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The Ghost in the Machine: The Persistence of Personal Identity in Hanif Kureishi's The Body

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Abstract This paper examines the complex relationship between mind, body, and identity as represented in Hanif Kureishi's The Body (2002). The narrative centres on Adam, an elderly writer who undergoes a radical transformation—a brain transplant into a youthful body. Through this futuristic scenario, Kureishi compels us to question traditional notions of selfhood. Using an interdisciplinary approach—drawing on insights from brain science, philosophy, psychology, posthumanism, and literary theory—this paper argues that Adam is still Adam stressing on the brain crucial role in the persistence and coherence of personal identity through time. It is thus the brain that matters not the 'body' as implied by the novel's title. The body is nothing but a vehicle of the self, a machine-like carrier of consciousness. In short, this paper attempts to use the novel as a laboratory for thought experiments where the dimensions of personal identity can be easily tested and observed.

Keywords Personal identity; narrative identity; chronotopic identity; cognitive psychology; Hanif Kureishi; philosophy of the mind

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Introduction

Years ago, we witnessed in the Arab world, where I belong, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that marked a dark period. One of its diabolical assassination methods was beheading people as a strategy to spread a culture of terror recalling Conradian scenes in Heart of Darkness (1901). At the same time, a contrasting narrative emerged in the West. Sergio Canavero, an Italian neurosurgeon, announced the potential for head transplants—attaching a human head to a new body. His bold claim in 2015, that such a surgery could happen within two years, sparked debates among scientists. Indeed, in the West, scientists were discussing the possibility of attaching spinal cords and nerves in the future where Canavero's operation can be feasible; while here in the Arab world, heads were cruelly cut.

This juxtaposition made me contemplate the nature of personal identity. There are different ways to define personal identity, depending on the context and the perspective. Merriam-Webster defines it as the persistent and continuous unity of the individual person normally attested by continuity of memory with present consciousness. If such a head transplantation is possible philosophically, how we maintain a personal identity. Is the sense of self and the persistence of personal identity tied to the brain, grounded in bodily criteria, or based on something more like a soul or spirit? Where is the place of the self, the soul, the "I"? Is the self all material or just an illusion? I look at my photos of childhood and I can recognize myself; but scientifically speaking, I am not the same person on the cellular, atomic or molecular level now. No single atom in my body is similar to that of the child in the photos. So, how can I feel this sense of continuity and unity through time? This paradox of continuity and change fuels my fascination and obsession with the amalgamation of neurosciences, philosophy, posthumanism, psychology and the emerging genre of 'neuro-fiction'. Neuro-novels have emerged as a reaction to the expanding field of brain research. They are avant-gardist works that experiment with literary conventions and engage in a dialogue with theoretical neuroscientists to portray the complex nature of consciousness, the self and human psyche.

Historically speaking, during the first industrial revolutions, the functions of human body and brain were paralleled to that of a machine. With the progress of human thought and the dawn of the fifth industrial revolution, mental functions are treated as computational processes in the brain. All our body processes are nothing but biochemical 'algorithms' (Harari 82). Transhumanist theorists believe that with the availability of powerful computational powers, they can simulate the human brain and even surpass it with quantum computers. Indeed, the 1990s was labelled

as the 'Decade of the Brain' by U.S. president George H. W. Bush as part of a larger effort involving funding for research into human consciousness that had been scarce during the peak years of behaviourism. A new generation of celebrity psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers of mind published bold titles such as Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997).

With these developments, the fascinating nature of the human mind turns into a hot-potato topic for novelists. They attempt to represent the psychic interiority and consciousness in order to determine how, under this new regime of brain science, personal identity can be understood. As a consequence, psychoanalysis was regarded as 'bankrupt' ("Writing on the Brain"). Therefore, the obsession with describing human personalities through the clinical lens of neuroscience has now permeated the realm of fiction, where characters and their inner lives are increasingly shaped by neuroscientific concepts. This literary breed was inaugurated by Ian McEwan's 1997 novel *Enduring Love*, that portrays a man with de Clérambault's syndrome. Other examples include Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in which the protagonist has Tourette's syndrome; Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), narrated by an autistic teenager; Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), about a man who suffers from Capgras syndrome and stops recognizing his wife; and Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* (2007) that tells the story of a professor at Harvard who develops early-onset Alzheimer's. Indeed, contemporary fiction requires of its audience a measure of scientific literacy.

