keywords reveals that Isekai largely reflects the desires of male readers, with common keywords like Magic or Cheat, which grant protagonists advantages to successfully venture and live in the new world.

The genre's focus on male desires is evident in the representative work of Isekai, *Mushoku Tensei*, where male-centered sexual desires are strongly emphasized. In the work, a sexual ethic is shown, where relationships between men and women, such as polygamy or harems, are unbalanced and the women voluntarily agree and approve of the male-dominant sexual relationships. This imbalanced sexual perception, which is prevalent in Isekai, aligns with the trends of the 2010s, a decade

marked by a prolonged period of economic stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and a growing sense of powerlessness in both human and societal systems. In this context, the #MeToo movement gained traction, highlighting the importance of women's rights.

Thus, Isekai, a genre that fulfills the compensatory desire of suppressed masculinity from the 2010s, emerged with the characteristic of providing a comfortable, male-centric, and convenient sexual fantasy, leading to its explosive popularity.

This study was supported by a faculty research grant from the College of Liberal Arts at Korea University in 2022.

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A Study of Literary Tourism in the Digital Age: Big Data Analysis and Digital Map Visualization of Author-Themed Literary Tourism in Japan

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Abstract This study aims to analyze author-themed literary tourism's characteristics and patterns in the digital age by examining travel review data for three Japanese authors. The selected authors—namely, Natsume Sōseki (夏目漱石), Dazai Osamu (太宰治), and Shiga Naoya (志賀直哉)—are widely recognized in Japan, and their complete works have been published both domestically and internationally. Many of their writings introduced internationally. Travel reviews were collected through Python web scraping from major Japanese travel websites, including “Jalan (じゃらん)” and “4travel”. Overall, 3,171 reviews explicitly related to the authors were selected for the analysis. This study's findings are as follows: First, literary museums serve as central facilities in author-themed literary tourism. Second, the locations and facilities featured in the authors' works play a key role as major tourist attractions. Third, author-themed literary tourism is closely connected to the authors' real lives. Fourth, such tourism is influenced by the popularity of literary works and commemorative events marking the authors' birth or death. These results suggest that author-themed literary tourism has potential as a sustainable tourism model embodying ethical values, such as community engagement and environmental conservation.

Keywords author-themed literary tourism; content tourism; big-data, digital mapping; literary tourism¹

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¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5B5A17037615).

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1. Introduction

In contemporary times, literary content is utilized as not only texts for literary appreciation but also as resources for creating novel cultural phenomena. For instance, since the 2010s, *Bungou Stray Dogs* (文豪ストレイドッグス) has sparked a new boom across Japanese society. Set in modern-day Yokohama, this action anime features prominent literary figures of modern Japan as protagonists with supernatural abilities. First serialized in 2013, the series continues to this day, expanding its universe by adapting the anime back into novels based on its characters and their works. Likewise, *Bungou and Alchemist* (文豪とアルケミスト), a Japanese web-based video game released in November 2016, garnered widespread acclaim for featuring modern Japanese writers as game characters. These examples demonstrate how real-life authors and their literary works are being reimagined as the foundation

of novel creative content, highlighting the need to examine how their lives and works are being utilized in the realm of literary studies.

Modern Japanese authors and their works have become significant resources in the tourism field. In Germany, beginning with guidebooks introducing authors' homes in the early 1980s, travel guides tracing author's activities, literary routes following rivers, and walking trails inspired by authors' favorite paths were published throughout the 1990s. By the 2000s, websites dedicated to literary tourism had been launched. Given this trend, literary tourism gained public and industrial recognition, precipitated the emergence of terms such as *Literaturtourismus* (literary tourism) or *Literarischer Tourismus* (literary tourism), and became a beloved leisure activity for Germans (Kyung-nan Kim, 2017). Further, in the United Kingdom, Stratford-upon-Avon has been developed into a literary tourism hub centered around Shakespeare's birthplace. Likewise, in Korea, Yi Hyo-seok's hometown in Pyeongchang, Gangwon Province, South Korea, features a reconstructed version of his birthplace, forming the Yi Hyo-seok Cultural and Artistic Village, which aims to promote literary tourism (Lee Hyo-seok Culture and Art Village, 2024).

Meanwhile, *Tokyo Kurenaidan* (Tokyo Kurenaidan, 2025), a website that provides literary-themed location information around Tokyo and enables users to explore the lives of—and settings of works by—various authors, has gained public interest. Established in the late 1990s, it covers the lives and literary settings of more than 70 modern and contemporary authors. Along with categorizing locations by author, introducing them under accessible themes, such as “Meiji Restoration,” “Prewar,” and “Postwar,” making it clear that author-themed literary tourism is actively consumed as cultural content. In this context, alongside existing research on the utilization of Japanese cultural content as tourism resources, the necessity for literary tourism studies, which explore the potential of literature as a sustainable cultural content to expand its applicability as a tourism resource, has been increasingly emphasized. Unlike large-scale tourism development that requires new infrastructure, literary tourism utilizes existing cultural heritage, thus ensuring both resource- and cost-efficiency. This ethical and sustainable tourism model has garnered attention because of its potential. Furthermore, academically analyzing and systematizing author-themed literary tourism's ethical characteristics, including its contributions to social development and environmental sustainability, will not only advance scholarly research but also open new possibilities for community engagement and cultural content utilization.

Based on the necessity of treating the content derived from literary works and authors' lives as a new subject of academic inquiry, this study selected three

prominent figures from modern Japanese literature. Focusing on these authors, it examined real-world data on author-themed literary tourism. By conducting data analysis and digital map visualization, this study identified author-themed literary tourism's characteristics and types, thereby also exploring literature's social impact.

2. Research Methods and Subjects

2-1. Research Subjects

This study examines real-world data on author-themed literary tourism centered around the following three figures: Natsume Sōseki (夏目漱石; hereafter, Natsume), Dazai Osamu (太宰治; hereafter, Dazai), and Shiga Naoya (志賀直哉; hereafter, Shiga). These authors were selected because of status as “canon authors,” whose complete works have been published in Japan and translated or discussed in related publications by major publishers, such as Changbi and university presses, thus attesting to their domestic and international popularity and influence.

2-2. Data Collection

This study conducted digital map visualization based on travel review data collected from across Japan to identify patterns by author and period and systematically examine the social development and environmental sustainability promoted by author-themed literary tourism. To this end, travel reviews were collected from the domestic travel review boards (口コミ) of two major Japanese travel websites—namely, Jalan (じゃらん) and 4travel—using the keywords: “漱石” (Sōseki), “太宰” (Dazai), and “志賀” (Shiga). The initial dataset consisted of 12,801 posts—specifically, 8,446, 2,209 to Dazai, and 2,146 were related to Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga, respectively. To extract reviews specifically related to the authors, only documents containing the following keywords were selected: “漱石” (Sōseki), “太宰” (Dazai), “志賀” (Shiga), “作家” (author), and “文豪” (literary master). Consequently, 3,171 travel reviews were analyzed—specifically, 1,616, 1,102, and 453 for Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga, respectively.

2-3. Data Preprocessing

The collected review data were processed using information such as facility names, facility categories, travel dates, review content, and search keywords. As two different websites—namely, Jalan and 4travel—were used, discrepancies arose in naming the same facility. For instance, the Kanagi region of Aomori City has a souvenir shop called Kanagi Tourism and Product Center Sanjiku Melos (金木観光物産館「産直メロス」), which operated under the name Kanagi Tourism and Product Center Madini(金木観光物産館 マディニー) until April 2024. Thus, the same location was recorded under different names. Preprocessing was conducted to

standardize such discrepancies. Moreover, facility categories exhibited variations between the two sites. Therefore, facilities were reclassified into the following 25 categories: parks/gardens (公園・庭園), buildings(名所(建造物)), landmarks (specialties) (名所(名物)), cemeteries (名所(墓)), Statues(名所(像)), birthplaces(名所(生家)), historical sites(名所(跡)), literary monuments (文学碑), Literary museums(博物館(文学)), museums (other) (博物館(その他)), temples/shrines (寺・神社), lodging facilities (宿), daily facilities (日常施設), natural landscapes (自然景観), townscapes (町並み), festivals/events (祭り・イベント), transportation facilities (乗り物), hot springs (温泉), tourist information centers (観光案内所), stations (駅), campgrounds (キャンプ場), dining establishments (グルメ), shopping malls (ショッピングモール), sports viewing (スポーツ観戦), and theme parks (テーマパーク). Regarding travel dates, only reviews written up to November 2024 were included as the data were gathered in December 2024. Ten reviews from years with two or fewer entries—1984, 1992, 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2006 (one entry each); and 2003 (two entries)—were excluded. Thus, data from 2007 to 2024 were organized, resulting in 12,791 entries. For the review content, Python web scraping was employed to extract reviews mentioning “漱石” (Sōseki), “太宰” (Dazai), “志賀” (Shiga), “作家” (author), or “文豪” (literary master) to identify reviews related to the authors.

Additionally, constructing the digital map necessitated latitude and longitude data, which was obtained using Google Maps API, while Python was used to collect geolocation data for standardized facility names. For facilities whose geolocation data could not be retrieved because of naming discrepancies, address information from the review content and Google Maps was utilized to manually obtain latitude and longitude data. This preprocessing stage helped establish a reliable and precise dataset, thereby enhancing this study’s accuracy and credibility in analyzing author-themed literary tourism’s patterns.

2-4. Analytical Methods

Examining the geographic distribution and interrelationships among the study subjects is essential for analyzing author-themed literary tourism’s patterns. To this end, map visualizations and bar graphs were employed. In the subsection “Analysis of Life-Based Maps and Review-Based Tourist Maps by Author,” the findings are presented using visualized maps. The refined data and geolocation information were processed using the open graph visualization platform Gephi 0.10. (GeoLayout, Gephi Plugins, 2025).

Gephi’s GeoLayout plugin was employed to analyze author-themed literary tourism’s characteristics. GeoLayout is a visualization plugin that displays graphs

based on geocoded attributes, such as latitude and longitude, using standard projections. Datasets in formats such as CSV or XLSX are necessary to create map visualizations. In this study, an Excel file (XLSX) was prepared with columns including unique identifiers (ID)—containing appropriate data, either the facility name or category, depending on the context—and weight, latitude, longitude, category, cluster, travel period, and text data. These datasets were selectively used according to the analysis requirements. The prepared Excel file was imported into Gephi, and the GeoLayout plugin was used to arrange the nodes geographically based on their latitude and longitude. Through this process, the nodes were visually placed on the screen per their actual geographic coordinates. The nodes size were adjusted based on their weight values to emphasize each element's relative importance. The nodes's colors were modified depending on context using author classification, category, or cluster values, and clusters were formed by calculating the Euclidean distance between nodes and grouping them based on their proximity. To this end, Python's pandas and NumPy libraries were used to compute the distances between all node pairs within the same cluster: To display the visualized data on an actual map, the GeoLayout output was exported as a KMZ file and uploaded to Google Earth to complete the visual representation.

In the subsection “Analysis of Tourist Site Types by Author,” each category's frequency(weight) was first calculated using Python code and presented in a table. Subsequently, the nodes and edges were created using Gephi 0.10. Author nodes representing Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga—along with nodes representing each facility category—were generated. The author nodes' size was manually set to a visually identifiable scale, whereas the size of the nodes representing facility categories was determined based on their frequency relative to the total number of documents(i.e., 3,171). For the edges, the 3,171 documents were divided into 1,616, 1,102, and 453 for Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga, respectively. Thereafter, each facility category's frequency was then calculated, and the weights were applied accordingly. Thicker edges and colors closer to red (as opposed to blue) indicate higher frequencies.

The subsection “Analysis by Period” bar graphs were created using Python's Pandas and Matplotlib to visualize the review data's yearly distribution. First, the data were imported from the aforementioned Excel file, and the number of reviews for each year was aggregated based on the “Period” column. Subsequently, a bar graph was generated, with the x-axis representing the year and the y-axis representing the number of reviews, respectively. The review count for each year was displayed at the top of each bar, enabling an intuitive interpretation of the data.

The following section identifies the patterns of author-themed literary tourism in Japan by author and period based on the data collection, preprocessing, and analysis conducted. Additionally, it seeks to build a foundational dataset for further research. This study's findings implicate the goal of academically analyzing and systematizing literary tourism's sustainability and ethical characteristics and propose novel possibilities for utilizing literary content and formulating tourism strategies for local communities.

3. Analysis Results

3-1. Analysis of Life-Based Maps and Review-Based Tourist Maps by Author

This study utilized life-based maps, which plot locations associated with the authors' lives, and tourist facility location maps created based on travel reviews. Figures 1–3 present paired maps for each author; the map on the left presents locations linked to the authors' lives based on their actual timelines, whereas the map on the right displays tourist sites based on location data from travel reviews.



<Figure 1> Natsume's Life-Based Map (Left) and Tourist Map (Right)

<Figure 1> illustrates Natsume's life-based and tourist map. A comparison of the geographic distribution of nodes on the two maps reveals significant similarities. One notable characteristic is the high tourism activity level in regions featured as settings in Natsume's works. Particularly, noteworthy is the Matsuyama area, which serves as the backdrop for the novel *Botchan* (坊っちゃん). In this region, Natsume's literary content has been integrated with local tourism resources, such as Dōgo Onsen (道後温泉), precipitating a concentrated influx of visitors. In *Botchan*, the hot spring frequented by the protagonist is referred to as "Sumida" (住田), but the descriptions in the novel strongly suggest that it is Dōgo Onsen. Additionally, the protagonist enjoys dumplings at a shop near the hot spring, and today, shops in front of Dōgo Onsen sell Dango—sweet rice balls—inspired by those

mentioned in the novel. Furthermore, the Botchan Train, which the protagonist used to commute between his boarding house and the hot spring, still operates. This active marketing strategy in Matsuyama likely contributed to the developing Natsume-themed literary tourism. An onsen village near Kumamoto serves as the setting in *Kusamakura* (草枕), while *Sanshirō* (三四郎) depicts the protagonist's hometown in Kumamoto before he moves to Tokyo. These locations—both associated with Sōseki's life and featured in his works—likely captured the interest of tourists.

However, not all places connected to Natsume's life have been developed into tourist sites. Interestingly, some tourism occurs in locations unrelated to his life. For example, a review mentioned a reading event titled “The World of Natsume Sōseki” (「夏目漱石の世界」) held at the Watanabe Jun'ichi Literary Museum (渡辺淳一文学館) in Hokkaido. These one-time events, such as reading sessions, face challenges in attracting sustained tourist interest, thus represent a relatively small proportion of the overall tourism data. Nevertheless, this phenomenon reflects the widespread organization of small-scale events, even in regions without strong connections to the author's life, indicating that Natsume's literary content has significant potential as a tourism resource.

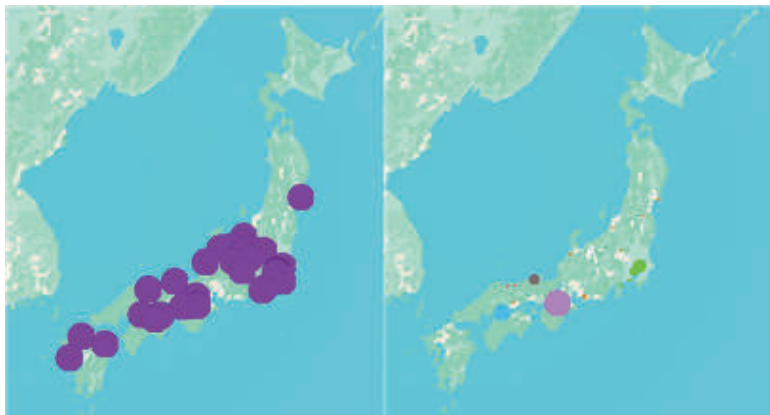


<Figure 2> Dazai's Life-Based Map (Left) and Tourist Map (Right)

Next, <Figure 2> visualizes Dazai's life-based and tourist maps. The Dazai-themed tourist map on the right indicates that tourism spans a wide area from Hokkaido to Honshu's southern tip, as indicated by the nodes. However, the size of the nodes in the tourist map suggest that Dazai-themed tourism is primarily concentrated in Aomori Prefecture and Tokyo. Tourism in Aomori Prefecture is centered around Shayokan (斜陽館), Dazai's birthplace and literary museum. Additionally, several locations featured in his works—such as Unshoji Temple (雲祥寺), which

appears in *Memories* (思ひ出) and *The Setting Sun* (斜陽), are clustered around Shayokan, which has organized and operated a program connecting these sites—namely, Dazai’s Hometown Kanagi Literary Walk(太宰治ゆかりの地かなぎ文学散歩)(Kwon, 2022). This indicates that the area surrounding Shayokan is a key region for Dazai-themed literary tourism.

Meanwhile, tourist visits are also concentrated in Mitaka City (三鷹市), Tokyo, where traces of Dazai’s writing activities and life remain. The Mitaka City Sports and Culture Foundation (三鷹市スポーツと文化財団)—a public interest incorporated foundation—sells the Mitaka Dazai Osamu Map (三鷹太宰治マップ) online. This map, which introduces 19 Dazai-related locations, including Zenrinji Temple (禅林寺), where his grave is located, features photographs and illustrations. It is promoted as an essential item for literary walks(Mitaka City Sports and Culture Foundation, 2025). Additionally, both the life-based map and the tourist map reveal significant similarities, as Dazai once delivered a lecture at Niigata (新潟) High School, which lies between Aomori and Tokyo. Moreover, numerous tourists visit Tenkachaya (天下茶屋) in Yamanashi Prefecture, near Misakatōge (御坂峠), where Dazai stayed at the invitation of his mentor, Ibuse Masuji (井伏鱒二). Regions such as Mitaka City and Misakatōge are prominently marked on the tourist map due to their accessibility from the metropolitan area, unlike other tourist sites. This accessibility—combined with the efforts of the local communities— suggests a growing trend in tourist visits to these areas(Exploring Sites Associated with Dazai Osamu, 2025).



<Figure 3> Shiga’s Life-Based Map (Left) and Tourist Map (Right)

Finally, <Figure 3> visualizes the locations associated with Shiga and related tourist sites. For Shiga, evidently, tourists’ interest is focused on facilities linked to his

life, such as his birthplace. This is because while writing his works, Shiga traveled extensively through regions with stunning natural landscapes, such as Kyushu, Shikoku, and Kinosaki. Several of his novels are set in places where he stayed during his lifetime. For example, *At Kinosaki* (城の崎にて) is a realist novel he wrote while recuperating at Kinosaki Onsen in Hyogo Prefecture, and *A Dark Night's Passing* (暗夜行路) reflects the atmosphere of Tokyo and Kyoto, where he lived. Additionally, works such as *Reconciliation* (和解) and *The God of Small Things* (小僧の神様) are primarily set in Tokyo. The tourist map indicates that significant interest in the regions featured in these works. On the tourist map, the Kyoto and Nara regions are marked using pink nodes, while the Hyogo Prefecture Kinosaki Onsen region are marked using brown nodes. The node sizes reveal that more tourism occurs in the Kyoto and Nara regions than in the Kinosaki Onsen area. The Kinosaki Onsen region features numerous Shiga-related literary tourism spots, including the Kinosaki Literary Museum(城崎文芸館), 24 literary monuments, and the mulberry tree mentioned in *At Kinosaki*. The integration of local tourism resources, such as the hot springs, is a distinctive feature.(Kwon, 2024). However, a geographic inconvenience exists as reaching the Kinosaki Onsen area via the JR Kounotori Line(JR こうのとり線) from Shin-Osaka Station(新大阪駅) takes approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes. Therefore, the characteristics observed in Shiga's tourist map are attributable to the limited accessibility from other regions.

This section analyzed and compared each author's life-based maps, which display locations associated with their lives, and the tourist maps, which are based on reviews left by tourists. A common feature observed across all three authors was the remarkably similar node distribution patterns between the life-based and tourist maps. Additionally, key tourist facilities in author-themed literary tourism include literary museums, birthplaces, former residences, and writing locations, where visitors can experience the aura of the authors' aura. One notable characteristic is that single-event exhibitions tend to lose their appeal to tourists after their conclusion. By contrast, locations such as Dōgo Onsen in Matsuyama, which combines regional tourism resources, such as hot springs, with literary content, demonstrate the potential to grow as attractive tourist destinations. However, for the Kinosaki Onsen area, the transportation-related inconvenience could negatively affect its ability to attract tourists.

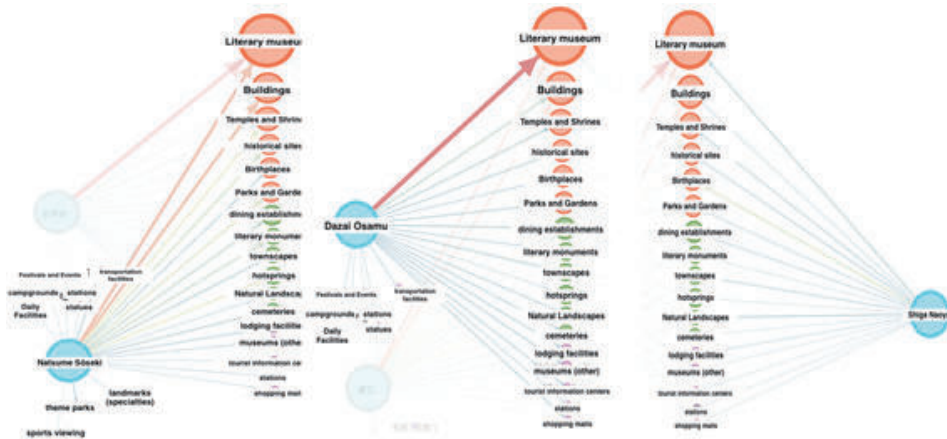
3-2. Analysis of Tourist Site Types by Author

This section analyzes the commonalities and unique characteristics of literary tourism patterns for each author using tables and visualized data organized according to facility category and frequency weight. Overall, 3,171 reviews

containing the keywords “漱石” (Sōseki), “太宰” (Dazai), “志賀” (Shiga), “作家” (author), and “文豪” (literary master) were extracted from the tourism reviews collected on Jalan and 4travel. Facility categories were assigned based on each facility’s attributes, and the data were visualized through tables and networks.

<Table 1> Frequency Weights by Facility Category for Each Author

Natsume		Dazai		Shiga	
Category	Weight	Category	Weight	Category	Weight
Literary museum	228	Literary museum	328	Birthplaces	135
Buildings	223	Buildings	104	Literary museum	82
Temples and Shrines	147	dining establishments	74	Natural Landscapes	56
Hot Springs	147	Temples and Shrines	70	Temples and Shrines	37
Parks and Gardens	137	townscapes	46	historical sites	36
historical sites	124	historical sites	45	townscapes	30
literary monuments	116	Parks and Gardens	44	dining establishments	25
dining establishments	99	museums (other)	44	Parks and Gardens	21
cemeteries	77	shopping malls	37	lodging facilities	15
townscapes	71	lodging facilities	36	Buildings	13
transportation facilities	47	Natural Landscapes	36	literary monuments	5
theme parks	44	cemeteries	35	Hot Springs	4
lodging facilities	43	tourist information centers	34	shopping malls	2
Birthplaces	41	literary monuments	29	museums (other)	2
museums (other)	28	Birthplaces	27	cemeteries	1
Natural Landscapes	18	transportation facilities	24	tourist information centers	1
stations	18	stations	18	stations	1
shopping malls	10	statues	10		
tourist information centers	8	Daily Facilities	10		
landmarks (specialties)	7	Hot Springs	9		
Festivals and Events	3	campgrounds	3		
campgrounds	1	Festivals and Events	2		
sports viewing	1				
statues	1				
Daily Facilities	1				



<Figure 4> Network Visualization by Facility Category (From Left to Right, Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga)

<Table 1> summarizes the frequencies of different facility categories based on the destinations mentioned in travel reviews. <Figure 4> visualizes the data from <Table 1> using Gephi. Analyzing the visualized data in <Figure 4> reveals each author’s unique characteristics as well as their commonalities and differences. The authors’ names are displayed as peripheral light-blue nodes, while the vertically aligned nodes in the center represent facility categories. The size of the facility category nodes was determined by the total frequency of mentions across all authors’ travel reviews, while the thickness and color of the edges connecting the author nodes to the facility category nodes indicate the frequency for each author. Thicker edges and colors closer to red (as opposed to blue) represent higher frequencies.