One of the biggest riddles in science and philosophy is the nature of our identity. We tend to believe each body houses a single mind, but brain research suggests otherwise. Why could not one body have multiple minds? This is exactly what happens in Dissociative Identity Disorder. Jeni Haynes' story is a powerful example. Her book, *The Girl in the Green Dress* (2022), describes how she endured horrific sexual abuse by her father. The extraordinary strength of her mind found a way to cope—dissociation. This defense mechanism created over two thousand separate personalities, called alters, each protecting her from the trauma in unique ways. These alters form an inner army to shield her.

On the other hand, some cases seem to show one mind existing in two bodies as in the case of the Chaplin sisters, identical twins, who speak exactly at the same time and finish each other sentences (Wright). The brain is indeed the carrier of personality; Nicholas Humphrey, a renowned neuropsychologist, says that the self, consciousness and behaviour are nothing but the "surface feature of the brain" (The Mind Made Flesh 78).

We can thus argue that personal identity which image is a fragile concept that can be influenced by many factors. If one injures his finger, nothing will happen. But a brain injury will inevitably cause a personality change. To put it simply, one's sense of self depends on the well-functioning of the brain; the brain is the guardian of identity as many clinical cases demonstrate this, especially the well-known case of Phineas Gage. This latter is arguably the most famous case study in the history of neuroscience. he survived an iron rod piercing through his skull, but this physical injury profoundly altered his identity. Although his memory and cognition had not been changed, his once gentle personality slowly degraded. He became a man of bad and rude ways, disrespectful to colleagues, and unable to accept advice. His plans for the future were abandoned, and he proceeded without thinking about the consequences. Gage became irritable, irreverent, rude and profane, traits that were not part of his past character. His transformation was so great that everyone said that "Gage is no longer himself" (Teles 419).

We can also imagine philosophical cases of brain transplants that refute body identity, or cases like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) who is transformed from a young man into an ugly giant bug. Therefore, personal identity based on bodily criteria is neither attractive for novelists nor for philosophers.

Thus, building on these ideas, we will examine *The Body* (2002) by Hanif Kureishi, the well-established British author, that thrusts us into the heart of this interdisciplinary exploration through the unconventional narrative of Adam, an elderly man who undergoes a radical transformation—a brain transplant into a young, healthy body. Adam, a successful old writer, meets his surgeon who warned him that after the transplant into a new body "not everyone wants to go back" (23). Like Shelley's modern Prometheus, the selected novella raises questions about the nature of identity and the ethical implications of disrupting death. Kureishi's narrative portrays a transhumanist future where the body is treated as a commodity; the rich can customize their look and bodies as one character (a new-body) says: "What's the point of being rich if you're lopsided and have a harelip? It was a joke, a mistake that I came out alive like that! This is the real me!" (113) The novella predicts the emergence of a new class of superhumans or as Harari Yuval describes: "having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles [wars, diseases and starvation], we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens into Homo deus* [man-god]" (26). These 'new bodies,' including the protagonist Adam—as the author refers to them—tend to lead a bohemian, hedonistic life, indulging in sensual pleasures. This recalls Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a classic exploration of the schism between the

outer self and the inner psyche. Kureishi further portrays death and aging, for this emerging elite class, as mere technical problems that can be overcome in a post-human future: "Soon everyone'll be talking 'bout this. There'll be a new class, an elite, a superclass of super-bodies. Then there'll be shops where you go to buy the body you want. I'll open one myself with real bodies rather than mannequins in the window. Bingo! Who d'you want to be today!" (114)

This audacious scenario serves as a powerful thought experiment, prompting us to critically examine the complex relationship between mind, body, and the essence of who we are. We will thus use philosophical, psycho-cognitive and literary insights to argue that Adam's journey, far from eroding his sense of self, offers compelling evidence for the remarkable adaptability and resilience of the human brain in preserving core identity.

To make the journey inside the mind of Adam possible, we will employ different sets of criteria to analyze personal identity: continuous memory, psychological continuity, narrative identity and persistence of personality. First, Locke emphasizes the importance of psychological continuity and memory as a criterion for personal identity. Locke argues that gaps in memory result in a shattered self, and consciousness is what allows an individual to connect the past to the present self to create and maintain a personal identity. He says: "self depends on consciousness not on substance" (*The Philosophical Works of John Locke* 474). Consciousness can be regarded here as 'memory.' This idea is recently updated and revised by the famous British philosopher Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (1984). Parfit argues that identity and memory come from the same place: "a psychological connectedness and continuity maintained inside our heads" (206). In short, memory is essential for the continuity and coherence of the self; i.e., personal identity is built on conscious remembering.

Additionally, numerous studies borrowed insights from Paul Ricœur in that storytelling and narration are integrally related to the construction of the narrator's identity. Ricœur's view is that personal identity consists in narrative identity, which he defines as a dynamic and evolving coherence between one's life story and one's self-understanding. He argues that a person is the same over time if he can tell a coherent and meaningful story about himself and his experiences (116-17).

Similarly, the philosopher Daniel Dennett has put forth a theory of the self in many of his works as 'a center of narrative gravity' (another narrative metaphor). Dennett claims that the self, rather than being a unified entity which persists across time, is an evolutionarily adaptive cognitive interpretation utilized by organisms (primarily human beings as they have the means of language) in order to effectively

navigate their social and physical environments ("The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity" 03). In other words, our consciousnesses are constantly writing multiple draft stories about who we are. The self is the draft that emerges from this process. Others have adopted a similar view suggesting that we are essentially narrative beings who experience and make sense of our lives in a story-like way. In short, the center of subjective experiences that gives us the sense of who we are is for Dennett the little person behind the eyes—as Nicholas Humphrey calls it "my inner eye" (1986) my consciousness incarnate. This homunculus is the Cartesian theatre that Dennett coined — the notion that consciousness occurs at a single place in the brain, symbolized by a small person within it receiving all sensory input and issuing commands.

From what have been said so far, discussions both within the scientific and lay literature prove the centrality of the brain, not the body as implied by the novel's title. Adam's skin and flesh do not represent his personality, but stories, narration, mindset and memories inside the brain which is the very seat of consciousness. The body is nothing but a vehicle of the self, a machine-like carrier of our consciousness; we are the ghosts in the machines in the Cartesian sense. Therefore, this paper attempts to contribute to the ongoing debate of identity using the novel as a laboratory for thought experiments in which the dimensions of personal identity can be tested and observed.

Consciousness and Narrative Identity

To lay the foundation for the discussion of Adam's narrative identity, we will first explore his stream of consciousness. Consciousness itself remains one of the greatest mysteries in science and philosophy, one that contemporary authors often seek to explore, reimagine, and demystify in their works. In fact, the novella is structured around memory, language and Adam's narration. The point of view, or "focalization" within a character helps bring fictional characters closer to the reader. The author uses internal monologues; in other words, the stream of consciousness as a realistic way to exemplify thought processes of Adam. Stream of consciousness writing allows the novelist to create the illusion that the reader is sharing sensations and uncensored thoughts inside the character's mind. Therefore, access to the protagonist's internal experiences, psyche and mindset enhances the reader's grasp of his external reality. It is therefore a symphony of the self beyond the flesh par-excellence as the author puts it in the novel:

I was, I noticed, becoming used to my body; I was even relaxing in it now. My

> long strides, the feel of my hands and face, seemed natural. I was beginning to stop expecting a different, slower response from my limbs. There was something else. For the first time in years, my body felt sensual and full of intense yearning; I was inhabited by a warm, inner fire, which nonetheless reached out to others—to anyone, almost. I had forgotten how inexorable and indiscriminate desire can be. Whether it was the previous inhabitant of this flesh, or youth itself, it was a pleasure that overtook and choked me. (54)

A brain transplant is presented in the novel as a consciousness transfer; in a trans-humanist sense, informational patterns of human identity are transferred to the new body (Hayles xii). Thus, the novella is structured around Adam's unchanging mind and consciousness within both bodies. Indeed, a model of the human mind must be, in effect, a model of the human brain: and the human brain is unimaginably complex as Nicholas Humphrey puts it (*The Inner Eye* 66). It is as if every human being possesses a kind of an 'inner eye' (Adam's inner eye is still Adam's within the skull) which looks in on his brain and tells him why and how he is acting in the way he is - providing him with what amounts to a plain man's guide to my own mind (Ibid 232). Consequently, Adam is not an unconscious zombie or a hollow man without an "inner eye", a machine that has no insight into anything which is happening inside it. Humphrey says that "the inner eye may have evolved for one purpose and one purpose only —to enable people to 'read' the behavior of other people like themselves - but with it we have the capacity to make our minds the measure of all things" (Ibid. 88). So, Adam's narration and stream of consciousness interpret his brain. The author exposes Adam's consciousness, the inner picture he has of what it is like to be himself, his self-awareness: the presence in Adam of a spirit, (self, soul ...) which we can call "I". It is the "I" that has thoughts and feelings, sensations, memories, desires. It is "I" that is conscious of its own existence and continuity in time. 'I' is, in short, the very essence of a human being. This presence called 'I' in Adam's new body has no separate reality - separate, that is, from the activity of his own brain. Everything which he is consciously aware of corresponds in one way or another to a brain state.