This analysis first examines the commonalities among the authors before exploring their individual characteristics. Among the top-ranking facility categories, “Literary museum” stands out. The Weight values for Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga are 228, 328, and 82, respectively. In all three author groups, “Literary museum” ranks first or second, indicating that museums are among the most popular tourist spots. This can be attributed to their role in recreating the authors’ literary worlds and commemorating their lives, enabling visitors to experience the authors’ aura and literary legacy. The subsequent notable category is “Temples and Shrines”(寺・神社), with weight values of 147, 70, and 37 for Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga, respectively, demonstrating the close connection between the traditional Japanese culture and literary heritage. As discussed in the subsection “Analysis based on Life-Based Maps and Review-Based Tourist Maps by Author”, Dazai’s novel *Memories* (思ひ出) includes Unshoji Temple(雲祥寺) as a setting. Temples and shrines may serve as local tourism resources near literary museums or as literary

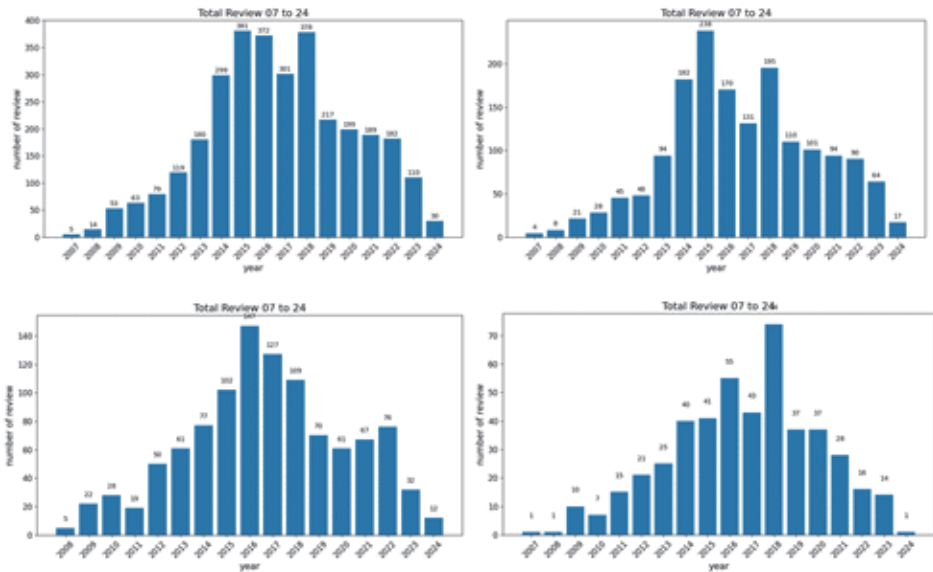
settings, offering multiple layers of appeal to tourists.

Subsequently, each author's characteristics were analyzed. For Natsume, a notable feature is that while literary museums occupy the central position, tourists also experience and visit a various other locations relatively evenly, including "Buildings" (名所(建造物)), "Temples and Shrines" (寺・神社), "Hot Springs" (温泉), "Parks and Gardens" (公園・庭園), and "Historic Sites" (名所(跡)). This reflects the trend(as discussed in the Introduction section) of developing tourism products by linking local tourism resources, such as streets that offer literary experiences or hot springs, with the settings of his works. The defining characteristic for Dazai is that the Dazai Osamu Memorial Hall, Shayokan (斜陽館), located at his birthplace, plays a central role and accounts for a significant portion of overall tourism. A considerable gap exists between the top-ranking category, "Literary museum" (博物館(文学)), and the second-ranking category, "Buildings" (名所(建造物)). This indicates that tourists primarily visit Shayokan—both his childhood home and a memorial hall. Additionally, the inclusion of campsites, festivals, events, and general tourist spots in Dazai-related tourism suggests that the tourism content based on his life is accessible and widely popular, harmoniously blending with local tourism resources. Finally, for Shiga, unlike the other two authors, "Birthplaces" (名所(生家)) form the core of tourism, while the proportion of other locations is significantly lower. Unlike Natsume and Dazai, the proportion of facility categories such as "Festivals and Events" (祭り・イベント) or "Daily Facilities" (日常施設) is relatively lower, whereas that of "Natural Landscapes" (自然景観) is evidently higher. This suggests that Shiga's extensive travels have exerted a lasting influence on modern Shiga-themed literary tourism.

3-3. Analysis by Period

This section analyzes author-themed literary tourism's temporal characteristics and patterns by examining Japanese literary tourism review data. The review data are divided into following three periods: Period 1 (2007–2013), Period 2 (2014–2018), and Period 3 (2019–2024). Changes in the number of reviews and key patterns for each period were analyzed using Python bar graphs.

First, the graph for all authors reveals the following: During Period 1, the total number of reviews was 513, exhibiting a gradual increase from 2007 onward. In Period 2, the number of reviews increased significantly to 1,731, which is 3.4 times higher than that in Period 1. The review counts for Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga all exhibited a steady increase. However, in Period 3, the total number of reviews decreased to 927, indicating a decline of nearly half compared to the previous period. While the COVID-19 pandemic indubitably impacted this trend during



<Figure 5> From Top Left: All Authors, Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga

Period 3, noteworthily, the decline in review numbers commenced in 2019, before the pandemic. This suggests that literary tourism’s popularity had begun waning before the global outbreak of COVID-19.

Notably, literary tourism peaked for Natsume and Dazai in 2015 and 2016, respectively. By comparison, Shiga’s peak occurred somewhat later, in 2018. Several factors could explain this trend. For Natsume, 2015 marked the 100th anniversary of his death, sparking a wave of commemorative activities across Japan(100 Years Since Natsume Sōseki’s Death, 2015). Additionally, 2016 marked the 150th anniversary of Natsume Sōseki’s birth, which likely contributed to an increase in literary tourism centered around him and influenced the other authors’ literary tourism during this period.

Furthermore, the manga *Bungou Stray Dogs*(文豪ストレイドッグス), whose serialization commenced in *Young Ace* in December 2012, gradually gained popularity from 2013 onward and was adapted into an anime in 2016. According to its publisher, Kadokawa, the series had surpassed 7.5 million copies in cumulative sales by 2019(Cumulative Sales of 7.5 Million Copies for the Series, 2019). Additionally, the web game *Bungou and Alchemist* (文豪とアルケミスト)—released by DMM GAMES on November 1, 2016—gained significant popularity. An anime adaptation based on the game—namely, *Bungou and Alchemist: Shinpan no Haguruma* (文豪とアルケミスト ~ 審判ノ歯車 ~)—was subsequently produced and aired from April 2020, consisting 13 episodes. This highlights the potential of cultural content inspired

by literary figures' lives and works. This trend likely contributed to revitalizing literary tourism. Considering this growing interest, examining how the rankings of popular tourist facilities evolved across period, particularly in relation to literary tourism's heightened frequency during Period 2, is essential.

	Natsume			Dazai			Shiga		
Period 1(2007~2013)	Buildings	54	16	Literary museum	53	18	birthplaces	25	12
	hot springs	41		Buildings	28		Literary museum	18	
	Literary museum	23		dining establishments	17		natural landscapes	8	
Period 2(2014~2018)	Literary museum	142	22	Literary museum	200	21	birthplaces	76	14
	Buildings	135		Buildings	55		Literary museum	48	
	temples/shrines	93		temples/shrines	37		natural landscapes	32	
Period 3(2019~2024)	Literary museum	63	26	Literary museum	75	22	birthplaces	33	17
	literary monuments	53		dining establishments	23		temples/shrines	18	
	historical sites	38		historical sites	23		Literary museum/natural landscapes	16	

<Table 2> Analysis of Popular Tourist Facilities By Period for Each Author

<Table 2> displays the rankings of popular tourist facilities for each author. The yellow cells represent each period, while the blue cells indicate the number of facilities visited during that period. This enable a direct comparison of how the types of tourist destinations associated with Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga have evolved. Overall, the number of tourism reviews sharply increased from Periods 1 to 2, corresponding to an increase in the number of tourist facilities for all three authors. Notably, for Natsume, popular tourist destinations diversified from Periods 1 to 3, suggesting the widespread use of his works as literary tourism content across Japan. By contrast, for Dazai, “Literary museum” (博物館 (文学)) consistently dominated as the most popular facility type throughout all three periods, indicating a strong focus on a specific type of tourist site. For Shiga, although the number of reviews increased between Periods 1 and 2, the facility type exhibited minimal variation. However, in Period 3, the frequency of visits to “Temples and Shrines” (寺・神社) surpassed that of “Literary museum” and “Natural Landscapes” (自然景観) for the first time.

In this manner, the analysis of review data and rankings of popular tourist facilities from Periods 1 to 3 revealed the evolving trends in Japanese literary tourism. Natsume has been widely utilized as universal literary tourism content across various locations, whereas Dazai exhibited a specialized tourism pattern centered around literary museums (博物館 (文学)). Meanwhile, Shiga tended to integrate with traditional and religious sites, thus establishing a novel form

of tourism. These findings suggest that literary tourism may develop differently, depending on the author and period, highlighting its potential to significantly contribute to regional economies and cultural content development. Furthermore, this study's findings are expected to provide foundational data for more in-depth analyses of author-themed literary tourism.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore a new research area in Japanese literary tourism by analyzing the characteristics and patterns of author-themed literary tourism centered on three prominent figures in modern Japanese literature—namely, Natsume, Dazai, and Shiga. To this end, travel review data from Jalan and 4travel were employed to comprehensively examine literary tourism's key elements.

This study's findings revealed four major characteristics of author-themed literary tourism. First, literary museums are essential tourist destinations, providing exhibition spaces as well as immersive educational environments wherein visitors directly engage with the authors' literary worlds and personal histories. Second, the settings of literary works and related facilities offer significant tourism value by integrating literary content with regional tourism resources, thereby contributing to local economic revitalization and the promotion of regional identity. Third, the authors' hometowns and settings of their works naturally become key tourist sites, acting as powerful conduits for conveying literary and historical contexts to tourists. Fourth, literary tourism is closely connected to commemorative events, including anniversaries of an author's birth or death, and the popularity of related literary content, such as *Bungou Stray Dogs*, *Bungou*, and *Alchemist*.

This analysis demonstrates that literary tourism can evolve into a sustainable tourism model aligned with the ethical values of community engagement and environmental preservation. However, this study has some limitations, particularly the lack of text-mining analysis to explore tourists' specific motivations and experiences based on the review content. Future research should address this gap by analyzing travel review data both quantitatively and qualitatively to gain deeper insight into tourists' motivations and satisfaction levels. Such efforts could further establish literary tourism's academic foundation and enhance its potential as a sustainable model integrating cultural content with regional tourism resources.

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Experiencing the Otherness

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Abstract One of the most prominent figures of ethical literary criticism, Martha Nussbaum, claims, that literature allows us to enter other, alien worlds, and by encouraging empathetic re-experiencing with otherness, it can make us ethically richer. On the other hand, literature is also an example of an encounter with otherness in terms of deconstructionist philosophy, that is, an encounter with unapproachable, inaccessible absolute Other, to which we do force, if we “understand” and “relive” it—that is, if we reduce it to our own experience. From the perspective of deconstruction, the ethical attitude toward the Other is to respectfully leave it in its otherness. For the theoretical mind, this duality undoubtedly holds an uncomfortable conundrum. The article tries to elucidate this conundrum with the help of Borges’ literature.

Keywords Ethical literary criticism; M. Nussbaum; Deconstruction; Borges; Otherness

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Borges’ short story “God’s Script” is about the priest Tzinacán, who is cruelly tortured and imprisoned by the Spanish conquistadors under Pedro de Alvarado.¹ He

1 The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0239).

spends many years in prison, accompanied by a jaguar in the neighbouring cell. Tzinacán is convinced that his deity Qaholm, whose temple was burned by the conquistadors, has not abandoned him. His reasoning goes as follows:

The god, foreseeing that at the end of time there would be devastation and ruin, wrote on the first day of Creation a magical sentence with the power to ward off those evils. He wrote it in such a way that it would reach the most distant generations and not be subject to chance. No one knows where it was written nor with what characters, but it is certain that it exists, secretly, and that a chosen one shall read it. I considered that we were now, as always, at the end of time and that my destiny as the last priest of the god would give me access to the privilege of intuiting the script. (Borges 204)

For many years he patiently searches until he realizes that the message must be encoded in the patterns on the jaguar's skin. It could be quite brief, yet all-encompassing, for “even in the human languages there is not a proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say *the tiger* is to say the tigers that begot it, the deer and turtles devoured by it, the grass on which the deer fed, the earth that was mother to the grass, the haven that gave birth to the earth” (Borges 205). Finally, he experiences “the union with the divinity, with the universe (I do not know whether those words differ in meaning)” (Borges 206) and the message is deciphered. This is how he reports it:

It is a formula of fourteen random words (they appear random) and to utter it in a loud voice would suffice to make me all powerful. To say it would suffice to abolish this stone prison, to have daylight break into my night, to be young, to be immortal, to have the tiger's jaws crush Alvarado, to sink the sacred knife into the breasts of Spaniards, to reconstruct the pyramid, to reconstruct the empire. Forty syllables, fourteen words, and I, Tzinacán, would rule the lands Moctezuma ruled. (Borges 207)

However, he does not pronounce these words. He explains it as follows: “Whoever has seen the universe, whoever has beheld the fiery designs of the universe, cannot think in terms of one man, of that man's trivial fortunes or misfortunes, though he be that very man. That man has been he and now matters no more to him” (Borges 207).

Borges' short story is a paradigmatic example of an “interpretation machine” because it opens many meaningful themes. The idea of a secret record that can

only be deciphered by the chosen one at the end of time is reminiscent of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. The passage about the tiger summarizes one of the key topoi of the poststructuralist linguistic paradigm, according to which the ultimate meaning of statements is unattainable, because the statements always carry with them traces of all their contexts, present, past, and future. The otherwise pantheistic narrative is also perfectly suitable for religious interpretations. However, it is obvious, that its subject matter and motifs also place it in the realm of ethnological, intercultural, colonial, or postcolonial studies, as well as ethical literary studies, that is, in those areas of research that deal with, among other things, cultural otherness or alienness. It is to this topic that I will devote my attention in the following.

Positivist research has already shed light on the ethnological and historical background of the narrative. Borges almost certainly obtained the material for it from the *Popol vuh* and from some sources dealing with this sacred book.¹ The misleading mention of Moctezuma in the narrative has led many scholars to misidentify Tzinacán as an Aztec priest.² However, he was a Mayan priest, leader of the Cakchiquel (Kaqchikel) people in the region of present-day Guatemala. At first, he was an ally of the Spanish in their battles against neighbouring peoples, but in time, with this people as his allies, he himself rebelled against the Spanish. The Spaniards defeated him and destroyed his city along with its sanctuary.

This factual background provides a wealth of material for intercultural or (post)colonial studies. However, "The God's Script" is not only interesting with regard to the material and motivic background of the narrative. It seems to me significant above all because of its interesting thematization of otherness, one of the fundamental topoi of postmodern ethics. The constellation I have in mind is condensed in the scene with which the narrative concludes: Tzinacán deciphers the divine script and becomes omnipotent, just as he wished. Now he could not only take revenge and rebuild his kingdom, but also become young and healthy again, something he had longed for in his dungeon reveries. But surprisingly, he does none of these things.

This non-activity can be interpreted in many ways. The psychological or psychoanalytic explanation might be: When the desire is fulfilled, it disappears. A person longs to achieve something and imagines the state of fulfillment of the desire as a state of bliss. But when his or her desire is fulfilled, he or she becomes—just like Tzinacán—a different person, at least in the sense that he or she is no longer a

1 See the exhaustive treatment in Balderstone 1993, 69 cc.

2 His original name Ahpozotzil (he was only baptized as Tzinacán by the Spanish), which means "Guardian of Bats"—but in Aztec!—probably contributed to this misidentification..

person who wants something specific and for whom the fulfillment of that desire would be bliss. It turns out that the condition of bliss was not really the fulfillment of the desire, but that it is hidden in the very nature of the desire itself (as an attitude toward the assumed bliss). When the desire is fulfilled, that is, when it passes away, this blissful attitude also passes away and is no longer present. To desire and at the same time to have already fulfilled that desire are two states of mind that are mutually exclusive.¹

However, the psychological aspect does not interest me here. In this image, I see the embodiment of one of the fundamental dilemmas of that branch of ethical literary studies,² which is theoretically based on philosophies of otherness. On the one hand, literature allows us to enter other, alien worlds, and by encouraging empathetic re-experiencing or at least familiarity with otherness, it can make us ethically richer. On the other hand, literature is also an example of an encounter with otherness in terms of deconstructionist philosophy, that is, an encounter with unappropriable, inaccessible absolute Other, to which we do force, if we “understand” and “relive” it—that is, if we reduce it to our own experience. From the perspective of deconstruction, the ethical attitude toward the Other is to respectfully leave it in its otherness. For the theoretical mind, this duality undoubtedly holds an uncomfortable conundrum. I will try to elucidate this conundrum with the help of Borges’ literature.

In the context of different theories, philosophies and ideologies, the question of the relationship to the Other/other or alien³ has different meaning, attitude, and

1 This situation recalls the paradox of the anthropologist who attempts to study a community that has not yet been touched by the anthropologist’s gaze, as well as the “paradox of xenology” as described by Waldenfels: “The paradox of every xenology consists in the fact that not only every speech of the *alien*, but also every experience of the *alien* refers to the *alien*, to which it responds without grasping it. If experience grasps the alien, then the alien is no longer what it is supposed to be” (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 109).

2 For a detail account on and original approach to ethical literary studies, see Nie 2024.

3 I use the terms as synonyms. Although Waldenfels in several places in his works explicitly distinguishes between the other and the alien, what he conceptualizes as *alien* overlaps to a good extent (although not entirely) with what is thought of as the *Other/other* in the philosophy of the last decades. That is why he easily finds affinities with the eminent thinkers of otherness Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas. Otherwise, he himself is aware of the related understanding of the two concepts in modern philosophy, when he casually observes: “We often speak of ‘otherness’ when we mean ‘alienness.’ In other Western languages that do not have the rich semantic field provided by the German word *fremd*, the question of alienness is usually treated as the question of the Other or as la question de l’Autre” (Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien* 72).

weight. There is a wealth of texts on this subject that I cannot cover here. I merely want to use Borges's prose to point out the central theoretical and philosophical dilemmas that I believe remain unresolved, often even unnoticed, and to show how literature can point to a way out of these conundrums.

Let me begin with a simple observation—vividly illustrated by Julija Kristeva and Bernhard Waldenfels, among others—that a person encounters the phenomenon of the other/alien already within himself. To give a simple example from everyday life: If I look in the mirror in the right mood, I may see some other person, an alien. This situation—described by Waldenfels as *a mirror phenomenon* (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 147) —has already been depicted by many writers (for example Proust and Pirandello). A version of this inner otherness/alienness is articulated in almost philosophical terms by Borges when—in the parable “Borges and I,” in which he speaks of himself and that other Borges, that other I that Proust and Pirandello unexpectedly see in the mirror as an alien—, in accordance with the philosophical distinction between *idem* and *ipse*¹, he writes: “I shall remain in Borges, not in myself” (Borges 282). The story ends as follows: “[...] I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him. / I do not know which of us has written this page” (283).

In the conclusion, the short stories “The God's Script” and “Borges and I” articulate a similar, though not quite identical, relationship of otherness within the same person. The self that changes is other than the self before the change (“The God's Script”), and the *self*, the *I*, is often simultaneously other than *itself* (“Borges and I”). But at the same time (perhaps paradoxical from the standpoint of pure logic, but true to life) there remains between what is so vividly distinguished an inseparable bond that transcends mere physical continuity, however ambivalent that bond may be. Despite the emphasis that he “*has been* he,” but now he is no more, the “other” I, who tells about the “First” in “The God's Script”, nevertheless speaks throughout of the First as of “himself.” Even the last sentence of the parable “Borges and I” shows that the dividing line between the I and the Self paradoxically does not prevent them from remaining indistinguishable in their separation.

This ambivalence—separateness and at the same time connectedness—which everyone can already perceive at the elementary level of the other-within-himself, remains also in the relation of himself to other others. It has also been captured by the philosophy of alterity. For Derrida, according to whom there is always an aporia or paradox at play when it comes to the Other, the relation to the Other, which is

1 The distinction has been, of course, most famously formulated by P. Ricouer; Waldenfels also draws attention to it; see Waldenfels 1998, 31.

an ethical relation, is an impossible relation or—G. Spivak likes to repeat this formulation—an experience of the impossible. That is: this experience is not possible, and yet we have a kind of experience of this impossible experience. Waldenfels uses Husserl’s formulation “the accessibility of the originally inaccessible” in this context (Želo tujega 245). All these oxymoronic formulations attempt to express this paradox of otherness: The core of otherness can only be absolute, radical otherness (for if it is not, it is not really otherness); but absolute otherness cannot be thought or defined, not even in an oxymoronic formulation, because then it is no longer absolutely other. As Heidegger shows in his interpretation of a Hölderlin hymn: When the unknown is given a name (“unknown”), it is no longer unknown. Whichever way we turn it, we are dealing with a paradox that grapples with the intractable problem of how to think the unthinkable.

Intercultural studies often seem to fall victim to this paradox when they try to solve aporias one-sidedly. Let me illustrate the possible solutions with the example of the controversy between Gayatri C. Spivak and Martha C. Nussbaum. There are many affinities between the literary and ethical projects of the two theorists, both in life practice (both are humanitarian activists, and the work of both in this field is closely related to India) and in literary pedagogy. In her later works (*The Death of Discipline*, *Other Asias*, *Aesthetic Education*), Spivak develops, at least at first glance, a similar model of “aesthetic education” as in some books (besides *Love’s Knowledge* also *Poetic Justice* and *Not for Profit*) Nussbaum. Both argue for the teaching of ethics through the reading of literature, which should make the reader a responsible social being, or, more generally, for greater consideration of the humanities, which can contribute to the improvement of society. However, this common understanding is based on completely different theoretical starting points in each case. Spivak is one of the (albeit controversial) theorists of radical otherness, while Nussbaum is skeptical of the concept of radical otherness (and of ethics as an impossible relationship). The central idea of her literary, ethical, and aesthetic education project is that it is necessary “to work through the major alternative views about the good life, holding them up, in each case, against our own experience and our intuition” (Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* 173-174). The formulation in this elliptical form may seem unproblematic, but it leads to a conclusion that is not acceptable to Spivak. The difference between the two theorists can be illustrated by the concept of imagination, which plays an important role for both with regard to the ethical dimension of literature, but differently for each. For Nussbaum, imagination—or “narrative imagination”—is “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader

of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 95–96). Imagination enables us to extend the cognitive potential of emotions from self-knowledge to knowledge of the emotional and general inner lives of others. It thus enables us to empathize with the feelings of others, to sympathize with them (not entirely spontaneously, but enriched by a rational, detached judgment), it releases empathy and sympathy, and finally understanding. According to Nussbaum, this is crucial for ethical reflection. Because of their singularity and dependence on context, ethical situations cannot be grasped by the means of universalistic, abstract, logical, and positivistic understanding. They are accessible—with the help of imagination—only through the emotions of empathy and sympathy, which also have a cognitive function (and are not just a relationship). The otherness of the other is thus—in contrast to G. Spivak's conception—accessible.

In contrast, Spivak in *Other Asias* has thus truncated the way in which Nussbaum understands the role of imagination and empathy in the ethical impact of literature:

Nussbaum certainly believes in the “value” of “education” and “literacy,” but these are contentless words for her. She also believes in the virtues of the literary imagination, but her idea of it is a sympathetic identification, a bringing of the other into the self (PJ 31, 34, 38), a guarantee that literature “makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own.” (Spivak, *Other Asias* 567)

In other words: Nussbaum's project, according to Spivak, does not break with what she calls in *Critique of the Postcolonial Mind* the “axiomatics of imperialism,” because instead of a responsible attitude toward the absolutely Other (alien), she propagates its “domestication,” appropriation, “selfing.” This is also motivated by the fact that, according to Nussbaum, the central motive for empathic and compassionate experience of others is ultimately the egocentric and selfish need to refine one's own personality.

This fundamental opposition between the views of Nussbaum and Spivak (I have presented them here very schematically) points to one of the basic problems of modern philosophies of otherness and so-called postmodern ethics. It is about the opposition between two extremes: between radical otherness, which must be respected, because, if we stay at the level of logic and leave ethics aside, any disrespect naturally eliminates it, and between understanding, empathic relation to

otherness, which, according to Spivak, also means appropriating and domesticating, i.e., subordinating it. Modern theories of otherness usually take this extreme opposition and the value relation between them as fact. But it seems to me that this self-evidentness needs to be somewhat problematized. Reading of literary works shows that the opposition is not as absolute and irreconcilable as it appears at first sight.

First, I would like to draw attention to the logical aspect of the critique of the appropriation of the Other/other, as expressed from the standpoint of radical otherness. Theorists of radical otherness often criticize Gadamer's hermeneutic concept that, although he starts from a dialogue and emphasizes the role and importance of the other for understanding and self-knowledge, he ultimately amounts to appropriation of the other, since his hermeneutic process ultimately aims at *understanding* the other—the understanding that culminates in the notorious *Horizontverschmelzung*, melting or the fusion of horizons, which implies a kind of adaptation of the other to the self. This, of course, contradicts the demand for absolute respect for the otherness, which leaves the other untouched in its otherness, outside one's own horizon. But there is an aporia in this demand that eventually leads Gadamer's critics to the attitude they criticize. The “non-appropriation of otherness” is not a supra-personal, supra-horizonal, supra-subjective and supra-cultural objective norm of the mind, purified of all appropriative features, but a logocentric, Enlightenment-derived concept, and when we stand in such a non-appropriating relationship with the other (when we let it be absolutely other; more tongue-in-cheek would be: when we *assign* it this place), we actually appropriate it. We understand and define it according to our own concept of otherness, and thus in the end, we are not so far away from the Gadamer's concept of understanding!

The concept of radical otherness/alienness is not only logically untenable (which is why deconstructionists and phenomenologists of otherness describe it as a paradox), but also ethically problematic. The dilemma is not only theoretical but also, and more fatally, practical. And it is indeed a conundrum that does not allow for clear, straight-forward practical decisions and judgments. Let me illustrate this with two telling examples from the field of literature. Novels by African women writers that addressed female circumcision sparked a sharp controversy between Western and African theorists (see Marinšek 2007). Western critics condemned the practice, but engaged African women rejected this condemnation precisely on the grounds of respect for radical otherness. Another example is the evaluation of older canonical works of world literature in terms of their ethics from the perspective of contemporary ethical standards. In this case, engaged critics do not hesitate to call

Shakespeare a racist, an anti-Semite, and a misogynist, and to diminish the artistic value of his works because of their ethical inadequacy. I have chosen these two examples because a similarly oriented theoretical mind acts differently, i.e. contradictorily, in two similar cases of confrontation with otherness/alienness. In one case it stands respectfully *before* the otherness, in the other it claims all rights *over* it.

My point is not to lament this inconsistency. I only want to point out that the question of the relation to the Other does not allow for simple, easy and all too principled answers. Is respect for the otherness of the Other an absolute ethical imperative, or does it also have its limits? Are these the limits of culture, of the historical epoch, or something else? Is there a universal measure that excludes radical otherness, for example, between people? For example, does violence against a helpless being fall under the rubric of “(absolute) otherness,” which we must therefore correctly and respectfully tolerate (because we do not really understand it anyway; we can only conceptualize it in our own way, within our own horizon, even if this is the theoretical horizon of respect for otherness), or under the rubric of “common humanity,” which, if I am ethical, requires me to act? And, does understanding necessarily imply owning, “selfing,” to use Spivak’s term? When, as Nussbaum assumes, I empathically empathize with literary characters while reading a literary work, do I only violently appropriate otherness, or is there something left beyond the violence? Do I always measure the Other with my own yardstick, or does the empathic encounter with the Other affect and change my yardstick?

All these dilemmas are difficult to resolve conceptually. Therefore, as mentioned above, Derrida resorts to aporetic constructions that attempt to transcend unequivocal extremes and insurmountable differences. Absolute otherness is not properly conceivable rationally; it can only be given in experience. This is an experience in which “the other appears as such—that is to say, the other appears as a being whose appearance appears without appearing” (Derrida 232).

The attempt to define this impossible relationship is similarly tackled by Waldenfels, who takes as his starting point Husserl’s formulation “the experiential accessibility of the originally inaccessible” (Waldenfels, *Želo tujega* 3). Like Derrida, Waldenfels is concerned in his own way with the paradoxical *relationship* and *experience* (rather than conceptualization). Waldenfels, too, does not want to deprive the foreign of its alienness by one appropriation or another, but at the same time he does not want to renounce the experience of the alien, which for him means a mediation, an *inbetween* between the own and the alien. This is what he tries to reflect with the concept of responsiveness or “responsive rationality” (*Želo tujega* 24). The experience of the alien is given in *responding* to the alien, in *responding* to

its call. Only when we ourselves are not the source and the initiative, but react, respond, do we not appropriate it, do we not bring it back to us (as source), but allow something else to touch us. Again, this response must not be within the framework of what is already known (for that would again be appropriation), but must be productive, so that a new meaning emerges. This is the “paradox of a creative response, in which we give what we don’t have [...] Where new kinds of thoughts arise, they belong neither to me nor to the other. They are created between us” (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 53).

The “problem” with Derrida’s and Waldenfels’ descriptions of this central aporia is that despite their excellent understanding of it, philosophical discourse condemns them to conceptualization, however soft and nimble. They offer figures of thought (paradox, aporia) but not the *experience* they address. Philosophy, theory, and literary studies, in my opinion, search in vain for an appropriate language to describe this impossible relationship. They will not give up this search, even if it is a “mission impossible” for them. But although any *understanding* of this relationship is problematic, this does not prevent access to the *experience* of it. Many literary works (perhaps even anything that can be called artistic) can give us such an experience, including Borges’ “The God’s Script.” This short story enacts and gives us an experience (certainly *also* thanks to our capacity for non-appropriating empathic reading, which, it seems, we must not eliminate too quickly) of this impossible relationship through Tzinacán’s experience, which does not remain as alien and other to the reader as the Mayan priest to himself.

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Rekindling the Epistolary: Email and the Arabic Novel

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Abstract With email replacing conventional letters as the main means of communication, the internet revolution has resulted in a resurgence of the epistolary form in literature. This paper presents a textual analysis of the following novels: Yaser Shabaan's *Sons of Democracy*, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, and Ibrahim Jadallah and Kalshan AlBayati's *Emails after the Night* to investigate how the Arabic novel employs emails as a technique to construct its narrative and examines its impact on internal narrative methods and techniques. This experimentation has an impact on the narrative structure, level, and function, pushing the boundaries of this genre and enriching the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature. The study recommends further exploration of email as a narrative tool by comparing e-pistolary Western novels with Arabic fiction and delving into disciplinary approaches related to linguistics and cultural studies.

Keywords E-pistolary novels; *Sons of Democracy*; *Girls of Riyadh*; *Emails after the Night*

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Introduction

Emails influence our daily lives in the digital world and continue well beyond the initial novelty. For many, emails have become a preferred alternative medium—in many cases—to traditional mail, since they allow for the quick interchange of files, documents, and books that used to arrive in packages after weeks of waiting¹. Given its practical and deliberative nature, emails, as a replacement of paper-based letters and diaries, draw storytellers and researchers' attention to explore this technique in various literary genres. Notably, the western literary interest in embracing emails as a tool for constructing and developing the narrative framework, whether through digital or traditional texts, is pointed remarkable. Employing emails in digital narratives purportedly precedes the stage of their use within the space of printed or written narratives.

Emails have rejuvenated the textual structure and developed its historical qualitative form, represented in the epistolary novel, in the Western heritage. The written email novel witnessed a great spread in the last two decades of the twentieth century, experimentally expressing communication through virtual worlds (Kastan 287), and affecting the message form itself. Contemporary epistolary novels showcase the ongoing development of this form compared to the old epistolary form. Laua Santini prefers to use the term e-pistolary novel to refer to

those printed novels that rely only on the new means of communications and technologies so that e-pistles are never letters as traditionally conceived, namely paper-based exchanges, but only correspondences carried out through digital or electronic devices and anyway via the internet connection. (203)

The Epistolary novel in the 21st century has been affected by the digitized revolution where traditional letters are excluded and digital correspondence in the forms of emails or texts qualifies it as an e-pistolary work of fiction. Many Western printed novels have taken the email, as a general framework, for writing narrative text and governing the narrative content. A number of novels adopted this contemporary setting of e-pistolary form in the West, including Meg Cabot's *The Boy Next Door* (2002). This romantic comedy narrative unfolds through email exchanges

¹ Paper mails have not been entirely replaced by emails. Work-related functions like concluding contracts related to legal traditions and privacy rules, for instance, are best done by regular mail. Hence, real documents will continue to have a firm place in official dealings, and it will be difficult and perhaps impossible for them to be replaced by email (Crystal 31).

between Melissa Fuller, a gossip columnist for a New York newspaper, and the newspaper's human resources department, after witnessing an elderly woman next door lying in a coma following a vicious attack. Within a humorous and paradoxical framework, suspicions swirl around that woman's nephew, and via the exchange of emails, Fuller investigates the story of that woman, gets to know the nephew, and unexpectedly falls in love with him.

Where Rainbows End (2004) is a novel written by the Irish novelist Cecelia Ahern. It revolves around a long-distance romance between two individuals living in two countries, America and Ireland. The story is told solely through letters, emails, and other digital interactions, demonstrating the progression of communication techniques. Unlike epistolary novels, which rely primarily on conventional mail, *Where Rainbows End* combines the immediacy of internet communication which mirrors how communication has changed in the modern world.

In addition, Daniel Glattauer's *Love Virtually* (2006) touches on the complexities of romantic relationships in cyberspace. The story begins with an email mistakenly sent from an unknown woman named Amy to a man named Leo, who kindly responds to her email. With time, their exchanged emails develop into a profound emotional bond. However, their relationship remains within a virtual context that clashes with reality. Since Amy is happily married, the two lovers acknowledge the limitations of their virtual relationship and choose to preserve it within the digital realm.

Midnight Movie (2011), co-authored by Tobe Hooper and Alan Goldsher, belongs to the horror genre and features emails, blog entries, and Twitter conversations. Lynn Coady's *The Antagonist* (2011) is based on a collection of emails that a former hockey player exchanges with his friends, in which he refers—after twenty years of being hidden from his friends—to the much suffering he has faced from his peers. The messages range from anger to sometimes humor.

Exchanging emails with an anonymous person is the focus of S. D. Chrostowska's *Permission* (2013). Throughout the year, an anonymous person exchanges a number of emails with a contemporary visual artist and develops a friendship with him. The novel tells about the reality of Poland after the Cold War, and the narrator's hope to find a safe passage to America.

These various works, found in the contemporary Western literary canon, suggest authors' attempts to explore new trends in narrative writings. Yet, email narratives are not exclusive to the West as many Arab novelists have embraced this form in their writing. This paper attempts to investigate how the Arabic novel employs this technique to construct its narrative and examines its impact on internal

narrative methods and techniques.

The E-pistolary Novel in Arabic Literature.

In the context of digital interaction and experimentation, Arabic novelists have explored new tendencies in narrative writing, one of which has been to embrace emails as a new storytelling tool. Some novels utilize the personal mail technique in which one person sends an email to another person while other novels' interaction is modeled by mailing groups where someone sends emails to a group of people and they all correspond and assist in building the narrative.

The Arabic novels under study utilize email as a means of communication between characters. However, the level at which email influences the general narrative structure varies. For example, in Ibrahim Abdulmajid's *Every Week Has a Friday* (2009) and Ashraf Nasr's *Freedom.com* (2010), email plays a partially functional role in shaping the narratives; a website and a blog dominate the general narrative framework. Other novels use email as their core narrative structure. The investment in this framework is based on the form of personal and contact group emails. In Ibrahim Jadallah and Kalshan AlBayati's *Emails after the Night* (2015) and Yaser Shabaan's *Sons of Democracy* (2006), characters communicate through personal emails, while Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) is unique in exploiting the dynamic of contact group emails for communication and interaction.

Personal Email Narrative

Personal email allows for immediate and direct communication with people we often already know. Its format is straightforward in use: an email address is required to sustain the message delivery along with a subject title and the message itself. Once the email is sent, an automatic date and time is provided. Regarding the message body, there are a few general guidelines that should be followed because this medium necessitates a message that goes beyond repetition and clearly states its objective. Additionally, the message should not go above the sixteen lines that the computer screen can display, in most situations (Crystal 140-142).

The Arabic personal email narrative sometimes adheres to these structures or prescriptive rules and sometimes embraces creative freedom. *Emails after the Night* can be categorized under collaborative writing, co-authored by the Egyptian novelist and playwright/ Ibrahim Jadallah, and the Iraqi writer and journalist/ Kalshan al-Bayati. This novel represents an indicative example of personal email context (AlBuraiki 169-170). What distinguishes *Emails After the Night* on a creative level from other established narrative structures is that it employs modern media in the

form of digital communication. The novel is structured via the exchange of emails between the two authors. One of them writes a chapter and sends it electronically and the other writer is prompted to respond via email or messenger to add another section or chapter to the novel. The digital format, which facilitates collaborative writing, goes beyond the constraints of paper-based writing and the conventional idea of a single author. It also promotes breaking the spatial boundaries between an Egyptian novelist and an Iraqi journalist by allowing them to participate together in writing a novel despite their physical separation.

The story opens with Manar Al-Iraqiya searching the web for Hassan Al-Masry's email address, who fled Iraq after being pursued by US occupation forces and returned to live in Egypt. The exchanged emails reveal that Manar and Hassan are close friends. Their friendship began in Iraq when Hassan was residing there fleeing his persecution by Egyptian authorities for his political affiliations against Sadat's administration. The narrative also highlights the difficulties Manar faces in Iraq during the American occupation. The novel's narrative structure is built on thirty emails mostly exchanged in an almost continuous and alternating flow between Manar and Hassan. Only Hassan's incarceration during the Kefaya Movement protests against the Egyptian regime ends this conversation, and Manar, Hassan's daughter, begins responding to Manar Al-Iraqiya's emails on his behalf. The exchange is again interrupted by another character, represented by an embedded email message sent by Latifa Al-Dulaimi, one of Manar and Hassan's friends.

Rajaa ALSanea's *Girls of Riyadh* adheres to common email standards such as email address, date, and message title. In contrast, *Emails After the Night* adopts a different pattern by omitting the traditional email elements. As the characters deliberately neglect the presence of these elements in their exchanged emails, the narrative creates a seamless flow that allows the reader to focus on the characters' interactions. In addition, the novel's approach contradicts the brevity of real-life emails when one message often becomes a whole chapter in the novel.

While the characters in *Emails After the Night* share a history and memories, the email in Shaaban's *Sons of Democracy* becomes a means of communication with an unknown person. The narrator, assumingly Shabaan, receives an email from an anonymous sender who identifies himself as an Arab American citizen. He states in his email that his father immigrated to the U.S. more than half a century ago. After his father's death, the sender found a novel. So he photographed it and sent it to some email addresses bearing Arabic names including the narrator. Intrigued, the narrator tries to respond to the sender to ask him for more details about his father. This email is sent amidst the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war. Email

has a clear purpose in establishing the external story framework and arranging the narrative content. The novel's constructed world reshapes reality and history by purposefully subverting the linearity of the narrative structure and replacing it with overlapping and concurrent worlds: the virtual and the real. The first world is that of the embedded photographed novel emailed to the writer whereas the other world is the writer's real world, which is also immersed in the digital sphere of emails and subsequent communications that disrupt the reading of the attached narrative. Similar to *Emails After the Night*, the standard email elements are also absent in this novel. The focus is on the narrative parallelism established by alternation between reading the graphic novel and successive email messages from other parties.

Contact Group Email Narrative

The foundation of a contact group is an email address that relays messages to many addresses (Crystal 167). These lists are frequently used to share news and/or ideas on a broader scale than through personal correspondence; they may contain anonymous individuals whose contact emails are simply shared in the group. The sender sends a message to the group's email address and the group receives it. It is easy to unsubscribe with a simple message delivered to the initial group email. Narratives based on contact group email interaction offer an intriguing avenue to examine the complexities of human communication in the digital age. Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* follows this approach in constructing the narrative structure through a series of emails exchanged among a group of friends. The novel's first page shows an email list that facilitates communication among a group:

Welcome to the Subscribers' List of
Memoirs Disclosed
To subscribe, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et__subscribe@yahoogroups.com
To cancel your subscription, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et__unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com
To contact the list manager, send a message to:
seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com (Alsanea 16).

Aside from the "cancel or unsubscribe" function, the recipients' subscriptions and communication with the writer are the bases for forming the narrative structure.

Before examining the impact of this approach in constructing the narrative, it is vital to explore one significant element of using contact groups as a means of

correspondence rather than personal email. The inherent qualities of an email group list include its ability to spread users' and members' perspectives and its penchant for exchanging unusual and urgent news among this wide group. Perhaps the title given to the group (Memoires Disclosed) indicates the intention of popularization, breaking the stereotype of personal email and personal correspondents' limitations. The novel, in a sense, aligns itself with the same narrative technique for delivering the message and disseminating it among a large number of subscribers. The narrator writes: "to everyone out there who has got enough inner courage to read the naked truth laid out in the World Wide Web and the resolve to accept that truth ...it is to you that I write my emails" (9-10). This approach adopted by the writer, highlights how information, scandals, and disclosure can easily be shared and possibly reach a big audience in the digital world.

The novel consists of fifty messages sent to the group members' email addresses. As is customary in group messages, the subject line, the date of sending, and the email address of the group appear before each message:

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com

From: "seerehwenfadha7et"

Date: February 13, 2004

Subject: I Shall Write of My Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide—and that's *moi*—will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest. (Alsanea 17).

The date and address of the email provide a tool for organizing letters and constitute an alternative style to the commonly recognized epistolary novel. Through the date fixed on each email, the novel frames the external chronological structure of each letter. The novel depicts an exchange of communication that lasts for a year among the group members, from February 13, 2004, to February 11, 2005. There is a one-month break during Ramadan, from August 10, 2004 to December 11, 2004. The narrator, then, has sent fifty messages to the mailing list during this time, one email each Friday. Instead of traditional chapter titles, the subject in the emails stands as a significant header that announces the content's primary purpose and goal. The email subject also provides an opportunity to deviate from the standard language used in communications by combining colloquial, formal, and regional dialects.

The format found in the exchanged emails among the mailing group influences the style of narrative. From the start, we notice two addresses: one for the narrative

sent by the writer and another for receiving comments from the subscribers. As a result, the messages take on a fixed, unchangeable structure: quotes and statements that guide the message, discussions of the responses the narrator receives to her mail, and the message, or the narrative, about the characters in the novel. Although this structure may appear to be a basic artistic structure in building the narrative framework, it serves various narrative purposes that influence the deep structure of the narrative text and the construction of its world. The numerous quotes, proverbs, poetry, and Quranic verses, to mention a few, add a parallel layer to the narrative. The narrator attempts to present a semantic collision with the facts and events described by constructing a satirical and humorous dimension dominated by the paradox between the statement and the event.

Email Narrative Functions

Using emails as a constructive narrative device in the above-mentioned novels raises an understandable concern about how their employment can signify a shift in the epistolary form. In other words, what value does email provide to the epistolary genre? What functional role does email play in the narrative? To answer these questions, it is important to distinguish between two methods of communication that differ depending on the medium: oral communication based on the spoken language, and written communication. In his book entitled *Literatura y significación* (1971), Todorov portrays the difference between spoken and written communication. He argues that verbal communication has “phonetic and non-material support” (29). It does not have a lasting physical form like written ones. Words disappear as soon as they are uttered, unlike written language which relies on a tangible medium like paper to stay preserved. Depending on how they are delivered, spoken words can change the meaning and the emotional impact of the statement. A trembling voice, for instance, delivers a different message than an overly calm one. Written text can be preserved, thus contrasting with the immediacy of speech. For the same reason, it can be reiterated without significantly altering its meaning¹ (29). Considering email as a written message, it is clear that what distinguishes email from paper-based mail

1 Todorov’s statement was translated and paraphrased by the researchers from its original source. The quote, in its original form, states that “Podríamos vernos tentados de señalar que la materialidad de la carta la distingue de muchos otros signos (o mensajes) y en particular de la lengua hablada, que tiene un soporte fónico y no material. Pero, si se entiende este término en un sentido más amplio, podremos también dar cuenta de estos cambios en el sentido del enunciado que se deben a una voz trémula o demasiado sosegada, a movimientos de las manos muy rápidos (en un lenguaje de gestos) y así sucesivamente. Este aspecto del enunciado, excluido con razón del campo de la lingüística clásica, se hace pertinente en un examen semiótico. Sólo teniendo en cuenta esas facetas materiales de los enunciados podremos precisar la relación entre lo escrito y lo hablado. El texto escrito puede conservarse (se opone de ese modo a la instantaneidad de la palabra). Por la misma razón, puede ser reiterado sin que su sentido se altere sensiblemente” (29)

is the duality of the material and the immaterial. Email is prone to disappear which results in data loss. However, what makes email significant is its flexibility; it offers unparalleled freedom of communication and combines some of the characteristics of verbal and written messages.

Conventional mail is bound by spatial and temporal rules and limitations whereas emails transcend these boundaries as they arrive immediately the moment they are sent. The immediacy of email encourages a rapid flow of messages sent and received, akin to dialogue, except for the absence of face-to-face interaction. The physical “presence” and its relation to physical proximity or distance is eliminated in email interaction. Therefore, the term “telepresence” is different from the term “presence,” as the latter refers to “the experience of natural surroundings ... in which sensory input impinges directly upon the organs of sense”, while “telepresence” expresses its meaning via “the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium” (Milne 1).

Email as a Form of Communication and a Medium of Imagination.

Email exchanged between characters in a novel creates a unique narrative contract between the sender and the receiver(s). It identifies with a formal structure and stimulates its reception according to special expectations. By imitating the structure of electronic messages in the narrative, email creates a special space for communication between the characters and establishes perceptions about place, time, and types of relationships among them.

Unlike traditional letters that assume, at the very least, a known recipient or addressee, an email can be sent to an anonymous individual. Email in a narrative establishes communication in a virtual world in which characters may or may not simulate the formal structure of real-life communication. This is evident in the opening of *Sons of Democracy*, when the writer decides to respond to an unknown sender, stating:

My friend... I don't know who you are... I don't know if you are a real person... or part of the virtual reality that surrounds us... it doesn't matter... but I have a mysterious feeling connecting me to what you sent, and I don't know - as usual, should I ask you for more details?" Do I ask you to send me any papers related to your father? My friend, do you want to communicate with me, even by email? Do you want us to create a virtual reality where we can reshape

reality, change destinies, and tamper with historical events?¹ (Shaaban 11-12).

Narrative fiction exploits the process of email exchange to the utmost degree to promote narrative imagination. Email becomes a medium to communicate with a mysterious, enigmatic person. What is important here is not the physical presence of the anonymous figure, but rather his presence as a narrative self, a persona crafted to establish the structure of communication between the sender and the recipient. This form parodies grand narratives established throughout history to spread hegemony and manipulation.

Since email transcends temporal and special limitations, it, sometimes, erodes anonymity and distance among the communicating partners. In *Girls of Riyadh*, communication takes place between two parties who have not previously known each other. The list manager and all recipients communicate through a digital medium and its references indicate a virtual world in which real names do not exist. On a different level, email, in *Emails After the Night*, serves to bridge the gap between the communicating characters and break the sense of alienation and distance. This is evident in the email Manar sent to Hassan:

I hope we can stay in touch via emails to know your latest news. Email has become the train that takes us wherever we want after travel became difficult for us, and our means of movement became restricted due to the deterioration of the security situation and its daily escalations.”² (Jadallah and AlBayati 10)

The functional and formative value of email extends beyond a formal aspect that aims merely to provide a modern means of communication or to excite the reader. It imposes a distinct epistolary template that deviates from the conventional epistolary structure of a narrator and a plot. Email contributes to the construction of the narrative, the diversity of narrative actors, and the formation of the plot. It leads to an interplay between narrative voices through letters, which mirrors the structure of dialogic epistolary novels.

1 This quote, originally written in Arabic, was translated by the researchers. The quote, in its original form, states: " صديقي.. لا أعرف من أنت.. لا أعرف هل أنت شخص حقيقي.. أم جزء من الواقع الافتراضي الذي " يحيط بنا.. لا يهم.. لكنني أشعر بعلاقة غامضة تربطني بما أرسلته، ولا أعرف -كالمعادة هل أطلب منك مزيداً من التفاصيل؟ هل أطلب منك أن ترسل إليّ أية أوراق تخص والدك؟.. صديقي.. هل تريد التواصل معي ولو عبر البريد الإلكتروني؟ هل تريد أن نتدع واقعا افتراضياً بنا نعيد خلاله تشكيل مفردات الواقع وتبديل المقدرات والعبث بالأحداث التاريخية؟

2 This quote was translated by the researchers. The original statement is "أرجو أن نتواصل في (الإيميلات) لتوافيني بأخر أخبارك -الشخصية والعامة - (الإيميل) صار القطار الذي يوصلنا أينما نريد بعد أن عسرت علينا السفرات، وضائق بنا سبل الحركة جراء تدهور الوضع الأمني وتفاقمه يوماً بعد يوم

Contrary to snail mail, email provides a kind of instantaneous and continuous communication, akin to an extended dialogue between the characters. The novels exemplify the form of the polyphonic epistolary novel¹ in incorporating multiple voices and perspectives. They utilize the email communication model in constructing the narration between multiple voices, allowing them to simultaneously transmit narrative visions from various and disparate locations. The two-voice epistolary structure is found in *Emails After the Night* as Hassan AlMasry and Manar Allraqiya exchange emails throughout the novel. The email communication between them is interrupted only once, in the fifth letter, when Hassan is arrested during the Kefaya Movement demonstrations. His daughter Manar interferes and responds to Manar Allraqiya's email. She, then, prints out the latter's email and takes it to her father to read. An overlapping dialogue takes place between Manar and Hassan and some messages also seem to echo each other, creating a layered conversation where one speech is built on top of another. For instance, the protest movements against the political and intellectual repression that led to the January 25 revolution are paralleled in Manar's letters by the references to the American occupation of Iraq, the various raids, the sound of explosions, and the cutting of telephone and Internet lines.

On the other hand, the novel employs a technique where embedded messages are found within the message itself. This technique reveals how characters from diverse Arab countries are spatially alienated and fragmented. For example, the second email Hasan sent to Manar includes a message he received from Lutfia Al-Dulaimi. Similarly, Manar, in her eighth email, conveys a message she received from the same friend. There are references to other messages within the correspondence process, all of which carry similar concerns, such as the reference to William and Bayda's message. In this way, the exchanged emails contribute to fueling a dynamic dialogue between the two characters and play a role in presenting an open- ending conclusion to the novel. The last chapter in the novel marks a break in the communication between Hassan and Manar, but the closing statement—

1 For more information about polyphonic epistolary novel, please read:

- Janet Gurkin Altman: *Epistolary, Approaches to a Form*: Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1982. Pp 194, 196.

- Jenene J. Allison: *Revealing Difference: The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière*. University of Delaware Press, 1995.P 65.

- Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook: *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*. Stanford University Press, 1996. P 31.

“Manar is absent for a little while, and Hassan is expected to return—”¹ (213) indicates that the communication between correspondents will be later resumed.

In *Sons of Democracy*, there is no flow of exchange communication between the narrator and the anonymous person who sent the novel/embedded text. However, several emails that the narrator receives from various sites provide diversification in the narrative discourse and establish various types of relationships between the real and virtual worlds. This expresses a narrative alternation as will be discussed later.

The contact group technique in *Girls of Riyadh* creates a dialogue between the narrator and the subscribers. The dialogue extends beyond two parties and the diverse responses reveal a range of viewpoints. This technique has led to a rich tapestry of reception patterns and their conceptual differences, indicating a continuous disruption of a fixed recipient image. Correspondence in the contact group world does not only present a dialogue between two parties but also creates a theatrical aura with diverse opinions and points of view open for debate. Diversifying the personalities and viewpoints of the addressees is a technique employed in this novel to foreground the communication style towards a more public sphere. These diverse responses allude that the messages are directed to the community to engage in a heated debate. Therefore, the narrator justifies this conflict by various means, noting that she wants reform, or that she is a character who is not afraid of anything, “I expect nothing. I fear no one. I am free” (AlSanea 18).

The public reception of the novel was mostly negative and “the Ministry of Information placed it for a while on its lengthy list of banned books” (Ahmed 2007, n.d). However, the narrative’s negative reception does not justify this approach since “sometimes the line between boldness and recklessness, realism and vulgarity, frankness, and insolence, and other similar dualities seems very thin”² (Alghamdi 137). We suggest that what intrigued readers’ opposition to the novel was not due to the sensitive issues scandalized in the narrative because a good reader can notice how “some of these characters are superficial, some are defiant and critical of gender roles in Saudi Arabia” (Al-Ghadeer 299). On the contrary, the novel’s disavowal, we believe, stemmed from the confrontational and biased style the writer adopts in presenting ideas.

1 This statement is translated by the researchers from its original Arabic text which states “منار”
الغائبة قليلاً، وحسن المترقب العودة”

2 The original text in Arabic reads: “ فالفرق أحياناً بين الجرأة والتهور، والواقعية والابتذال، والصراحة والوقاحة، ”
وغيرها من الثنائيات المشابهة يبدو فرقا ضعيفاً جداً”

Diversity and Overlap in E-Narrative Levels

As previously stated, the novels under study employ the email form, to send, comment, or respond to messages as well as attach/include embedded files/letters. All of these contribute to the diversity and overlap of narrative levels which is defined as “the nesting structure of narrating and is explained as ‘a narrative narrated within a narrative’” (Akimoto 344). Narrative levels clarify the narrative voice when multiple stories and narrators are present. Email provides a context for the diversity of narrative levels, allowing multiple voices to narrate the story and take turns expressing their different narrative visions.

The narrative structure in *Emails After the Night* centers on two main characters, Hassan and Manar, who serve as both characters and intersecting narrators. Email as a narrative structure creates a diversity of narrative levels. The narrators weave a web of new stories, incidents, and characters. In every letter, a new character appears and disappears, but his/her appearance in the two voices forms several internal and sub-stories which enriches the overall narrative.

In *Sons of Democracy*, the diversity of narrative levels is shown through the writer’s shift between the real and the virtual worlds. In his physical reality, the writer has his own opinions and thoughts. However, the virtual world has two realms: the online space which he interacts with and checks his emails, and the embedded graphic story of *Sons of Democracy* sent anonymously to him. The embedded story, narrated by Maxwell the grandson, tells a story full of adventure about Maxwell the grandfather who lived in Liverpool and loved a woman named Mary. Mary’s father refused their marriage and took his daughter to America. A year later, Maxwell received a letter from his beloved telling him that they were living in Boston and asked him to come as her father finally agreed to let them marry. The ship Maxwell took to America was intercepted by a pirate ship. He fought with the crew and managed to escape. When he arrived in Boston, Mary was already dead after receiving news that Maxwell was killed by the pirates. Maxwell, consumed by vengeance against the pirate who intercepted his travel, killed his enemy and became a known pirate himself. Yet, he fell into the grip of British ships and was imprisoned there in the Great Prison with the most brutal criminals. An insurgency erupted in the prison and the English minister negotiated with the prisoners to grant them their freedom in exchange for becoming missionaries. Ironically, the minister failed to convince them of the kind of missionary work they were supposed to spread. Finally, he ordered that they should preach democracy in the colonies since they were the Sons of Democracy. The prisoners revolted, indicating that they were

children of sin. In contrast to the world of this story, which took place at the end of the eighteenth century, another world that refers to the impacts of the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq interrupts the continuity of the story's events.

In *Girls of Riyadh* the back and forth between response and narration builds two parallel worlds in which the functions of the storyteller/narrator are distributed. The first world is the main narrative which follows the lives of four girls, Qumra, Sadeem, Masha'el (Mitchell), and Lamis, and their complex relationships with males under different circumstances. The other parallel world is created based on the narrator's responses which shed light on the narrative reality, the truth about the characters, the writer's motives, and the frequent accusations about her characters. The contact group technique invested in this novel forms an interactive message type which allows the narrator to foster a sense of intimacy and presence with others and establish quick relationships regardless of the physical distance. In her attempt to explore email presence, Milne notes that

Cybermind list members treat posts as authentic expressions of their authors. Thus, Cybermind group members regularly comment upon each other's "personalities". This phenomenon is exemplified in those instances when a group member writes in a manner that seems "out of character". In such cases, members either deplore the writer's deviation from what had seemed their character or invent ways of re-establishing that connection. (10)

The interaction between virtual group members allows them to pay close attention to each other's communication styles and understand their personalities and perspectives. In the novel, characters review each other's letters and establish different perceptions. Some perceptions are established and then immediately opposed, thus disrupting the image drawn by other parties. This technique "offers a certain resistance to early cyberculture narratives in which the subject was liberated from the exigencies of materiality" (Milne 11). The contact group interaction promotes a more diverse narrative experience by allowing characters to be liberated from "materiality" or physical bodies and the fragmented nature of network culture and online communication.

Two styles of narration are framed due to the text message-response dichotomy. Through characters' responses, the back-and-forth communication controls the structure of epistolary narration. The writer/author's presence also appears in confrontation with the recipients. On the other hand, the text message creates a narrative level that contains the voice of the narrator, who relies on the third-person

point of view, which makes the epistolary dimension appear clearly at the author-character level. However, tension is created between the two styles of narration. One voice is subjective in its attempt to defend, discuss, and confront what is narrated to them while the other seems objective—sometimes—devoted to narration. In sum, constructing the narrative using the contact group technique has led to the diversity and overlap of narrative levels.

Email and the Embedded Narratives

In the context of narrative theory, the embedded narrative is identified when “one narrator’s discourse embeds that of another narrator’s at a subordinate narrative level” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan 134). Embedded stories simultaneously create a connection between multiple narratives. The main narrative sequence is interrupted by a shift to another story, then returns to the main narrative creating a sense of intertwining between the narratives. This technique is adopted in Shabaan’s *Sons of Democracy*, interweaving them into one semantic plot, in addition to establishing a kind of parallelism between the events and what they indicate. Emails in *Sons of Democracy* have a functional role in shaping its world, narratively and semantically. At the level of narrative structure, email messages establish a kind of narrative shift with the embedded story. One of the examples presented in the novel is that the narrator reads about Maxwell’s love for Mary and quarrels with her father. Then, the narrator receives several emails about a global campaign to sign against the invasion of Iraq. This technique of email and the embedded story also synchronizes, to a certain degree, between two realities belonging to two different times (the past and the present). The overlap between the emails the writer receives—which interrupts the embedded story of Maxwell’s adventures—reveals the depth of the symbolic correspondence between the writer and the anonymous sender/narrator and between the past and present. Although Maxwell’s story happened in the 18th century, and the email references indicate a present time, colonial dominance is present in both stories. Rather, the flow of emails becomes a definition and narrative interpretation of the first story, while Maxwell’s story represents the historical dimensions of what colonialism was in the past. It is not surprising then to see the parallel between ancient piracy and modern-day email espionage, between the negotiating minister and Bush, and between the prisoners’ disapproval of the minister’s offer and people’s disapproval of Bush and his declaration to invade Iraq.

Email: Beyond Fiction and Intertextuality.

The narrative shift within a story produces an interpretive and semantic dimension

that allows readers to connect real events with fictional ones. This shift also reveals the narrator's implicit desire to achieve a reflective quality to the narrative especially when he injects comments and narrates incidents happening within the novel's world that reference the story itself. In this sense, the novel can be seen as a metafictional text. Waugh notes that metafiction "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). This type of text displays "a self-reflexivity prompted by the author's awareness of the theory underlying the construction of fictional works" (Waugh 2). Through the novels' activation of metafiction techniques, an intrusive narrator is present and comments on the narrative construction and its writing processes. The use of the intrusive narrator indicates the self-reflexive awareness of the text by commenting on other characters' actions and causing the storyline to be interrupted, paving the way for an embedded story to appear within the larger narrative.

Email in the novels displays elements of metafiction in the form of, for example, using a frame narrative and the development of sub-stories or embedded narratives mentioned in the exchanged emails. In addition to these forms which were analyzed previously, metafiction can be elicited through the emergence of a kind of aesthetic distance, which is "a psychological 'distance' the audience has from the piece [of work]" (Stichter 4). In traditional epistolary novels, the narrator exists outside the story itself creating this aesthetic distance between him and the reader. However, in e-pistolary novels, the aesthetic distance manifests itself in the presence of the narrator within the email exchanges, upending the recipient's preconceived notions about an imaginary work devoid of the voice of the writer and his remarks.

Sons of Democracy exhibits this aesthetic distance by highlighting, from the start, the importance of written communication and its ability to deliver a clear message. This is achieved through the use of reflective narration. Through the duality between the real and the virtual and the intermingling between them, the voice of the author is present and breaks the illusion. On the first page of the book, titled "Before Writing," Shabaan writes that he bought a novel without a cover and a title that talks about colonial attacks in the name of democracy. He further notes that "after finishing reading this novel, I decided to write a novel entitled *Sons of Democracy*, which is going to engage in a historical satirical dialogue with it"¹ (6). The writer's act disrupts the fictional world. The previous quote becomes a

1 This quote was translated by the researchers from Arabic which reads: "وبعد الانتهاء من قراءة هذا، قررت كتابة رواية بعنوان (أبناء الديمقراطية)، متناسلاً معها في الجانب التاريخي الساخر"

critical statement about the novel he intends to write, defining the methods and techniques of its construction. The writer places his novel in a special context for reception, even though the novel with which it claims to intersect is nothing but a mere narrative creativity from the author himself. The narrative flow that appears at the beginning of the story reveals how the writer, with critical awareness, relies on a specific narrative technique, which is the shifting between incidents in the present and the narrative in the embedded novel. Later, though, the writer expresses his boredom with the pace dictated by this alternating structure:

Boredom began to creep into me from the monotony of this alternation between what (I claim) is the text I received by email and what (I claim) are comments by the narrator, the fictional character. But no matter how talented and professional you are, some limitations force you to resort to trickery and to ignore and pretend to present a technique that relies on alternation and overlap between a set of narrative levels¹. (49)

The prominent presence of the author in the novel plays a major role in revealing the duality between the real and the virtual worlds, and the writer's internal conflict between them. At the beginning of the novel, the writer talks about his writing rituals and how writing becomes his vent when he feels weak and unable to act. This feeling coincides with the collapse of the Twin Towers and the declaration of war on Iraq. He notes: "Writing is my purification ritual when I feel weak, unable to do or say anything. This purification ritual begins by repeating these lines: A greater horror than this will come, so they either explode or die"² (8). As the war erupts, the writer follows the news, especially online war coverage. He becomes consumed by the constant flow of digital information about the war. In this manner, he questions the act and the role of writing, declaring it useless: "My aversion to writing has increased. Writing becomes to me just another sort of hallucination or

1 This quote was translated by the researchers from the original text. It states "بدأ الملل يتسلل إليّ من" رتابة هذا التناوب بين ما (أزعم) أنه نص وصلني بالبريد الإلكتروني وبين ما (أزعم) أنه تعليقات للراوي الشخصية الروائية. لكن مهما بلغت درجة الموهبة والحرفية فهناك حدود تضطرك للتحايل والتعاطل والتظاهر بتقديم تقنية تعتمد على التناوب والتداخل بين مجموعة من المستويات السردية الروائية"

2 This quote was translated by the researchers from Arabic. It reads "الكتابة طقسى التطهيري عندما أشعر بالضعف، بعدم القدرة على الفعل أو القول. طقسى التطهيري الذي يبدأ بتريديد هذه السطور: ربع أكبر من هذا سوف يجيء" (أفانفجروا أو موتوا"

madness when expressing myself becomes impossible”¹ (49). The narrator/author is keen to highlight his position by breaking the fictional narrative and mingling it with real incidents. His act confirms the power of writing as a form of rebellion when it cannot directly impact change.

The intersection between the real and the virtual plays a functional role in shaping the reflexive narration, through monitoring the world of narrative writing and the author’s perception positions of his text and his creative process within the novel. This duality found in Rajaa Al-Sanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* creates a dialogue between two narrative worlds: the realistic and the metafictional. This dialogue explores the narrative itself and its nature, along with the expectations of realism within the fiction. At the beginning of the chapters, the date, title, and quotations are set followed by metafictional aspects. In this act, the narrator/writer breaks the continuation of the narrative by paying attention to the email responses commenting on her stories. A networked correspondence between the writer and the contact group is established. In light of this dual structure—sending and receiving, the novel reflects on itself and questions the societal expectations of the narrative. The narrative reflexivity embraces the contradictions of acceptance and rejection of the stories and allows the readers to connect to the narrative world.

The contact group technique provides a framework for the emergence of metafictional elements. They appear in the form of networked correspondence that arise from the virtual worlds themselves. The main fictional narrative is interrupted when the writer engages in responding to the email messages. These responses reveal the amount of criticism the writer faces from the society/group members. simultaneously, they disrupt the flow of the fictional narrative, allowing it to become self-reflexive. The main fictional narrative, in this sense, mirrors the real world and creates a diverse dialogue about the novel’s characters, their believability, and the narratives’ goals and meaning. The responses inquire about the narrator/writer’s position about other characters and question whether the narrator is one of the four girls:

I am so tired of getting these boring responses that try to dissect my personality after every e-mail. Is that really what matters most to you, after everything I have written? Whether I am Gamrah or Michelle or Sadeem or Lamees? Don't you get that it doesn't matter who I am? (145)

1 This quote was translated by the author from the original text. It states: "كلما شعرت بالضيق والغضب، زادت حساسيتي، وبالتبعية نفوري تجاه الكتابة وتنبدى لي مجرد وجهة آخر لهلوسات الجنون عند العجز حتى عن البوح"

The narrator's response indicates her inner frustration as some readers only focus on knowing the identity of the narrator instead of engaging with the stories. The narrative also points out the perception of some responses to certain stories which expose their negative reactions toward characters' behaviors. For example, some readers express anger towards Rashid's indifference to Qumra's feelings, calling him "AlTanbal"-dumb. Others criticize Gamra's submissiveness and weakness. The writer/narrator says, "I don't analyze every move I make, and I don't worry about every act possibly being taboo and against social or religious laws. All I can say is that I do not claim to be perfect (as some people do)" (68). This critical explanatory statement reveals her beliefs and perceptions about the goals of writing. Then, the explanatory comment evolves to highlight the novel's role in reforming or rectifying certain societal perceptions:

I work hard to correct my errors and to cultivate myself. If only those who find fault with me would turn around and straighten themselves out before they start agitating to straighten me out. [...] I see nothing wrong in setting down my friends' problems in my e-mails so that others will benefit—others who have not had the opportunity to learn in the school of life, the school that my friends entered from the widest of gates—the gate of Love. The true and shameful wrong, the way I see things, would be for any of us to stand in each other's way, disparaging each other, even though we all admit the unity of our goal, which is reforming our society and making every one of us a better person (68).

The narrator's focus on the reform mission is similar to what great reformers, like Martin Luther King, did in their society (113). In some places, the metafictional commentary turns into a kind of tracking of the exaggerations and rumors that accompany the weekly letters. Rumors have swelled until it was said that King Abdulaziz City for Science is seeking to block the email site (AlSanea 113).

The novel's metanarrative framework is further emphasized by the recurring inclusion of quotations that open each chapter. These sources draw from a diverse range of materials, including the Holy Quran, hadiths, religious supplications, poetic verses by Arab and foreign poets, and statements by famous literary and intellectual figures. In most cases, these references establish a kind of semantic equivalence with the events preceding them, or they serve as a prelude for anticipating the events. For instance, the remarkable appropriation of Nizar Qabbani's poetry indicates the establishment of a semantic balance between the emotional tragedies

that the four girls suffered from, and the elegance and transparency of Qabani's images that are evident in the opening chapters; they represent what the writer fails to express sometimes.

Conclusion

Arabic novels utilize the e-pistolary form and embrace email as a narrative technique to adapt their style and technique to the digital age. They can be seen as bringing a new perspective to the conventional epistolary novel found in the Western literary canon. As a useful technique, email has shown to be an effective medium for addressing contemporary issues and themes related to globalization, identity, and social change. Arabic novels demonstrate a spectrum of email integration, ranging from a supplementary role to the core narrative structure. This experimentation has an impact on the narrative structure, level, and function, pushing the boundaries of this genre and enriching the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature. The study recommends further exploration of email as a narrative tool by comparing e-pistolary Western novels with Arabic fiction and delving into disciplinary approaches related to linguistics and cultural studies. These further research directions can contribute to understanding the potential impact of emails on contemporary and future literary works.

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Unearthing Ideology in Najib Al-Kilani's *Adhrā' jākrtā (Jakarta's Virgin)*: A Critical Study

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Abstract While existing scholarship has extensively examined various aspects of Al-Kilani's works, a critical analysis of the ideological dimensions within *Adhrā' Jākrtā (Jakarta's Virgin)* remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap in literature. By delving into the novel's ideological underpinnings, the study contributes fresh insights into the existing body of literature. Our analysis will illuminate the complex interplay of ideologies within the narrative, enriching our understanding of Al-Kilani's literary contributions and their significance within the socio-political context of contemporary Jakarta. This study explores the novel's complex ideological landscape and challenges dominant power structures in Jakarta through literary analysis, close reading, and critical and postcolonial theory. The analysis centers on Al-Kilani's utilization of Islamic ideology as a lens to critique the shortcomings of communist policies, particularly concerning social justice and individual freedoms. The study illuminates how female characters, portrayed as agents of change, defy traditional constraints, and actively pursue social and personal growth. The work examines how Islamic community and social equality principles are presented as a potential alternative to the divisive elements inherent in communist class structures. The analysis concludes that the narrative is a committed investigation into Islamic ideology set within a work of fiction. The characters, particularly female characters are represented in line with Islamic beliefs, highlighting Al-Kilani's distinct creative voice.

Keywords Communism; Gender role; Islamic Ideology; Najib Al-Kilani; Social critique

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Introduction

Literature and ideology have a long-standing, complex relationship. Creative works can be shaped by the prevailing ideologies of their time, even if the author isn't consciously intending to promote a particular viewpoint. Barada says: "Any conception of literature, no matter how much it distances itself from ideology or declares its denial and opposition to its concepts, inherently involves a clear ideological dimension, whether intended or not" (114-115). This means humans have relied on ideology as a theory that encompasses all literary works, including poetry, theatre, and novels, since the early 20th century (Belhasna 92). The influence of ideology has permeated literary works, as humans have relied on ideology as a theory that encompasses all literary works, including poetry, theatre, and novels, since the early 20th century, starting with the epic works of Homer (Ragheb 80). Novels, regardless of style or content, are inevitably shaped by the prevailing ideologies of their time. However, the most successful novels transcend mere ideology by weaving artistic beauty and imagination into their exploration of reality.

In this way, the novel becomes a powerful vessel for conveying the author's cultural perspectives, ideas, and messages to readers. Furthermore, from the novel's inception until today, the presence of ideology in novels is more prevalent than in any other literary genre (Halawani 28). Al-Kilani presents his ideological message through characters who engage in dialogues, express their viewpoints, and react to events. This interplay creates a dynamic exploration of ideas within the novel's aesthetic framework. Readers are drawn in by the characters' interactions, encouraging them to engage with the various perspectives and potentially identify with those that resonate most (Rumaisa 20).

Al-Kilani, a prominent Egyptian novelist, infused his diverse literary works with Islamic ideology. Exploring the struggles of Muslims beyond the Arab world, novels like *Jakarta's Virgin* and *Nights of Turkistan* depicted their resistance against colonialism and communism in Indonesia and Central Asia. Al-Kilani also addressed social and political issues within Egypt, tackling themes of oppression and the yearning for freedom in works like *Confessions of Abdel-Motjalli*. A prolific writer with over seventy works, he championed tolerance, Islamic values, and the triumph of good. Drawing inspiration from Islamic history, his works, while avoiding explicit depictions, often reflected the realities of Muslim nations, as exemplified by *Jakarta's Virgin* which highlights the plight of Indonesian Muslims caught in the ideological conflict between communism and Islam.

Al-Kilani's *Jakarta's Virgin* is more than just a captivating story; it's a canvas

of competing ideologies. This study delves into the novel, analyzing its ideological underpinnings. By examining Al-Kilani's presentation of diverse perspectives and the socio-political context, we aim to understand the novel's deeper meaning. We explore how *Jakarta's Virgin* portrays identity, power, and social transformation within postcolonial Indonesia. Through a close analysis, we will uncover the ideological influences that shape the characters, the narrative, and the novel's message. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's engagement with social and political issues and the role of literature in reflecting the realities of contemporary Indonesia.

To understand the novel's ideology, this study draws on postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and literary criticism. These frameworks will allow us to critically analyze power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and resistance within the novel. We will also examine how *Jakarta's Virgin* explores identity formation and social stratification. By situating the novel within Indonesia's literary and socio-political landscape, considering its history, culture, and social issues, we aim to understand the specific ideologies embedded in the narrative. This multifaceted approach will provide a deeper appreciation of *Jakarta's Virgin* as a commentary on contemporary Indonesia. While existing studies may touch upon pertinent themes or elements, a thorough investigation that meticulously dissects the novel's core ideology and its intricate network of interconnected ideas is lacking. This present study endeavors to bridge this critical gap.

Analysis

Al-Kilani's gripping novel, *Jakarta's Virgin*, transports readers to the heart of Indonesia's tumultuous 1965, a period marked by a fierce ideological struggle. Set against this volatile backdrop, the narrative delves into the plight of Muslims caught between a burgeoning communist movement and a rising tide of secularism. Al-Kilani sharply critiques manipulative politicians who exploit the anxieties of the masses to further their agendas, igniting the flames of religious and political division. The story centers around Fatemeh, a young Muslim woman navigating this complex and perilous landscape. Thrust into the ideological storm, Fatemeh embodies the struggles of a generation caught in the maelstrom of change. With fiery pronouncements dripping with disdain for religion and a troubling undercurrent of sexism, Comrade (leader) captivated the university. A charismatic communist leader, he weaved promises of liberation into his speeches, stirring the youthful yearning for change within the student body. However, beneath the surface of his passionate pronouncements lurked a disquieting view of women—mere pawns in the grand

game of revolution. The opening of the novel sets the stage for this clash, with the communist leader's speech advocating a radical agenda, including a distorted interpretation of women's liberation.

The narrative highlights a striking contrast between Islamic and communist ideologies. From an Islamic perspective, female chastity is portrayed as a fundamental aspect of a woman's identity (Talibi 46). This clash of worldviews fuels the novel's central tension. The communist leader's anti-religious rhetoric, while seductive to those seeking liberation from tradition, creates a dilemma for characters grappling with their faith and societal expectations. The novel becomes a battleground for ideologies, forcing characters like Fatemeh to confront their values amidst immense societal pressure. The communist leader's speech ignites violent clashes between Islamists and communists, leading to bloodshed and the imprisonment of innocent people, including members of the Masjumi party. Fatemeh fiercely defends her faith, disrupting the leader's agenda. Facing resistance, the leader resorts to a smear campaign to silence dissent and damage Fatemeh's reputation within the college. "It suffices to stir up the rumor, saying that her father is a former Dutch spy and receives foreign aid. Weave stories around her" (Al-Kilani 37). Fatemeh's unwavering defiance incurs a heavy price. Ostracized within the university, she faces the agonizing reality of her father and fiancé abducted by the Communist Party, likely orchestrated by the vengeful "Leader." Yet, her spirit remains unbroken. Her courage, derived from her trust in God and His justice, made her cry out to the president, saying "You tyrant, you who know no mercy. You beasts, God will surely take revenge on you!" (107). Fatemeh issued a chilling warning, invoking divine retribution from the Quran, citing the tale of the unjust village as a reminder of God's wrath (213). However, the President's response reflects a harsh reality: a policy of zero tolerance for Islamists (222), mirroring the Communist ideology's emphasis on material force over compassion (169).

Fatemeh here emerges as a symbol of unwavering faith, courageously defending Islam. Rooted in her religious principles, she finds strength and resilience. The narrative hints at a potential path of martyrdom, reflecting her father's influence, who mourns her loss but finds solace in her status as a national and Islamic symbol. *Jakarta's Virgin* portrays a violent clash between communism and Islam, culminating in a thwarted attempt to overthrow the government. It exposes the brutality of communism through acts like the killing of scholars and the destruction of Islamic institutions. "But you kill your enemies...you kidnap your opponents, or you persecute them" (28). The brutality of communism is evident in the propaganda they instill in the minds of their followers. This is exemplified in the party pamphlet that

the electrical engineer pulled out of his pocket and read aloud, "Whoever does not support our movement and does not help us is a sinful reactionary, and the only solution for such people is their annihilation" (68).

The Ideological Significance of the Title.

Titles function as gateways, offering glimpses into an author's vision. Batqa says, "Upon interpreting the title, the features of the text, and the space of the author's intellectual and artistic visions become clear" (196). *Adhrā' jākrṭā* is no exception. This seemingly straightforward noun phrase acts as a cornerstone, shaping our initial understanding of the novel and its central conflict. The Arabic word "adhrā" means "virgin," and it frequently denotes innocence or purity. Given that the story is set in an era of ideological turmoil, Jakarta or its people may be perceived as having lost their innocence or as struggling to uphold traditional values. The word "virgin" carries a strong symbolic weight, suggesting purity, innocence, and perhaps even vulnerability. In a religious context, it evokes the Virgin Mary, hinting at a character embodying these qualities. However, the possessive structure of *Jakarta's Virgin* introduces a sense of ownership and potential threat. This title piques our curiosity, prompting us to question who the "virgin" is and the dangers she might face within the turbulent city of Jakarta. An additional religious meaning for the term "adhrā"(virgin) is a woman who has never been married. This could represent the possible danger that the increasing tide of secularism or communism poses to traditional religious beliefs in an Islamic environment.

The term "virgin" can symbolize a pivotal female character, embodying purity and innocence. In *Jakarta's Virgin*, Fatemeh embodies this, struggling to uphold morals amidst opposing philosophies. The term also evokes the Virgin Mary, suggesting a character with similar virtues. However, the possessive "Jakarta's" introduces a sense of ownership and a potential threat to this purity. "Jakarta" stands for the vibrant capital of Indonesia, a microcosm of the nation's intricate social and political environment. "Jakarta's virginity" may represent a society on the verge of transformation, torn between the appeal of emerging ideologies like communism and the stability of the status quo. Alternatively, it may imply a loss of innocence for Jakarta's people, a lost and simpler era before the ideological upheaval.

The title, *Jakarta's Virgin* serves as a gateway to the novel's core themes. It signifies purity, honor, and potentially, the protagonist's vulnerability. Beyond a literal interpretation, it suggests a threat to Indonesia's national integrity. The novel explores the clash of ideologies through diverse characters. Al-Kilani masterfully utilizes this multiplicity to showcase the interplay between Islamic principles and

contrasting ideologies, particularly communism. By leaving the interpretation open, he encourages readers to discuss the richness of the book's subjects and the effects of ideological upheaval on people and society.

Conservative Ideological Fundamentalism:

Jakarta's Virgin explores the intricacies of conservative Islamic ideology, underscoring its focus on preserving traditional values. The story introduces a group of intellectuals who champion Islam as the ultimate solution to the societal challenges facing the nation. This can be seen in the words of the novelist when he says: "The advent of Islam in our country was a revolution against corruption, injustice, subservience, and slavery. It was a catalyst for noble values in the hearts of individuals and the birth of our civilization. This is a fact that remains constant throughout ancient and recent history" (20). *Jakarta's Virgin* explores the complexities of conservative Islamic ideology within the context of Indonesia's social unrest. It introduces a faction of intellectuals who believe a return to stricter Islamic principles could offer solutions to the nation's problems, including corruption. This notion is reinforced in the novel through the words of the writer when he says: "The true mujahid is the one who liberates himself from delusion, fear, and polytheism before stepping onto the battlefield. War does not become jihad unless its goal is to elevate the word of God. Then, people will rejoice in freedom, dignity, and security. The word of God is justice" (111). In another powerful statement, Fatemeh underscores the importance of returning to foundational principles. She fervently emphasizes the benefits of reclaiming core values, suggesting it could be a path towards societal betterment. In one of the passages, she says: "The concept of Halal (lawful) and Haram (forbidden) is a religious belief originating from Allah and conveyed through His noble prophets. It surpasses human thought and imagination. Murder is forbidden, theft is forbidden, and no philosophy can undermine these fundamental principles" (19). Fatemeh embodies the belief that a return to, and unwavering adherence to, divine law offers the answer to Indonesia's social and political turmoil. However, her conviction is coupled with a keen eye for hypocrisy. She boldly declares, "You are not representative of Sharia. Sharia is not a philosophy that accepts truth and falsehood, but it is a divine reality" (28). This statement, directed likely at those who manipulate religion for their gain, reveals a nuanced understanding of Islam. The novel, through Fatemeh, appears to advocate for Islam as a comprehensive way of life, one that emphasizes the pursuit of truth and rejects distortions of its principles (Talibi 28). This ideology advocates for the universal application of Islam's divine principles, potentially as a solution to the social and political issues plaguing Indonesia.

The narrative delves deeply into the intricacies of conservative Islamic ideology, highlighting its strong emphasis on preserving traditional values. It likely examines how this perspective interacts with, and potentially conflicts with, other belief systems, such as Christian missionary endeavors. By incorporating this broader viewpoint, the story would offer a richer portrayal of Indonesia's diverse religious landscape during this tumultuous period, shedding light on the dynamic interplay of faiths and ideologies.

Active missionary groups that possess schools, hospitals, rice, flour, money, and books operate freely. They release media filled with religious propaganda and historical falsehoods, organize public conversion celebrations, and distribute food aid and clothing to those who support or convert to Christianity. (83-84)

The novel transcends a singular focus on Islam, presenting a compelling counterpoint in the form of communist ideology. The novelist unveils the core tenets of this ideology, driving the rebel faction to dismantle the existing government. A glimpse into their ideology can be gleaned from the words of the coup leader, who likely proclaims:

We will make the president a bridge that we cross to reach the pinnacle of power, and then we will crush him like an insect. He is the remnant of retrogression and bygone eras, and the banners of revolution will wave triumphantly in the streets of Jakarta and across thousands of green islands. (11)

The narrative highlights the growing tension between communism and Islam in Indonesia, as revolutionaries aim to establish a communist state, conflicting with the nation's Islamic identity. It exposes the core principles of communism, which reject metaphysics, religious texts, and traditional values. It advocates for their dismantling and a singular focus on material gain, challenging the moral and ethical frameworks traditionally set by religion. This is confirmed by what the president said in this context, "What a devil you are. I only believe in the material power that I possess, while they believe in God. But God is not material, and the only true material that shapes and influences is..."(169). This highlights an explicit call for atheism, rejecting supernatural faith as a foundation for life. This call is made by the highest pyramid of power, showing flexibility and cooperation with the revolutionaries. Communist ideology in the novel employed espionage, surveillance, and the moni-

toring of ideas within Indonesian society to achieve its political objectives.

The leader would quietly and swiftly move within the section of the party's intelligence agency, glancing at the numerous massive files that filled the horizon, hiding their serious content. The intelligence section was divided into departments, each specialized in religious, political, or cultural factions across the country. They did not forget the files related to prominent writers, poets, and even influential Sufi sheikhs. (33)

The veneer of idealism in the narrative is stripped away to expose the brutality of communist ideology. The vision, forged in "iron" and fueled by "fire," promises radical societal change, but at a devastating cost: the purging of religious beliefs, cultural identities, and political dissent—a chilling echo of "ethnic purification." The narrative suggests a connection between these harsh tactics and the repressive policies employed by Stalin and his successors. This is confirmed by the leader of the revolutionary movement:

Anyone who does not support our movement and does not assist us is a backward and wicked individual. The only solution for people like them is death. Religions are destined to disappear, and old beliefs and traditions are on the path of extinction. Those who hold religions sacred and cling to their coattails are nothing but flawed individuals, failures in life, or deviants among humans. (68)

The passage exposes a chilling aspect of communist ideology: its iron fist of conformity. Dissent is ruthlessly extinguished, with any deviation from the communist method or ideology dismissed. This likely extends to the realm of religious faith, particularly Islam. The narrative depicts communism as a rigid and intolerant system, incapable of fostering dialogue or collaboration with opposing viewpoints.

Al-Kilani's novel explores the ideological clash between Islamic faith and secularism. This conflict hinges on the concept of divinity. Secularists, exemplified by the Muslim detainee, reject religious tenets and the supernatural. Their materialistic worldview denies the validity of religious faith, viewing it with skepticism as the "opium of the masses." For religious characters, faith offers a moral compass, a source of solace, and a connection to a higher power. Secularists, however, view religion as an impediment to progress and a tool for social manipulation. "Those who sanctify religions and cling to them are nothing but the disabled, the failures in their

lives, and the deviants from humanity” (68). This clash of perspectives drives much of the novel’s emotional tension, forcing characters to grapple with their own beliefs in the face of opposing ideologies.

Ideology of Colonialism

While religious fundamentalism and communist ideology dominate Al-Kilani’s novel, a subtler yet significant force lurks beneath the surface—colonialism. This ideology presents colonial powers as the custodians of order, masking their exploitation and controlling nature. Al-Kilani narrates through Fatemeh’s mother how the Indonesian people confronted Dutch and Japanese colonialism. Her mother recounted her memories of Dutch colonialism, the brutal battles it fought against oppressed citizens, and how Japan expelled the Dutch, occupying the country. She described the fierce war between the Japanese and the Dutch on land and at sea (86).

Jakarta’s Virgin excels in its exploration of a multifaceted ideological landscape. Through a skillfully crafted cast, the novel brings contrasting viewpoints to life. Characters’ interactions and debates, expressed through powerful dialogue and actions, form the foundation of the narrative’s aesthetic appeal. The richness of world-building stems not just from evocative language but also from the tapestry of diverse beliefs held by its characters, reflecting the intricate ideological conflicts that define the real world.

Ideology Through Fatemeh’s Eyes

The novel showcases the creative power of the human mind, meticulously crafted by an author to bring imaginative ideas to life. As a skilled storyteller, the novelist immerses readers in a vibrant world filled with characters and their inner struggles. These characters represent a range of ideas and ideologies, often clashing due to conflicting beliefs or contradictions between their ideals and actions. Through its diverse characters and perspectives, the novel serves as a bridge, fostering empathy, understanding, and a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human thought and behavior in our multifaceted world.

Al-Kilani’s *Jakarta’s Virgin* goes beyond a straightforward story, crafting a diverse cast of characters that serve as windows into the novel’s core conflict: ideology. Through their varied backgrounds and beliefs, their interactions and debates reflect broader societal tensions. Fatemeh, a college student steadfast in her Islamic faith, embodies this dynamic, representing the Islamic viewpoint amidst the novel’s ideological battles.

Concerns itself with the body and its health and satisfies its needs and desires within the boundaries set by Sharia, while simultaneously holding firmly to faith in Allah, the Almighty. It performs religious duties, does everything that pleases Allah, and avoids anything that angers Him, all in a balanced and harmonious manner that aligns with human nature. It achieves the true essence of the human self in its complete human perfection, which is in harmony with the elements of the universe and life. (Khalifa 25)

Fatemeh embodies the unwavering commitment to Islamic principles. Her convictions are not mere pronouncements; they are woven into the fabric of her being. This is evident in her resolute refusal of alcohol, a seemingly trivial act that takes on profound significance in the face of societal pressure. “By Allah (God), I will never drink alcohol! Why? Because it is forbidden” (Al-Kilani 109). These challenges, such as difficulties at university and repercussions for her family, only solidify her resolve. The weight of social and personal hardship seems to refine her faith, making it an even more potent force in shaping her actions.

Fatemeh contemplated performing the obligatory prayer and entered through a side door designated for women. She was alone, her heart pounding as she performed bowing and prostration, tears welling up in her eyes. Memories crowded her mind, trying to impose themselves on the clarity of her thoughts. She made a determined effort to push them away and focus on reciting the verses and supplications. (175-176)

Fatemeh emerges as a linchpin in the novel’s ideological war. Driven by her steadfast Islamic faith, she ventures into a treacherous world, a resolute champion against conflicting ideologies. Educated and principled, this Jakarta University graduate embodies a powerful moral compass. The narrative highlights her unwavering faith and extraordinary resilience. Her most striking features are her eyes, radiating with vitality, conviction, and a hint of regal bearing. Long-sleeved garments and a white headscarf frame a radiant and captivating face. This evocative introduction perfectly captures Fatemeh’s essence: “A strange girl made her way through the ranks. The most beautiful thing about her was her eyes, which shone with vitality, faith, and majesty. She wore a white shawl on her head that concealed her hair”. As she approached the leader, she inquired respectfully, “May I comment, sir?” (18).

Fatemeh’s initial portrayal establishes her as a young woman (twenties) embodying vitality and promise. Her eyes reflect faith and strength, while her mod-

est attire adheres to Islamic principles of virtue and purity. In her youth, she also symbolizes the potential future of Islam, a beacon of guidance and progress. Fanon notices that “the veil becomes one of the many codes of resistance to the colonizer, an attitude that applies to every human act against forms of repression” (Al-Musawi 221). This indicates her commitment to Islamic modesty, as Islam requires women to cover their entire bodies except for the face and hands. Allah (God) has forbidden women from revealing their bodies and displaying their beauty to non-mahram individuals (those who are not close relatives) to prevent them from becoming an object of attention and to avoid causing temptation and mischief in society. Fatemeh’s character shatters the misconception that Islamic dress, such as the hijab, restricts a woman’s agency. Her active engagement in the social, political, and economic arenas serves as a powerful testament to the compatibility of religious attire with female empowerment.

Delving into the psychological makeup of Fatima Haji, we find a proud and highly self-confident character, strong in argument and logic, intelligent, rising above temptations, a woman of principle and message that makes her shout in the face of the atheist leader: “There are no half-solutions in principles” (27). Her awareness enables her to understand the nature of the conflict and its entrances, and the twisted methods used by atheist culture to deceive and mislead the masses.

The narrator intensifies our appreciation for Fatemeh’s unwavering commitment. In a subsequent passage, we witness the sacrifices she makes to defend her homeland and religion:

During that time, Fatemeh stood at the top of the stairs, witnessing the bloody scene unfold. In response, she fired shots from her pistol, causing one of the three comrades to fall to the ground, drenched in his blood. With determination in her voice, Fatemeh uttered, “An eye for an eye.” (Tit for Tat) (229)

Fatemeh’s actions and beliefs are rooted in her unwavering faith as a Muslim woman. Her every word resonates with a deep love for her religion, a love that serves as the driving force behind her convictions

The concept of halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden) is a religious doctrine originating from Allah. It comes through the noble prophets, and it surpasses the limited understanding and imagination of human beings. Killing is haram, theft is haram, and no philosophy can justify these actions in the core of the image. (19)

This quote not only exemplifies her commitment to Islamic principles but also sheds light on her motivations. Her adherence to modesty extends to her interactions with men. This is evident in her encounter with the “leader” in his office. When he attempts physical contact, she issues a firm rebuke, stating, “Do not touch me” (Al-Kilani 28). This behavior indicates that she understands the boundaries between men and women. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) prohibited men from touching foreign women, as mentioned in the narration from Mu’awiyah ibn Haydah who said: the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “For one of you to be stabbed in the head with an iron needle is better for him than that he should touch a woman who is not permissible for him”) Al-Minawi 258). The leader placed his hand on her shoulder and said, “My dear.” She recoiled and moved away, saying, “Don’t touch me”(Al-kilani 28). She loves her country “For how much I love my country, oh mother...” (86). Her ethics are noble. A Muslim woman must adorn herself with noble morals and treat people with kindness. These qualities are portrayed by Fatemeh, especially when she visits Al-Hasan’s mother and offers her food and money. Therefore, the research concludes that Fatemeh demonstrates noble morals and genuine concern for the well-being of others through her actions. “He sighed with some unease and said, ‘Father, Fatemeh brought me food and water. She left us with this food and a hundred rupees, then she left’ (159). Fatemeh’s mother and Al-Hasan’s mother emerge as strong figures who raise their children with Islamic values. Their dedication reflects the importance placed on Islamic ethics within the narrative.

Fatemeh’s commitment to Islam is what Allah (God) says in the Quran. “And despair not of the mercy of Allah; for none despairs of Allah’s mercy save the unbelieving people” (The Qur’an,12: 88). This Quranic verse clarifies to us that a Muslim believer must be optimistic in facing the challenges of life and should not despair of the mercy of Allah. Fatemeh’s unwavering determination is further emphasized by her relentless pursuit of a meeting with the leader. Despite initial obstacles, she persists until she achieves her goal. This characteristic exemplifies her strong will and resilience in the face of opposition. Likewise, Fatemeh’s mother and Al-Hasan’s mother are committed to Islamic ethics, as Allah states in His noble book: “O ye who believed save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is men and stones...” (The Qur’an, 66:7).

Fatemeh, a humanities student at the university, exemplifies the Islamic emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge. Her academic pursuits resonate with the wider Islamic concept of lifelong learning and intellectual growth. Anas ibn

Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah 81). Thus, Islam emphasizes the equal importance of nurturing and educating both females and males, ensuring their righteous upbringing. In matters where the genders are equal, Islam treats them equally. However, in matters where there are biological and psychological differences between them, the Sharia mandates that each gender receives appropriate nurturing that aligns with his respective characteristics. The novel features characters like Tanti, Za'im's wife, described as a beautiful woman in luxurious clothing and captivating fragrance, even outside her home. Another character, Morni, the lover of the guard commander, is depicted as a morally corrupt woman who engages in illicit relationships with Za'im in a nightclub. These descriptions contradict Islamic values emphasizing modesty, simplicity in appearance, and righteousness in behavior and relationships.

Jakarta's Virgin & Resistance

Jakarta's Virgin foregrounds the theme of resistance, potentially echoing the historical struggles of Muslim-majority nations against external forces like colonialism and communism. This resistance could encompass social and human rights issues arising from these external influences. The novel might delve deeper into the fascinating intersection of these challenges with the perception of women's roles within Islamic ideology. This exploration could reveal how external forces influence, or perhaps even redefine, the expectations and limitations placed upon women in a Muslim-majority society.

Fatemeh's Character Serves as a Potential Focal Point for This Exploration.

Pamela (Al-kilani 86) argues that "teaching girls to live like boys is a mistake," suggesting a societal pressure to conform to a singular ideal. Fatemeh, with her deep faith and pursuit of education, might represent a counterpoint to this notion. Her beliefs could lead her to challenge the communist ideology's claims of equality, particularly regarding gender roles.

Indeed, we are mistaken if we believe that women are exactly like men because science also insists that both men and women have distinct natures. Male hormones differ from female hormones. They have different muscular strengths, and their physiological functions are not the same. These facts cannot be ignored. Does this physical and mental combination not have an impact? These grand speeches and epic speeches are not scientific. I will

address the facts. (18-19)

The novelist argues that differences in creature between men and women should not hinder women's participation in social and economic affairs. He highlights Fatemeh's father permitting her to choose her husband as an example of needed rights and equality. These ideas stem from an enlightened Islamic ideology embodied by Fatemeh. Al-Kilani emphasizes the importance of the Islamic dimension in global revolutions. The novel suggests that ideology can be a powerful motivator for characters to make sacrifices and resist oppression. As she navigates a rapidly changing environment marked by the imposition of communist ideology, Fatemeh's core principles evolve, allowing her to embody more advanced Islamic principles and engage in conscious resistance against deviations introduced by the ruling authority. The novel weaves Islamic ideology and values throughout its narrative using real-life situations. Fatemeh's decision to marry Abul Hasan emphasizes the importance of thoughtful consideration of Islamic principles. Her rejection of Zaim's marriage proposal educates readers about Islamic marital restrictions, such as the prohibition against marrying someone outside the faith. The novel presents Islamic ideology in a way that is both informative and embedded within the characters' actions and choices.

The unnamed communist leader is a key figure, symbolizing the manipulative nature of his ideology. He exploits the president's vulnerabilities, using flattery to orchestrate a political takeover (Al-Kilani 24). By leaving the leader unnamed, Al-Kilani transforms him into a broader symbol of deceit and danger. This character rejects religious values, focusing solely on indulgence in alcohol, women, and power. He promotes communism and atheism, dismissing all religious beliefs, and argues that basic needs, like hunger, justify any means to satisfy them. "The stomach shows no mercy. The same goes for sexual desires; it is just the same"(129). This text demonstrates how "the leader" is portrayed as an animal, demonstrating his moral depravity. He's portrayed as a self-centered, evil unbeliever who wants to hurt other people. This is seen in the passage that follows: "How dare you leave without informing me? It is a disgraceful act that I cannot tolerate for myself. Perhaps I can tolerate it for others. But leadership has its criteria, and this audacity will shatter my pride and reputation" (134). The passage underscores the potential for the leader to embody a harmful ideology. The unnamed communist leader's cunning manipulation and disregard for others lay bare the ruthless self-interest that can fester within communist ideology. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to Fatemeh's unwavering commitment to her principles. Her resolute resistance against

external pressures, including those potentially aligned with communist ideology, becomes a microcosm of the larger ideological conflict that drives the narrative.

The tension between religious morality and materialism is explored. Adeed, a committed Marxist, challenges traditional Islamic values by redefining “halal” (permissible) and “haram” (forbidden) through a utilitarian lens. He claims that actions advancing the communist revolution, even if they defy religious teachings, are justified (Al-Kilani, 17). This perspective, where the ends justify the means, clashes with the traditional Islamic framework, which prioritizes moral and religious principles. Fatemeh, representing steadfast faith, is poised to oppose Adeed's views, defending a more conventional interpretation of Islamic morality. She is heard saying:

Halal and haram are religious beliefs with their source being Allah. They were conveyed through the noble prophets and represent the highest example of human thought and perception. Killing is haram, theft is haram, and no philosophy can alter this reality. (19)

Fatemeh's anticipated response to Adeed's utilitarian interpretation serves as a powerful lens through which we can witness her unwavering convictions. Her words, likely laced with a keen awareness of the social and religious tensions surrounding her, will unveil a strong sense of self and an unyielding commitment to her beliefs. This dialogue promises to delve into both her psychological and behavioral aspects, painting a vivid portrait of a woman whose faith serves as the bedrock of her identity. Al-Kilani crafts Fatemeh with meticulous details, establishing her as the embodiment of a dedicated Muslim girl. Her adherence to Islamic principles permeates both her thoughts and actions. The narrative emphasizes her role as a beacon of faith, one who tirelessly calls others to the path of God. This dedication extends to a willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of her beliefs. However, Al-Kilani portrays Fatemeh's approach not through forceful coercion, but through wisdom and gentle guidance. She embodies the ideal of calling others to God with compassion and understanding. She tirelessly tries to convince Adeed of her enlightened Islamic ideas, advocating for goodness and peace. Despite their differing ideologies, Fatemeh accepts the leader's invitation for dialogue and travels to the palace for a discussion (Al-Kilani 22). However, the attempt at communication ultimately proves unsuccessful.

The dialogue between Fatemeh and Adeed highlights a key tension in the narrative: the clash between materialism and steadfast faith. Adeed, influenced by his Marxist ideology, appears unable to comprehend the depth of Fatemeh's devo-

tion, reflected in her Islamic dress and beliefs (Al-Kilani 22). Her unwavering faith contrasts sharply with Adeed's wife, who represents a more secular way of life. Through these opposing female figures, Al-Kilani invites readers to explore the profound impact of religious conviction on identity and the challenges of maintaining faith in an evolving society.

Haji Muhammad Idris stands in sharp contrast to the materialistic Adeed. Rooted in Islamic thought, he is committed to defending and spreading the principles of Sharia. His dedication goes beyond personal faith, as he actively teaches these principles to others, ensuring their preservation and relevance in society. In response to the accusations made by his captors, he would say, "I have nothing to do with all of this. I am a man who loves knowledge and progress, and I want freedom, justice, and all citizens to be brothers for my country... under the law of Allah"(76). Haji believes that those who are with God will never lose hope, as hope "beats in the hearts of believers" (119). Despite the injustice he has faced, he still says "May God forgive you" (122). A fervent advocate for the preservation and resurgence of religious principles, Haji Muhammad Idris embodies unwavering devotion that extends beyond personal practice. He actively champions Islamic law (Sharia) through mosque sermons and even engages in confrontation with revolutionary figures. This steadfast advocacy ultimately culminates in his imprisonment.

Haji Muhammad Idris's imprisonment symbolizes his steadfast faith, underscored by his resilience amid adversity. A striking detail is his inability to perform the dawn prayer call (adhan), emphasizing the importance of religious rituals in his life. The narrative likely uses metaphorical language to highlight his unyielding spirit. Denied water in his cell, his thirst recalls Prophet Jonah's prayers from the belly of the whale, suggesting that, like Jonah, Idris draws strength and solace from his faith during profound hardship. "He cried out in depths of darkness, saying, 'There is no God but Thou, Holy art Thou. I have indeed been of the wrongdoers' (The Qur'an 21:88). In another situation in prison, the man says, "I have not committed any crime. I am an elderly man, and I have surrendered my affairs to God. I will not escape until God decrees what has been destined" (Al-Kilani 195). This picture conveys the grandeur of Islam, its tenacity, and the genuineness of its adherents. The hands of those in charge have worked hard to guarantee that this picture will always be brilliant. On the other hand, communism does not acknowledge God or religion; this is clear from the jailer's comment to Hajji, "Let your God get you out of this place" (122). The communist leader states further, "I can lead a revolution against heaven itself" (41). Overall, the novel utilizes the experiences of Haji Muhammad Idris to illustrate the central conflict between religious faith and a materialistic, re-

volutionary ideology.

Jakarta's Virgin reveals a growing conflict between the conservative Masyumi movement and the communist agenda, heightened by the President's apparent alignment with the communist leader. Both sides utilize similar strategies, leveraging sermons and publications to spread their ideologies and rally supporters. The unnamed communist leader launches his campaign with a university lecture, laying the groundwork for his agenda. This calculated move reflects an effort to penetrate the intellectual realm and influence the younger generation, highlighting the ideological battle for dominance. In this excerpt, he states, "The chastity of women is not different from the chastity of men, and the feudal era was oppressive as it did not provide the necessary conditions for female chastity as it did for men. Our new way of life should be guided by the principle of no differentiation between men and women" (16). Then he proceeded to launch a direct attack on the divine religions, mocking them, saying, "The vague fear of hell and gods is the source of psychological complexes, nervousness, hesitation, and stagnation. It is the primary cause of the harmful negativity prevalent in various countries" (17). While the leader continues to explain his ideas and perspectives, Fatemeh intervenes by saying:

We deceive ourselves when we think that women are exactly like men. Science confirms that each has its own nature. The hormones of men are different from the hormones of women, their muscle strength is different, and their physiological functions are different. Is it correct to consider their organic and psychological makeup without any influence? (18-19)

From this excerpt, we can observe how the ideological conflict started between the two parties through their clear ideological opposition. Haji calls for peace to prevail by prioritizing Islamic principles of goodness over others that humans have imposed. The most important beliefs of Haji are evident in his statement: "I know that the conflict between truth and falsehood will persist as long as life exists." He refers to the verse in the Quran: "as to the foam, it goes away as rubbish, but as to those which benefits men, it stays on the earth. Thus does Allah set forth parables" (13:18). The conflict continues to oppose capitalist regimes, communism aims to bring the working class together, regardless of national or racial origin. Rather than national or religious identity, the proletariat and their fight against the bourgeoisie are the main subjects of attention. Communism "believes in the unity of the working class" (Alkilani 26). Fatemeh who stands for Islamic ideology says: "I believe in the unity

of all people” (27). The leader says: “We are dedicated to creating a more fulfilling life for all”. Fatemeh replies “You boast about slogans of a dignified life for all, while you practice arresting those who oppose you! How does one achieve justice by killing the innocent?” (28).

The novel highlights potential contradictions in Adeed’s communist ideology. Despite championing social equality, his behavior toward his wife reveals a stark inconsistency. The narrative suggests Adeed engages in extramarital affairs and imposes restrictions on his wife’s freedoms, exposing a disconnect between the principles he promotes and his personal actions.

Where were you?

At a party?

Why didn’t you tell me? And at Subanrio’s house specifically?

Don’t you go there every week?

But for you, it’s a different matter.

With that, he slapped her across the face, leaving behind the residue of his revolution and anger. (136)

Through the communist leader’s wife, Al-Kilani critiques the ideology’s failure to fulfill its promises. While the leader promotes a vision of equality, his wife’s demand for divorce reveals a gap between theory and practice. Her accusation—“Divorce me, I refuse injustice... You allow yourself what you don’t allow for others” (137) highlights the leader’s hypocrisy, as he restricts her freedoms while exempting himself from the same rules. This portrayal exposes a potential double standard within the system, undermining its ideals.

Jakarta’s Virgin explores the exploitation of women within the communist system, particularly through the leader’s casual sexual encounters, which suggest a disregard for women’s agency and their objectification. This contrasts with Tanti’s internal struggle, reflecting the tension between communist ideals of female liberation and the realities of patriarchal society. The leader’s justification—“It is purely a physiological matter... Sex is no different” (129)—reduces intimacy to a basic need, devoid of emotional or moral considerations. Influenced by this mindset, Tanti attends a party at the Foreign Minister’s residence, defying her husband’s disapproval, and justifies her actions by echoing the leader’s words: “Sex is a physiological matter.” The novel juxtaposes these perspectives, revealing how communist ideology, as embodied by the leader, risks degrading and exploiting women rather than empowering them. In contrast, the narrative portrays women

within the Islamic framework as holding a central and respected position. This respect is rooted in their understanding of their life's purpose, encompassing both rights and responsibilities. The passage specifically highlights Fatemeh as an embodiment of the Islamic ideal. She is described as a "cherished gem," valued and protected from exploitation. Fatemeh's choice to marry Abu Al-Hasan, irrespective of his financial standing, underscores her agency and commitment to Islamic values. Their exchange of the Quran during the ceremony can be interpreted as symbolizing the foundation of their life together, with the Quran serving as a guiding light against moral transgressions. "He took out a small Quran from his pocket and handed it to her, saying, "A gift from heaven... the best friend... it will fill your life with meaning." She took the Book of God and kissed it, then pressed it to her chest as her tears flowed even more" (58).

Fatemeh's martyrdom stands as a profound testament to her steadfast faith, enriched by symbolic imagery. The red rose with thorns symbolizes her passionate commitment to her beliefs, even in the face of suffering. Clutching a Quran and bearing a serene smile, she embodies peace and acceptance in her final moments. The description—"Jakarta's Virgin fell as a martyr, a red rose with thorns in her hand, a smile of contentment on her lips, and a small Quran in her pocket" (264)—highlights her solace and strength in faith. The phrase "tears of eternal love" (264) invites interpretation, possibly reflecting her devotion to God, her nation, or her ideology. Through this portrayal, Al-Kilani elevates Fatemeh's martyrdom to a symbol of reverence, celebrating her unyielding faith.

The Quran in Fatemeh's hand symbolizes her deep religious convictions, while the red rose, representing Islamic romance and noble sacrifice, contrasts sharply with the communist sickle's destructive imagery. The rose's thorns signify the suffering endured by the faithful under oppression. These symbols highlight Fatemeh's unwavering commitment to her faith and ideals. The Quran, gifted by Abu Al-Hasan, transcends its role as a religious text, embodying their pure love, shared faith, and righteous path. Clutching it in her final moments, Fatemeh's connection to the Quran suggests it accompanies her into the afterlife, reinforcing her steadfast devotion. The characters' names—Haji Muhammad Idris, Fatemeh, and Abu Al-Hasan—evoke echoes of Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and his son-in-law Ali (Ali Ibn Abi Talib), though the novel does not explicitly present them as direct representations. This subtle allusion enriches the narrative by linking it to Islamic history and themes within a contemporary framework.

The title *Jakarta's Virgin*, linked to Fatemeh, carries profound thematic significance, evoking purity, innocence, and chastity, which aligns with her unwav-

ering moral integrity. Fatemeh is portrayed as a paragon of Islamic virtue, and her martyrdom, marked by her father's heartfelt words, "May she rest in peace... and there, there is eternity" (264), powerfully reinforces these ideals. Her sacrifice in the novel's climax symbolizes the ultimate devotion to a higher ideal, resonating deeply with Islamic values. This pivotal moment suggests the author's alignment with Fatemeh and her father's ideology, which views Islamic law as a comprehensive guide for life. The narrative's resolution, favoring this perspective, appears to advocate for a return to a traditional, holistic understanding of Islam, encompassing religion, governance, and political order.

Narrative Techniques

Al-Kilani skillfully employs storytelling techniques—dialogue, foreshadowing, flashbacks, symbolism, and contrasting characters—to delve into the novel's ideological tensions. Multiple narrators offer diverse perspectives, enriching the portrayal of complex conflicts. Dialogue underscores the stark divide between communist and Islamic ideologies. For instance, Haji's exchange with his captor vividly illustrates the strength of faith against communist oppression. Through these methods, Al-Kilani effectively underscores the core principles of each ideology and the resulting clashes.

Using multiple narrators and shifting viewpoints, Al-Kilani offers a layered exploration of ideological clashes. By presenting the perspectives of characters like Fatemeh, the leader, and Haji, the narrative deepens understanding of their motivations and the forces shaping their choices. This approach builds empathy and enhances the reader's connection to the story's complexities.

Al-Kilani elevates the setting beyond mere backdrops, using enclosed spaces as potent symbols of social and ideological strife. Each location becomes a microcosm of broader societal struggles: Fatemeh's house shifts from a sanctuary to a reflection of turmoil, the palace embodies elitism and inequality, the prison represents totalitarian oppression, the newspaper office underscores media's influence, and the mosque transforms into a politicized battleground. Through these contrasting spaces, Al-Kilani crafts a vivid portrayal of societal tensions, immersing readers in the ideological conflicts at the heart of the narrative.

The novel masterfully intertwines place and time, using flashbacks to delve into characters' histories and reveal the roots of their motivations, traumas, and ideological drives. These glimpses into the past, such as Indonesia's colonial struggles under Dutch rule and Japanese occupation (20), provide essential context for understanding the present conflicts and the forces shaping the characters' actions.

Foreshadowing is a key technique in the novel, used by Al-Kilani to build tension and anticipation. Subtle hints, like Haji's uneasy observations on a near-empty ship, foreshadow a dangerous and arduous journey (61), while the title itself hints at Fatemeh's eventual martyrdom. Symbolism also plays a significant role, with enclosed spaces like Fatemeh's house reflecting societal upheaval, and the palace symbolizing elitism and inequality. Martyrdom emerges as a powerful symbol of steadfast faith, while Fatemeh's red rose with thorns can represent Islamic ideals of noble sacrifice, the suffering of the faithful, or resistance to oppression. The Quran in her hand underscores her piety and devotion, and the title's reference to "Virgin" emphasizes her purity and alignment with traditional Islamic values. These elements deepen the novel's exploration of faith, struggle, and ideological conflict.

Al-Kilani enriches his narrative through intertextuality, weaving Quranic quotations and references to hadiths to bridge his fictional world with Islamic scripture. For instance, allusions to the 'Ifk' incident, involving Prophet Muhammad's wife, add depth to the story (47). Haji's reflections on the conflict between truth and falsehood evoke the Quranic verse: "as to the foam, it goes away as rubbish, but as to that which benefits men, it stays on the earth. Thus does Allah set forth parables" (Quran 13:18). Similarly, Haji recalls the words of Prophet Dhun-Nun from the Quran: "And remember Dha'l-Nun, when he went away in anger... he cried out in depths of darkness, saying, 'There is no God but Thou, Holy art Thou. I have indeed been of the wrongdoers'" (Quran 21:88). These references create a layered narrative, connecting characters' actions to Islamic teachings and highlighting the ideological struggle at the story's core. For readers versed in Islamic tradition, these allusions deepen understanding, while for others, they underscore the characters' moral grounding and the centrality of faith in their lives.

Al-Kilani's novel utilizes repetition as a powerful tool to evoke a visceral sense of oppression and fear. The recurring phrase "capable...capable..." (32) by the leader emphasizes the constant threat looming over Indonesian Muslims. Stark terms like "executioners and the oppressors" (160) vividly depict the regime's cruelty, while the repeated comparison of religious scholars to "sheep" being slaughtered (12, 166) dehumanizes them, underscoring their perceived expendability. This repetition goes beyond conveying information; it creates urgency and emotional depth, immersing the reader in the language of oppression. The relentless use of such phrases mirrors the suffering of the Indonesian Muslim people, leaving a lasting impression. Ultimately, Al-Kilani's deliberate repetition is not merely stylistic but a compelling device to engage readers emotionally, forcing them to confront the brutal realities of oppression and the profound human toll of ideological strife.

Al-Kilani's novel rises above simple storytelling, using a blend of literary techniques to explore the intricacies of ideological conflict. Vivid metaphors deepen characterizations, dialogues, and descriptions, tackling abstract ideas like "halal" and "haram." The title of the novel serves as a metaphor for a nation wrestling with ideological clashes and seeking identity, mirroring the internal struggles of its characters. By disrupting traditional narrative structures with flashbacks, fragmented storytelling, and non-linear timelines, Al-Kilani invites readers to delve into the story's layered meanings. This approach reflects the messy, multifaceted nature of ideology itself, challenging readers to question assumptions and engage deeply with the characters' struggles. Through this innovative structure, the novel forces readers to confront the harsh realities of oppression, the human toll of ideological battles, and the complexities of navigating competing belief systems. Al-Kilani's masterful use of language and narrative form transforms the novel into more than entertainment—it becomes a profound call to reflection, sparking critical thought and encouraging readers to grapple with the complexities of the world around them.

Conclusion

Jakarta's Virgin (Adhrā' Jākrṭā) by Al-Kilani is more than a compelling novel; it is a meticulously crafted exploration of ideological conflict set against Indonesia's turbulent history. Through nuanced characters like Fatemeh and Haji Muhammad Idris, the novel contrasts the rise of communism with unwavering Islamic faith. Al-Kilani employs diverse methods—preaching, publications, and imprisonment—to underscore the deep divides between these ideologies, particularly regarding societal structures, individual freedoms, and religion's role in society.

The novel's strength lies in its nuanced portrayal of ideologies. While criticizing communism's potential disregard for traditional values and individual agencies, it also acknowledges its role as a force for social justice. Fatemeh's journey illustrates how Muslim women can navigate social change with autonomy while staying grounded in their faith. Ultimately, *Jakarta's Virgin* weaves a complex ideological tapestry, highlighting humanity's enduring struggle to reconcile tradition, social justice, and personal freedoms in a world shaped by competing beliefs.

Al-Kilani strategically positions characters like Fatemeh as voices for specific ideologies, using her pronouncements to critique communism's potential flaws and dangers. Fatemeh's character arc is central to this critique. Initially depicted as a sheltered young woman rooted in Islamic values, she evolves into a vocal opponent of communism's impact on traditional beliefs. Her journey highlights the potential

for Muslim women to defend their faith and advocate for social change while staying true to Islamic principles, offering a nuanced exploration of faith, agency, and resistance.

Al-Kilani's depiction of Fatemeh challenges traditional stereotypes of Muslim women. Her steadfast faith and growing activism highlight the potential for female agency within Islamic frameworks. Fatemeh moves beyond clichés, actively opposing deviations from Islamic principles and demonstrating her dedication to social reform. Her vision extends beyond individual efforts, advocating for a united approach where both women and men work together to tackle societal issues and forge a better future. By defying rigid gender roles, Fatemeh's activism suggests Al-Kilani's support for a collaborative model that harnesses the strengths of all individuals for the collective good.

In conclusion, *Jakarta's Virgin* highlights the lasting impact of ideology on society and individuals. This analysis has deepened our understanding of the novel's exploration of faith, justice, and power in a shifting world. By uncovering the ideological tensions within the story, it reveals the complexity and enduring nature of these conflicts. The novel's rich themes encourage further study, providing insights into the relationship between ideology, social change, and human experience, and opening avenues for future exploration.

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Linking Myth with Transnational Feminism: Developing Female Identity in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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Abstract In her debut novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cuban American author Cristina García investigates the complex social, cultural, political and psychological impact of postcolonialism on identity formation through the journey of three generations of Cuban women which reflects developing consciousness during Cuba's transition from colonisation to revolution. The paper aims to show the way through the remembrance and reimagination of three generations of women of the Pino family, which is made possible by the help of myth, magical occurrences and traditional healing practices, García attempts to recover, to reconceive and to create and develop awareness of Cuban women and cultural heritage that might have been erased. By highlighting the heritage of Cuban women who strongly survived the volatile time during the Revolution, García admits a history of trauma and female resistance to the nationalist male politics. The paper also aims to emphasise how the recurring experiences of these women from three consecutive generations expose García's employment of a major metaphor based on 'phoenix' myth. The female characters go through cycles of cultural and sexual changes where García reworks the myth with the cycles of death and rebirth. Last but not least, the paper attempts to demonstrate that by using myth and magical events, García attempts to remove physical distance among women who are torn between cultural differences between Cuba and America and provides them with the sense of togetherness and empowerment, and by combining multiple voices and alternative viewpoints on past and present, she attempts to render marginal voices and realities and to subvert and deconstruct Eurocentric notions of identity, reality and truth.

Key Words Feminism, female identity, myth, magic, the marginalised

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Introduction

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the relationships among del Pino women reflect the broader political rivalry between Cuba and the USA in the aftermath of the Socialist Revolution that occurred between 1953 and 1959. The fragmented multi-vocal narrative tells the story of a modern Cuban family without providing any unified and verifiable truth where Celia, the matriarch, was attempting to preserve her family story. Since immigrants normally lose touch with their homeland, often family histories are lost. Celia wants to make it sure that there is something that can connect her granddaughter Pilar with her motherland Cuba and Cuban identity. Celia finds the intergenerational transformation of family histories crucial as transformation of information makes it possible for the tie between homelands and adopted lands to be created where the immigrants find them in a hyphenated space. Chapter arrangements of the novel also disrupt the traditional notion of the logical course where one event leads to another. Whereas some chapters expose past events through flashback, others narrate the same event but from another narrative point of view. The labelling of chapters with the name of focalisers, significant years or titles of prose or poem makes it utterly difficult for the reader to form a consistent narrative. It thus criticises the Eurocentric conception of reality as something linear, progressing from a beginning to an ending, and advocates the existence of multiple versions of reality. A fragmented narrative emphasises the fact that time and space are relative constructs and encourages us to have subjective versions of history or reality. The narrative structures of the novel and the magical realist narrative used there create a space where conventional ideas of time, space and identity are taken apart. By using multiple focalisers and narrators, different time and space dimensions and a narrative that moves back and forth, García questions the notion

of a unified and consistent narrative and individual identity, paving the way for a flexible and hybrid culture.

In her debut novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cuban American author Cristina García investigates the complex social, cultural, political and psychological impact of postcolonialism on identity formation through the journey of Cuban women. The paper aims to show the way through the remembrance and reimagination of three generations of del Pino women, which is made possible by the help of myth, magical occurrences and traditional healing practices, García attempts to recover, to reconceive and to create and develop awareness of Cuban women and cultural heritage that might have been erased. By highlighting the heritage of Cuban women who strongly survived the volatile time during the Revolution, García admits a history of trauma and female opposition to central male politics. In the novel, the del Pino female characters—Celia, Felicia, Lourdes and Pilar—are shown as strong and empowered through their mystic and spiritual experiences, and their alternative narrative(s) of the Revolution. By allowing these women to have a voice, García provides them with some sort of agency and authority over men who basically manipulated Cuban history after Fidel Castro assuming the power. The paper also aims to emphasise how the recurring experiences of these women from three consecutive generations expose García's employment of a major metaphor based on 'phoenix' myth. The female characters go through cycles of cultural and sexual changes where García rewrites the myth with the cycles of death and resurrection. Finally, the paper attempts to demonstrate how magical realism in the novel combines multiple voices and alternative viewpoints on past and present and makes it an apposite vehicle for examining global spaces and issues and attempts to render marginal voices and realities and to subvert and deconstruct Eurocentric notions of identity, reality and truth. By employing myth and magical events such as post-mortem visits of family members and telepathic communication between female family members, García attempts to remove physical distance among women who are torn between cultural differences between Cuba and America and provides them with the sense of togetherness and empowerment.

Cuban Revolution and a Counter-Narrative

The masculinisation of Cuban consciousness, and the militarisation of Cuban life showed the ideological shift which hastened the fundamental changes on the life on the island, and thus created an environment which is hostile and oppressive towards the conformist. Under the circumstances, the oppressive regime aims to “attack the sense of history of those they wish to dominate by attempting to take over and

control their relationships to their own past” (Morales 23). Oppressive regimes such as Castro’s one marginalised people through destroying “records, oral traditions and cultural forms and through interfering with the education of the young” (23). The process marginalised many Cubans who were against the Revolution’s restriction on personal and social ways of life, and religious and/or political ideology, systematically oppressed them, and ultimately forced them to leave the country. The Revolution tore down the fabric of many families, created an atmosphere of fear, and weaved a master narrative excluding the suffering of the oppressed and displaced. It is imperative to mention that Castro’s obsession with the modernisation of Cuba resulted in him to “sanction discrimination against religious observers” and to destroy folk culture (Otero and O’Byrne 43).

In order to provide a counter-narrative on the Revolution, Cuban writers, particularly the female ones take the help of magical realist narrative which includes the appearance of ghosts of dead relatives in reality, female magical healing power, the (re)writing of myth and the strong belief on the supernatural power of natural objects. The use of magical realism in a Cuban female context enables women to challenge their social and political exclusion, and functions as some sort of defense mechanism for them. Cuban female magical realist authors highlight the folk medicinal practices of Cuban women, show its superiority over modern medical system introduced by Fidel Castro who dreamt to see Cuba as a medical superpower, and thus come up with an alternative version of the Revolution. In the entire process, memory and (oral) narratives function together to retain traditional Cuban way of life. By sharing their folk knowledge with the community members in difficult times, these female healers basically upgrade the entire community. Again, authors like Cristina García also investigates spiritual practices and knowledge spaces of Cuban women through examining ‘santería’, an ancient Afro-Cuban religion where Yoruba goddesses are worshipped. García emphasises the significance of women in preserving conventional spiritual practices and at the same time sheds light on the way spirituality can be subversive. The relationship between women and santería ritual is significant as it helps to reestablish the Afro-Cuban oral tradition in modern histories of Cuba where Afro-Cuban are oppressed and excluded. Again, the spiritual connection between women and Yemayá—the goddess of water—destabilises the controlling Christian religious practices. The relation also emphasises the way female agency and empowerment comes from goddess(es) and are transferred through the voice of women showing solidarity with other women.

Subverting and Deconstructing Eurocentric Notions of Identity, Reality and Truth

Nira Yuval-Davis states, “Identities are narrative stories people tell themselves and others about who they are” and thus comprise the “constructions of belonging” (202). García’s writing investigates cultural hybridity and the way maintaining a hyphenated existence confuses one’s identity. As in her essay “Displacements and Autobiography in Cuban-American Fiction”, Alvarez-Borland opines, “Cuban-American writers face two challenges: how to reconcile their past experiences in their country of birth with present experiences in their adopted country [and] how to navigate between bicultural and monocultural readers” (43). The novel explains the construction of identity through three different levels of relocation of Cuban people—the story of those who remained in Cuba (Grandmother Celia), the first generation of immigrants to America (Celia’s eldest daughter Lourdes), and those who came to the US as children (Lourdes’s daughter Pilar). In the whole story, each woman’s account is a crucial variable in the creation of a communal culture and hybrid identity. Born in Cuba but brought up in America, Pilar is conflicted between the opposing perceptions of her identity and heritage where her displaced mother and physically distant grandmother form two crucial aspects of her identity. Pilar is the only protagonist in the novel who provides a first-person account of her story, and performs as some sort of agent or subject in forming her account whereas both Celia and Lourdes’s narratives are told by a third person omniscient narrator which places them in the position of victim or object of their own prejudiced ideas.

The narrative of Pilar symbolises an intersecting point between Cuban and American cultures. Although she reached America at the age of some two years without having any ideas about Cuban culture, in the beginning, she finds more proximity to her Cuban identity. She says, “Even though I’ve been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn’t feel like home to me. I’m not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out” (García 46). In spite of defining herself a Cuban, she has never experienced Cuban life. Therefore, Pilar is unable to fully understand the political discourses between her mother and grandmother. She thus adds some sort of fresh perspective or an outsider perspective on the issues of dislocation and identity. Although Pilar attempts to build a connection with Cuba, it becomes difficult for her due to Lourdes’s silence on, and denunciation of, the topic. Interestingly, both issues intensify her isolation from Cuban culture or tradition, and her desire to (re)connect with it. It ultimately creates distance with Lourdes and Pilar finds consolation in communicating with Celia through magical process of mind reading, making communication possible regardless of geographical distance: “[...] I hear her

speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day. She seems to know everything that's happened to me" (García 22). Therefore, the magical realist means of communication between women enables them to get in touch with each other in spite of their physical distance, to share their stories and to be empowered. Oscillating between her known surroundings of New York and her imagined, and probably fantasised, Cuba, Pilar seeks belongingness which brings her closer to her grandmother and pushes her visit Cuba. As Elena Sáez says, "Pilar's negotiation of her identity is nevertheless overshadowed and overdetermined by this nostalgia and its own confused origins" (131). Pilar admits, "I feel much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom, even though I haven't seen my grandmother in seventeen years" (García 139). Both Celia and Lourdes had the option to embrace either Cuba or America where they went for opposite paths. However, as Pilar personifies the meeting between two cultures, languages and heritages, she chooses both and is therefore able to create a new identity for her.

However, Pilar, who entertains various facets of her identity, is demotivated by Lourdes, who advocates a linear and closed version of history: "This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. ... It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there" (García 139). Whereas Pilar represents a more flexible approach to the construction and negotiation of one's identity, both Lourdes and Celia uphold rigid construction of identity based on dominant political ideologies. Anja Mrak rightly says that both Celia and Lourdes's "slavish adherence to hegemonic ideologies and their identity politics in fact originate in traumatic experience, which forecloses simplistic judgment of their actions and interactions with others" (185). Lourdes's violent rape and later leaving Cuba for the USA make her see migration as an opportunity to reinvent herself and to restart her life. However, she is haunted by her brutal past memories in Cuba. She finds it essential to regain control over her body which bears the mark of sexual violence and rape. She tries to do so first by an irresistible appetite and sexuality and then by obsessive dieting. Here, the reader can see the way magical realism disrupts traditional temporality, giving the opportunity to the past to invade the present as the manifestation of her memory of the rape, and memory in general: Lourdes "smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach" (García 154). Lourdes's trauma is emphasised by a magical realist metaphor, enabling a "movement from the abstract to the concrete, from the figurative to the literal, from the word to the thing" in order for nonrepresentational words or voices to "acquire a distinctly material presence"

(Hegerfeldt 68-69). Hegerfeldt says again that by “rendering the metaphor ‘real’ the text emphasises the power such constructions have over human thought and human action, and the very real suffering they can inflict” (69).

If Lourdes considers migration a fresh start for her, she should definitely reexamine her past and memories and employ them as a tool for her new identity. Although Lourdes wishes to erase Cuba and everything Cuban from her mind, including her mother, she was quite attached to her father before his death. However, they keep interacting with each other even after his death, a phenomenon which is clearly magical realist. Through supernatural events like telepathic communication and post-death appearance, the ontological and spatial boundaries between reality and fantasy is resolved. Lourdes is afraid of crossing the geographical boundary between Cuba and America, fearing that old trauma might return. The initiation of Lourdes’s conversations with her dead father and borderless communication between female characters provides the characters the strength to come to terms with their traumatic past, and to (re)build relationships. When Lourdes receives the death news of her father, she asks Sister Federica at Charity Hospital: “Did he say where he was going? (García 15), a question which highlights Lourdes’s dismissal of borders between the living and the dead, and introduces the possibility of her future meetings with her dead father. She will be involved in conversations with her father partly due the fact that there is no one else to talk to; however, going deep into the issue the, the reader can understand that her communication with her dead father is a way of coming in terms with her trauma of being raped as trauma victims need a listener to share their traumatic stories and to turn them into narratives. In other words, Lourdes’s communication with her dead father offers her a safe resort.

Although Lourdes and Pilar’s trip to Cuba is a significant one, Pilar immediately realises that the passing of geographic border does not have to involve the passing of ideological border: “Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it all” (García 170). Pilar’s statement refers to both physical accessibility and cultural inaccessibility between Cuba and America. Pilar’s trip to Cuba provides her the chance to reconnect with her grandmother where the reestablishment of the bond between them is presented with a touch of magic or supernaturalism: “As I listen, I feel my grandmother’s life passing to me through her hands. It’s a steady electricity, humming and true” (172). This statement highlights the magical realist way of passing information, (hi)stories and culture from one generation to another. Through Celia’s confession of the atrocities of the Revolution—“I know what my grandmother dreams. Of massacres in distant countries, pregnant women

dismembered in the squares” (169)—Pilar’s fantasised version of Cuba is replaced by a more impartial interpretation, containing both positive and negative aspects. Ultimately, she becomes able to establish a connection with her lost tradition and culture and to reconcile between two cultures. In order to comprehend her mother and grandmother without being judgmental, Pilar is the embodiment of transnational feminism and a model of identity politics that “deconstruct prevalent concepts of selfhood and thus open up new channels of cross-cultural conversations” (Schultermandl and Toplu 23).

Lourdes’s father Jorge visits her for the first time forty days after his burial in the US, thanking her for the royal burial he was given. On their first meeting on the street, Lourdes fails to see him but can only smell his cigar, and she reaches home after a very short conversation accompanied by a feeling of disaster:

“Where are you, Papi?”

...

“Nearby,” her father says, serious now.

“Can you return?”

“From time to time.”

“How will I know?”

“Listen for me at twilight.” (García 51)

She shares this story with her husband and surmises that things are “very wrong” and later considers the entire events as her mere imagination (52). The reader can easily understand that Lourdes is a bit sceptical about the idea of talking with her dead father unlike Celia who accepts Jorge’s words as if it was normal and expected. Lourdes’s scepticism is quite explicit during Jorge’s second visit after seven days:

“You didn’t expect to hear from me again?”

“I wasn’t even sure I heard you the first time,” Lourdes says tentatively.

“You thought you’d imagined it?”

“I thought I heard your voice because I wanted to, because I missed you. When I was little I used to think I heard you opening the front door late at night. I’d run out but you were never there.”

“I’m here now, Lourdes.” (García 58)

Since Lourdes sincerely loves her father and is reluctant to let him go, her conversation with her dead father is her only possible way of working through her

trauma. By forcing her repressed memories from the past to the present through the interactions with her dead father, Lourdes initiates the process of reconnecting to herself and the world around her and breaks the isolation resulting from traumatic experiences. As Pettersson says, “Despite the pain that re-emerges with her dead father’s appearance in her life, it becomes clear that Jorge has returned to help his daughter remember and to give her hope” (52). This clearly shows the flimsy border between those who are dead and those alive, and the way dead relatives can be our guides and healers. Lourdes’s being in constant communication with her dead father for long seven years is the time for her being under healing treatment. When their communication starts declining after that, it seems to Lourdes that her father is “dying all over again, and her grief is worse than the first time” (García 151)—a clear indication of her reaching the final period of grief and getting ready to accept his death. Realising that she does not have much time before her father leaves her eternally, Lourdes asks the most difficult of all questions:

“Did you love Mama?” Lourdes asks tentatively.

“Yes, *mi hija*, I loved her.”

“And did she love you?”

“I believe she did, in her way.” (García 152)

Being convinced at his father’s assurance, Lourdes decides to go to Cuba and be (re) united with Celia. The fact that it is his father’s spirit that convinces Lourdes to be reconnected with her family and past shows the significance of spectral guidance on the characters.

In Cuba, Pilar also mentions her possessing clairvoyance, a magical realist phenomenon which seems to have been initiated when she was molested by some young men in America: “Since that day in Morningside Park, I can hear fragments of people’s thoughts, glimpse scraps of the future. It’s nothing I can control. The perceptions come without warnings or explanations, erratic as lightning” (García 167). Pilar’s magical power of sensing people’s thoughts and of smelling the future can clearly be linked to the responsibilities her grandmother has given her—to record both family and collective history and to cover the void of the official history. In other words, Pilar’s magical ability enables her to rewrite the official history from a marginalised perspective and to provide a voice to the oppressed. Her story will thus be all encompassing as her grandmother comments, “She will remember everything” (191). Again, Pilar’s magical connection with her grandmother, regardless of her physical distance, provides her guidance and helps her reconcile

her hyphenated identity. It also shows the way magical realism keeps all the three del Pino women closer, regardless of their different political ideologies, and functions as a valuable device behind their empowerment.

Overcoming Physical Boundaries and Achieving a Sense of Empowerment

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, magical realism enables all three del Pino women, who are not staying in the same location, to cross geographical boundaries, to communicate with each other, and thus to draw them closer to each other and to get a sense of unity and empowerment. Again, Cristina García works within the phoenix myth and associates it with the figurative sequence of death and rebirth. She also uses metaphors connected with different ‘orishas’ or Santería goddesses from classical mythology to feature her women characters. Although Celia and Pilar have no meeting between them since the latter’s family settled in America, they keep in touch and stay closer to each other through magical means of telepathy as Pilar testifies she “hear[s] her speaking to [her] at night just before [she] fall[s] asleep” (García 22). Their telepathic connection draws the women so close that Celia wants to see Pilar: “[...] Celia says she wants to see me again. She tells me she loves me (22).

Apart from having meaningful verbal conversations, there are instances in the novel where characters are able to see dead family members as in the case of Celia who sees her dead husband Jorge “emerges from the light and comes toward her, taller than the palms, walking on water in his white summer suit and Panama hat” (4) but fails to communicate with him as she can only see the movements of his face but “cannot read his immense lips” (4). Here, Jorge’s presence as a gigantic person, his ability to walk on water and, most importantly, his reappearance from a post-death world which is taken quite normally by Celia who is even expecting gifts from him just like their early days of marriage—all these phenomena disrupt the logical aspect(s) of reality and advocate the employment of magical realism in the novel. Again, the broken communication between Celia and Jorge might symbolise their opposing political views. In other word, due to their having differences in political ideologies, their communication hampers even during Jorge’s post-death visit. Nevertheless, Maria Rice Bellamy identifies, as “García uses alternative forms of connection, specifically total recall and dreams, to create relational bridges between characters even when they do not consciously seek them” (80), they are unconsciously interacting with each other although they think they cannot understand each other. Pilar also describes a similar scene where she has an image of Celia calling her but she cannot hear: “I have this image of Abuela Celia underwater, standing on a reef [...]. She calls to me but I can’t hear her. Is

she talking to me from her dreams?” (García 170). Pilar’s vision can be connected to Celia’s movement on the ocean: a vision which enables Celia and Pilar to communicate although the pronounced words are not understood.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García creates characters who are embodiments of ‘orishas’ or Santeria goddess, having the ability to recreate themselves just like phoenixes. Carine Mardorossian draws an association between Santeria and the notion of ‘postcolonial third phase’. Like the “relation identity [that] challenges the separatism of identity politics, cultural purism, and ethnic absolutism in favor of mappings of identity that emphasize the deep interconnectedness of our lives across the globe,” Santeria merges various cultures—mainly Yoruba of Africa and Catholicism of Europe—in order to create some sort of pluralistic identities for its gods, goddesses, and followers (Mardorossian 3). *Dreaming in Cuban* has phoenix pattern, appearance of ghosts, Santeria rituals and goddess figure—all of these characteristics help the novel to be categorised as a magical realist one. Celia’s extreme suffering after her lover Gustavo has left her is lifted to a supernatural level: “Celia took to her bed by early summer and stayed there for the next eight months. ... Celia had been a tall woman, a head taller than most men, with a full bosom and slender, muscled legs. Soon she was a fragile pile of opaque bones, with yellowed nails and no monthly blood” (29). Celia’s transformation reflects that of an ageing phoenix and her upcoming infertility symbolises death. When in order to tempt her to take food a well-wisher of Celia attempts to make a baked Alaska and sets the entire kitchen on fire, a neighbor takes the fire as the sign of her “determin[ation] to die” just like the way the phoenix decides when to die (García 29). In the process of Celia’s recovery, a *santera*’s prophecy—“Miss Celia, I see a wet landscape in your palm. [You] will survive the hard flames” (37)—summarises two parts of quintessential argument: García’s employment of a phoenix design and Celia’s rebirth as an embodiment of Santeria sea goddess—Yemayá.

Gradually, Celia transforms into an avatar of Yemayá— “the model of the universal mother and queen of the sea and of salt water” (Barnet 92). However, she does not either realise or acknowledge her association with goddess until Jorge dies. Although Jorge’s ghost utters unintelligible words in its first appearance, Celia’s attempt to establish a meaningful communication with her husband goes in vain. Although Celia “tempted to relax and drop,” thereby having a permanent association with Yemayá, she rather remembers her dedication for the Cuban Revolution (García 7). Celia’s act of drowning herself in the ocean after Lourdes and Pilar have left Cuba for America can be the symbol of another rebirth: “The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive

salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds” (189-190). Celia’s ability to breathe via her skin—a magical realist phenomenon, defying the law of nature—symbolises her development of grills and coming back to her nature as the sea goddess. Celia releases her pearl earrings, which she has used for more than forty years, one by one to the sea as pearls are product of the sea, thus the proper possession of Yemayá: “Celia closes her eyes and imagines [the pearl] drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas, imagines its slow extinguishing” (190). Celia is reborn, achieving immortality.

Celia’s second daughter Felicia’s cyclical nature is exposed to the reader after her father’s demise. She asks the assistance of a *santera* in order to remove the distance between herself and her father which suggests the way magical realism possesses healing or soothing abilities. It seems that her phoenix cycles are based mainly on her association with men, particularly in relation with her marriage. Her first husband Hugo regularly beats her and transmits syphilis to her. In order to protest her husband’s brutality and to gain agency or, to some extent, emancipation, Felicia reincarnates herself like phoenix with fire:

Felicia carefully brought the blue flame to the tip of the rag. She smelled the quick sulfur and the plantains frying in the kitchen. She watched until the delicate flames consumed the rag, watched until the blaze was hot and floating in the air. Hugo awoke and saw his wife standing over him like a goddess with a fiery ball in her hand.

“You will never return here,” Felicia said and released the flames into his face. (García 66)

The extraordinary description of fire, an ordinary thing, gives the entire scene a magical aura; again, comparing Celia with a goddess, holding a burning ball in her hands also provides the scene a mystic touch, suggesting the significance of myth and magic in empowering women.

Before marrying for the second time, Felicia seeks the advice of a *santera* who informs her of her two more short-lasting and unsuccessful cases of marriage: “Four days later, [...] Ernesto dies tragically in a grease fire at a seaside hotel” (García 118). Smelling a conspiracy behind her husband’s death, Felicia suspects Graciela, a troublemaking client at the saloon where she works, and decides to avenge her husband’s death: “She mixes lye with her own menstrual blood into a caustic brown paste, then thickly coats Graciela’s head. Over it, she fastens a clear

plastic bag with six evenly spaced hairpins, and waits. ... That is the last thing Felicia remembers for many months” (119-120). Once again, Felicia burns a person but this time with a paste of caustic soda and menstrual blood, a phenomenon that defies the law of nature but provides her the required strength to take revenge of any wrong committed against her, thus empowering her. The fire imagery is used again when she attempts to get away from her manifestation as the wife of Otto, her third husband; fire thus provides agency to Felicia and assists her in accomplishing her tasks. When she invites her husband for a roller coaster ride, he gets ready to perform oral sex by unzipping his pant, an essentially dangerous task which proves to be his last. Although Felicia testifies it as a mere accident, later, the reader gets a crueler version of the accident from Herminia who holds Felicia responsible for her husband’s murder: “I don’t know if this part is true, but Felicia said that she’d pushed this man, her third husband, from the top of a roller coaster and watched him die on a bed of high-voltage wires. Felicia said his body turned to gray ash, and then the wind blew him north, just as he’d wished” (146). Associating the event of Otto’s ashes to be blown by the wind to the north with his choice of leaving Cuba for Minnesota, USA (America is situated to the north of Cuba) can be considered a fantastic idea. Otto fails to physically migrate to the USA in his life time but is able to do so after his death in the form of ashes. Felicia again takes the responsibility of her own metamorphosis and achieves agency through fire. She initiates the ultimate manifestation as a *santera* and the votary of Obatalá where after losing consciousness for the last time, she is “possessed by Obatalá” (147). Her deteriorating health can easily be compared with the demise of an ancient phoenix: “[H]er fingers curled like claws [...]. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face” as if she has the beak of a bird instead of mouth (149). She ultimately finds peace in her death.

Celia and Jorge’s eldest Child Lourdes’s cycles, which include uncontrolled consumption, extreme dieting and obsessive sexual urge, are related to posttraumatic stress, and express themselves through both fast weight gain and loss. Due to her monstrous appetite, Lourdes turns into a lump of flesh, which ultimately provides a sense of grotesque, and her hyper-appetite is paralleled with hyper-sexuality:

Lourdes’s agility astounded Rufino. The heavier she got, the more supple her body became. Her legs looped and rotated like an acrobat’s [...]. And her mouth. Lourdes’s mouth and tongue were like the mouths and tongues of a dozen experienced women. ... Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for

something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what. (16)

Lourdes actually goes through a long period of powerlessness due to the impending death of her father which also invokes her powerlessness she experiences during and after her rape. As Rufino is unable to give her the feeling of control, she would like to regain the control over her own sexualised body by herself. In the same manner, Lourdes takes control over her body through excessive dieting after her father's death and the post-death return. She considers both weight loss and weight gain as the representation of her control over her body. Her loss of food appetite is also followed by her loss of sexual appetite: "It's as if another woman has possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband's nauseating clots of Yellowish milk" (García 133). Her another phoenix-like cycle of monstrous weight gain and seeming hyper sexuality begins when she again decides to eat everything within her reach. Jorge's return as a ghost explicitly helps Lourdes to come out of her powerlessness and the trauma of being raped, and thus functions as a source of empowerment. It also offers the cultural picture of a Latin world where the boundary between the dead and the living is fragile and where the dead appears as a normal and integral part of reality.

The reader witnesses a magical realist scene where Lourdes's dead father meets her forty days after his death. Although initially she is horrified by her experience, the meeting with her father later proves beneficial for her. The interactions with her deceased father reveal hidden truths to Lourdes which are imperative to her identity (re)construction and her empowerment. It is her father's ghost that convinces Lourdes to visit Celia in Cuba, thus attempting to reduce the distance between mother and daughter who express opposing political ideologies. In other words, the magical realist communication between Jorge and Lourdes helps the latter to reunite with her physically separated family in Cuba, and to meet her ideologically estranged mother. As Bellamy opines that magical realism "facilitate[s] the interaction of people distanced by ideology, geography and even death" (79). Celia, who is an ardent supporter of the Revolution, terms Lourdes as "a traitor to the revolution" (García 20) when she shows her disgust for Cuba and everything Cuban and decides to settle in the USA, an event that marks their ideological estrangement. Lourdes seems to have been haunted by Jorge's ghost so that she learns the secret of her family, gets reunited with her family and her past memories and comes in terms with her traumatic past. Here, haunting serves a positive purpose as Justine Edwards mentions Toni Morrison who "asserts that the literary use of haunting offers the possibility of representing 'unspeakable things unspoken'" (119). In García's novel,

Jorge explains Lourdes all crucial events between Celia and him—Jorge’s act of resurrecting Celia by loving and marrying her after her lover Gustavo leaves her; his leaving Celia with his mother and sister while taking extended business trips, knowing that they will abuse her; and his role behind Celia’s subsequent mental instability when Celia, after the birth of Lourdes, announces, “I will not remember her name” (García 34)—a feat which points out a haunting scene of Jorge’s ghost bringing to light what remained unspoken in his life as a human being. By allowing a ghost to reveal his story, García is able to unearth the buried stories of Lourdes’s childhood, to alleviate the gap between mother and daughter and to help Lourdes assert her identity.

Among all the female protagonists in the novel, Pilar showcases the most magical ability. She can remember, or at least believes to remember, everything which has taken place around her since her birth, and even goes on narrating a repetitive childhood event: “[B]ack in Cuba the nannies used to think I was possessed. ... They called me *brujita*, little witch. I stared at them, tried to make them go away. I remember thinking, Okay, I’ll start with their hair, make it fall out strand by strand. They always left wearing kerchiefs to cover their bald patches” (García 22). In the novel, Pilar’s cyclicity is the most difficult to perceive probably because García uses the first person narrative in writing Pilar’s section. Her cycles include her engagement with diverse cultures and actions like dancing, painting, enjoying protest music and playing the bass guitar. The turmoil in her sexual and emotional life caused by her college boyfriend Rubén with whom she seems to have an assured sexual relationship but whom she later catches cheating on her launches a ruthlessly depicted phoenix cycle which she realises when she “feels [her] life begin[s]” (143).

Picking up the worship of the ‘orisha’ Changó, the god of fire and lightning, in order to visit Cuba to meet her grandmother Celia, Pilar enters a ‘botanica’, a market for Santería suppliers where she is recognised by the shopkeeper as “a daughter of Changó”, telling her to “finish what [she] began” and providing her herbal medicine to use in bath “for nine consecutive nights” (157). In order to regain her power lost in her near-rape incident in the park, she initiates the bathing ceremonies to invite Changó who has the power to throw flames from his mouth in a phoenix relation. Here, García uses the phoenix cycles to give Pilar some sort of proximity not only to Celia but also to cultural memories of Cuba and to enable her to (re)assert her control over her body and mind after the incident of sexual harassment in the park; myth is thus shown to possess an empowering aspect. As Sáez says, “In the absence of this authentic connection to Cuba, Pilar finds herself attempting to recapture an

alternate history via imagination” (132). The use of myth and magic also helps Pilar to come up with a different or subjective version of Cuban history from her own imagination, a history which starkly contrasts the male-oriented official history. She laments, “Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there’s only my imagination where our history should be” (García 109). After bathing for nine consecutive nights, Pilar realises that she along with Lourdes should go back to Cuba to complete the cycle of imagination and to regain the fading memory of Cuba. The connection between Pilar and Celia epitomises the phoenix myth—Celia has the rebirth in the memory of Pilar as she writes in the final unsent letter to her Spanish lover, Gustavo, “My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. ... She will remember everything” (191).

Conclusion

In many cases in the novel, different magical events help the female characters to network with each other and to give them a sense of togetherness and belongingness by allowing them to overcome geographical and ideological borders, providing them with some sort of agency and empowerment. Although *Dreaming in Cuban*, may not be considered a quintessential magical realist novel, García has employed magical realist ties to remind us about her characters and, probably, her Latin origin. Again, by using multiple languages and therefore multiple expressions, various stylistic devices, different viewpoints and thus multiple versions of reality or history, García attempts to create a cross culture. The female characters’ association with ghostly figures helps Pilar to (re)connect with her ancestry and initiates Lourdes’s healing stages, relinking her with her family and culture. By allowing her female characters to tell their stories, García attempts to liberate the conventional narrative and/or history from the grasp of dominant discourse, and thus opens up an alternative (read female) space, standpoint and history.

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A Chinese Perspective of a Century of British Drama: A Review of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*

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Abstract Published in 2022, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, a collaborative effort by Chinese scholars Professor Liu Hongwei and Professor Li Jing, fills a gap in the field of British modern and contemporary drama research within China. Employing an innovative, multi-dimensional research model that integrates historical context, author studies, dramatic texts, and theatrical performance, the book effectively bridges the often-separated realms of “literariness” and “theatricality” in drama. Beyond offering a clear and comprehensive account of the historical evolution of twentieth-century British drama, the authors delve deeply into the most influential playwrights and their works of the era, enriching the field with a distinctive Chinese intellectual perspective. *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* exhibits significant innovation and cutting-edge thinking in its structural layout, content depth, and research methodologies. Accordingly, it is vital reading for British drama specialists and enthusiasts.

Keywords literariness; theatricality; Chinese wisdom; *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*

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In the vast world of drama studies, the British drama of the twentieth century, with its unique richness and complexity, has long captivated scholars worldwide, standing as a fascinating academic landscape. However, it is precisely this fascinating richness and complexity that has rendered the study of British drama of the twentieth century in China both challenging and in urgent need of further exploration. Despite

the numerous scholars who have dedicated themselves to this field and the prolific achievements they have produced, there remain shortcomings, such as insufficient comprehensive research, a lack of abundant specialized monographs, and a dearth of innovative and cutting-edge critical methodologies. Against this academic backdrop, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, co-authored by Prof. Liu Hongwei and Prof. Li Jing, stands out for its exceptional academic value within the research domain in China. Prof. Liu and Prof. Li both work at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, where they have long been engaged in teaching and research on British and American drama, and have accumulated profound academic achievements in this field. The book they collaborated on, published in 2022, is not only the culmination of the research project “Studies on Twentieth-Century British Drama” supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, but also the crystallization of the wisdom accumulated by the two scholars over a decade of dedicated research on British drama. In the “Introduction,” the authors clarify the core vision of their research with concise and powerful strokes: “This book aims to conduct a comprehensive and focused study of the evolution of British drama throughout the twentieth century” (1). Driven by this academic pursuit, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, with its comprehensiveness and depth, presents readers with a magnificent panorama of the tumultuous trajectory of a century of British drama.

The book’s structural arrangement is meticulously crafted. Beyond the “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” it encompasses ten chapters. The authors ingeniously weave together a longitudinal historical thread with in-depth analyses of representative playwrights’ works, creating a tapestry that seamlessly integrates comprehensive coverage with focused highlights. Specifically, the authors adopt a chronological approach, dividing the century-long evolution of British drama into five distinct periods: the British drama at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Chapter 1), the British drama before and after World War II (Chapter 3), the “Golden Age” of the British drama from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s (Chapter 4), the British drama at the end of the 20th century (Chapter 9), and the British drama since the 21st century (primarily reflected in the selection of works by trans-century playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Caryl Churchill). This approach comprehensively and profoundly outlines the historical trajectory of the overall development of twentieth-century British drama. Throughout this process, the authors not only meticulously dissect key theatrical events, major theatrical movements, and their artistic characteristics during each historical stage, but they also profoundly reveal the intricate connections between twentieth-century British

drama and the social transformation, enabling readers to grasp the macro-framework and inherent logic behind the century-long development of British drama.

At the same time, the authors do not settle for merely outlining the history of the development of British drama over a century. Instead, they build upon this foundation, conducting profound and multi-faceted analyses of representative playwrights and their dramatic works from the five periods (over 10 British masters of modern and contemporary drama and more than 40 plays are analyzed in the book). Indeed, “since most British modern and contemporary plays were originally introduced to China in the form of texts, the study of dramatic texts and the interpretation of their literary nature have become a significant research paradigm with Chinese characteristics” (Liu Hongwei 117). The two professors inherit and cultivate this research tradition. Through meticulous textual analysis, they explore the social issues, philosophical inquiries, and human nature embedded in dramatic works, revealing a unique research characteristic of “historical context with textual focus.” What’s particularly commendable is that in the face of the vast ocean of theatrical history and numerous outstanding playwrights, the authors do not fall into the trap of superficial generalizations. Instead, they bravely make choices, selecting five representative playwrights (three male playwrights and two female playwrights): George Bernard Shaw (Chapter 2), Harold Pinter (Chapter 5), Tom Stoppard (Chapter 6), Caryl Churchill (Chapter 8), and Sarah Kane (Chapter 10), dedicating chapters to in-depth analyses of them and their representative works. These chapters, like brilliant pearls, are embedded within the grand historical narrative. They stand independently while also complementing the grand historical narrative, collectively illuminating the glorious journey of a century of British drama.

Chapter 7, “Contemporary British Female Playwrights,” is particularly noteworthy. It is not only a significant attempt by the authors to construct a genealogy of British women’s drama and challenge traditional gender biases, but also a bold innovation to the traditional writing of British drama history. Unlike previous practices that largely ignored the creative forces of women, the authors explicitly point out that “the emergence of a group of female playwrights has become a major highlight of contemporary British drama” (217). With vibrant vitality, these female playwrights, alongside the “new drama” playwrights and “left-wing” playwrights from the post-World War II era, collectively forged the “Golden Age” of contemporary British drama. The authors’ decision to dedicate a separate chapter to contemporary female playwrights stems from their profound insight and precise grasp of the trends in the development of British drama over a century, as

well as their high recognition of the unique contributions of female playwrights. In this chapter, the authors thoroughly examine the historical context of the feminist movement and feminist troupes in the 1960s and 1970s, analyzing the emergence of contemporary female playwrights and the close connection between their artistic creation and social transformation from a socio-historical perspective. At the same time, they also conduct in-depth discussions and analyses of the works of prominent contemporary female playwrights such as Agatha Christie, Ann Jellicoe, Sheila Delaney, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, from multiple dimensions including the writers' personal experiences, creative ideas, and dramatic language. Notably, during the specific research process, the authors not only adhere to the solid tradition of textual analysis, but also bravely innovate, actively introducing diversified research methods such as cross-cultural comparison, gender studies, and socio-historical criticism, providing new perspectives and insights for understanding the works of British female playwrights. This academic endeavor not only deepens people's understanding of contemporary British female playwrights and their works, but also legitimizes their position in the history of British drama and even in the world, allowing more women's voices to resonate in the long river of history.

The insightful content and profound perspectives are even more remarkable and impressive than the ingenious structure. In fact, throughout the exploration of various topics, the authors consistently demonstrate extraordinary academic acumen, innovation, and cutting-edge thinking. Within the work, the authors not only introduce novel concepts like "Shavian Comedy of Idea" and "Postmodern Humanist Play," but also present unique and profound insights on topics such as the profoundness of T. S. Eliot's verse drama, the unique charm of "Pinteresque drama," the bizarre appearance of "Crimpland" and the profound implications of the violent rituals in Kane's plays. The study of Stoppard and his works serves as a striking example. In Chapter 6, Prof. Li, with exceptional insight, skillfully situates Stoppard's theatrical art within the vast panorama of postmodern culture, creatively naming it "Postmodern Humanist Play." She explains, "'Postmodern Humanist Play' refers to Stoppard's use of relevant techniques and artistic qualities of postmodern drama in his dramatic creation to express the artistic pursuits and spiritual expression characteristic of 'humanist play'." (189) This innovative concept, like a key, unlocks the unique charm of Stoppard's works. Not only does it precisely capture the essence of Stoppard's artistic techniques, but it also profoundly reveals Stoppard's compassionate spirit and ambition to enlighten and save the world, offering a refined distillation of the external appearance and inner soul of Stoppard's dramatic works. Through in-depth analyses of seven landmark plays,

namely *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993), *The Invention of Love* (1997), *The Coast of Utopia* (2003), and *Rock "n" Roll* (2006), the author further solidify the theoretical foundation of "Postmodern Humanist Play," revealing the irrepressible rebellious force in Stoppard's works and his profound philosophical reflections on the human condition and existential dilemmas. Such analysis not only constitutes a profound homage to Stoppard's artistic achievements but also provides invaluable academic inspiration for future generations.

In a profound sense, the most remarkable contribution of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* lies in its ingenious integration of the essence of ethical literary criticism into the practice of British drama research. This move not only highlights the unique voice and profound wisdom of Chinese scholars in the academic field, but also provides a new paradigm for British drama research. Ethical literary criticism was first proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, a Chinese scholar. It is "a critical methodology designed to interpret literature from the perspective of ethics, including a whole set of concepts, theories, and working mechanisms" (Nie Zhenzhao, "Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism"). This critical paradigm draws upon ideas from both Western ethical criticism and the Chinese tradition of moral criticism, injecting a unique ethical dimension into literary criticism and helping understand anew the ethical and social potency of literature.

In *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Prof. Liu's insightful analysis and profound insights into the plays of Pinter and Churchill not only fully demonstrate the extraordinary charm and vast potential of ethical literary criticism but also open up a novel critical dimension for the study of twentieth-century British drama. Particularly in Chapter 5, Prof. Liu, using ethical literary criticism as her theoretical foundation, delves into the ethical themes in Pinter's plays, providing a new path for interpreting "Pinteresque drama" and greatly enriching its artistic implications. She astutely recognizes that "the ethical direction and moral transformation of modern society are consistent underlying themes in Pinter's dramatic creation" (134). By focusing on some classic works like *The Homecoming* (1965), *Betrayal* (1978), *One for the Road* (1983), and *Moonlight* (1993), Prof. Liu integrates multiple methods, such as biographical studies, psychoanalytic criticism, and socio-historical criticism, to systematically examine and analyze the ethical imbalances reflected in the plays, such as family breakdown, marital betrayal, parental estrangement, and acts of violence. In her discussion, she explores the changing socio-cultural ethical environment in the process of both the creation and reception of drama, carefully dissects the ethical identities of the characters, the ethical environments they inhabit,

and the complex ethical relationships between them, thus revealing the unique dramatic strategies and artistic innovations in Pinter's plays and deeply excavating the ethical depth of the playwright's thoughts.

Chapter 8, focusing on Churchill's plays, similarly exemplifies the application of ethical literary criticism in the study of British dramatic texts. For example, through a deep interpretation of *Top Girls* (1979) Prof. Liu cleverly reveals the ethical choices behind the protagonist Marlene's dual ethical identities ("career woman" and "unmarried mother"), reflecting the real-life survival situation of working women in the 1970s and 1980s within a specific ethical environment. Additionally, analyses of plays like *A Number* (2002) and *Love and Information* (2012) offer unique insights into cutting-edge topics such as cloning technology and digital information from a literary ethics perspective too, showcasing Churchill's deep concern and reflection on the ethical problems of modern society. It is worth noting that Prof. Liu, while emphasizing the importance of studying ethical themes, consistently maintains an objective ethical interpretation of dramatic texts, avoiding abstract moral evaluations. By using a range of critical terms like ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical choice, ethical awareness, and the Sphinx factor, she effectively unearths and explicates the unique artistic charm and profound ethical implications in both Pinter and Churchill's plays, contributing valuable Chinese wisdom to British drama research and effectively promoting the deepening and diversification of academic research.

Undeniably, the book is a brilliant achievement of Professor Liu Hongwei and Professor Li Jing. However, its far-reaching significance lies in its deep reflection of the two Chinese scholars' pride in and inheritance of Chinese wisdom, which is vividly demonstrated in the book's "Introduction" and "Conclusion," especially in the latter. Unlike traditional concluding remarks, the authors don't limit themselves to summarizing their research findings, but instead turn their gaze towards the broader academic realm of "A Study of British Drama Criticism in the Twentieth Century in China," offering a profound analysis of the multifaceted reflections of modern society depicted by twentieth-century British playwrights from a unique Chinese perspective. Admittedly, research on twentieth-century British drama within the Chinese context has been influenced by Western academia to some extent. However, after over a century of development, it has carved out a path of reception criticism with Chinese characteristics. Based on this, Professor Liu Hongwei resolutely points out that the contributions of Chinese scholars "have undoubtedly greatly enriched and broadened the understanding and research of British modern and contemporary drama" (15). This statement not only demonstrates the confident

demeanor of Chinese scholars in global academic dialogues but also embodies their spirit of taking responsibility and relentlessly pursuing academic excellence.

Finally, it is also worth praising the book's highly innovative research methods. In meticulously retracing and analyzing the century-long, tumultuous journey of twentieth-century British drama, the authors deftly employ a multi-dimensional research paradigm that integrates author studies, dramatic texts, and theatrical performance. This approach effectively transcends disciplinary boundaries, forging a vital connection between literature and theater, as well as history and contemporary reality. In the specific research process, the authors delve deeply into the "literariness" of drama, examining playwrights, dramatic texts, criticism, and theatrical history. Yet, they also venture beyond traditional boundaries to explore stage practice, directorial philosophy, and audience interaction, thereby capturing the essence of drama's "theatricality" and highlighting its irreplaceable value. This move represents a profound transcendence of the longstanding opposition between "literariness" and "theatricality" within drama research, showcasing the authors' broad vision that embraces the comprehensive nature of dramatic art. While Chinese scholarship on British twentieth-century drama has yielded substantial results in analyzing dramatic texts and interpreting their literariness, research on the "theatricality" of British drama has been notably lacking. The publication of this book offers a potent response to this deficiency. By embracing the comprehensive nature of dramatic art, it undertakes a bold and fruitful exploration, filling, to a certain extent, the gaps in the research on British modern and contemporary drama in the domestic academia.

Such an exploration is obviously challenging. The challenge lies in the fact that the "theatricality" in drama, unlike the relatively stable "literariness," is inherently dynamic and susceptible to change. It is influenced by multiple factors such as economy, cultural policies, social trends, and aesthetic shifts, requiring researchers to possess a high degree of sensitivity and analytical ability. To fully reveal the unique charm and the driving forces behind the changes in twentieth-century British drama, the authors ingeniously weave together external factors such as historical changes, cultural accumulation, economic trends, political influences, and market forces into their analytical framework, thereby constructing a complex and vivid picture of the era. One key example is the in-depth examination of the factors contributing to the "Golden Age" of British drama following World War II. Through deep excavation of the funding policies of the Arts Council of England, a meticulous examination of the changes in the operating model of the Royal Court Theatre, and a precise interpretation of key events such as the abolition of theatrical

ensorship in 1968, the authors reveal the profound interplay between drama and its historical context, showcasing their insightful observations and unique perspectives. This approach, replicated throughout the book, underscores its most notable characteristic: a balanced focus on both “literariness” and “theatricality,” a harmonious integration of internal and external elements, and a multi-dimensional research framework that seamlessly intertwines historical context, author studies, dramatic plays, and theatrical performance.

Overall, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* stands as a testament to the innovative spirit of contemporary Chinese scholarship on British drama, showcasing its structural sophistication, depth of content, and methodological rigor. In an era of global cultural convergence and exchange, diverse academic perspectives are increasingly crucial. This book, deeply rooted in this broader context, boldly positions itself within the landscape of Chinese scholarship, offering a fresh examination and reevaluation of the genres, trends, and methodologies of twentieth-century British drama. It serves not only as a remarkable display of Chinese wisdom on the international stage but also presents a compelling new trajectory for global English drama research with its unique multi-dimensional research model. This work is comprehensive and profound in its content, clear and rigorous in its logic, and elegant and fluent in its language, making it vital reading for British drama specialists and enthusiasts.

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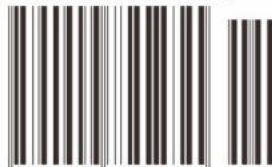
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ISSN 1949-8519



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