Furthermore, Adam's symphony of the self is composed of myriads experiences and aspirations. This symphony is excavated by the author who lays it bare for us through a series of snapshots (flashbacks) bridging Adam's past with the present:

> He helped me recall moments with my own children: my boy, at four, fetching

> me an old newspaper from the kitchen, as he was used to my perpetual reading… The kid sent me into an unshareable spin. I wept alone, feeling guilty at how impatient I had been with my own children. I composed a lengthy email apologizing for omissions years ago, but didn't send it. (69)

These snapshots serve as potent testaments to the enduring coherence and narrative arc of Adam's life. Interestingly, recent advancements in neuropsychology suggest a paradigm shift in our understanding of memory storage. While traditional metaphors depict memories of childhood or yesterday for example as cinematic experiences, contemporary research indicates that the brain store them akin to these fragmented snapshots. Thus, it is the job of brain to fill in the gaps between fragments of memories using narration to establish coherence, as Dr Shohamy says: "Our memory is not an accurate snapshot of our experiences. We can't remember everything" (qtd in Cantor).

Here, Ricœur notes that the subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable story' about himself. Ricœur's argument is that narrative identity can account for change within the general configuration of a life and that the subject can be both the writer and reader of his own life (Crowley 12). Adam as we have seen so far is both the writer and the reader of his life. He even tries to bridge and harmonize the two poles of his past self as a writer with his new one unlike Shelley's incoherent creature in Frankenstein. Writing defines him, pen finds its way back to his hand once more: "In the corner of the room, on a small table, were some papers. "Please don't look at that," I said. "Why not?" "Leave it! I'm trying… to do something about an old man in a young man's body" (130).

Marya Schechtman argues that personal identity is not merely a matter of biological continuity but of narrative construction: "constituting an identity requires that an individual conceives of his life having the form and the logic of a story—more specifically, the story of a person's life—where 'story' is understood as a conventional, linear narrative" (qtd. in Hyvärinen and Watanabe 350). In *The Body*, Adam's return to writing after his transplantation is not incidental—it is a profound existential act of narrative recovery. Writing allows Adam to reassert authorship over the new chapter he is living through. More than just a symbolic act, Adam's return to his desk—despite having a new body—signals the continuity of narrative agency. His memory is intact, his aesthetic sensibility persists, and the desire to articulate his thoughts through language remains central to who he is. When he remarks: "I couldn't resist sitting down at my desk. I looked at the photographs of my children at various ages. I knew where everything was, though my hands were

bigger and my arms longer than before... I wrote a few words... I had to tear myself away" (137), he is not simply performing a habitual action. He is reclaiming his narrative identity—bridging the past and present through the act of authorship. The physical discontinuity (bigger hands, longer arms) is acknowledged, but it does not disrupt the coherence of the self who remembers, reflects, and writes. Moreover, Adam was a writer before the transplantation, and writing is a unique marker of human identity that differentiate us from other creatures—an externalization of consciousness. In continuing to write, he performs an act of existential affirmation: he is still Adam, the storyteller of his own life. Schechtman's framework helps to illuminate this process, particularly in a posthuman context where bodily identity is a fragile concept.

Language and narration are indeed the carriers of identity and the self. Word making and narration here can be seen as self-making. We may agree with Paul Ricœur's claim that narration bridges the line and mediates between the two poles of identity: idem-identity (sameness or permanence) or ipse-identity (selfhood or uniqueness). Adam in this sense has preserved both types of identity. These two poles constitute the narrative identity of Adam which is present and intact due to memory, language and stories.

In the previous passages, we can see how unbroken memory preserves Adam's narrative identity and his relationship with his wife and children. Adam recalls the events and experiences that they shared. By recalling his wife and children's identities, Adam also maintains his own narrative identity and the continuity and coherence of his life story. Indeed, this plot aligns with Nancy Katherine Hayles' claim who is a famous literary posthuman scholar: "The clear implication is that if we can become the [story] we have constructed, we can achieve effective immortality" (13). Unlike the body, which is temporary and subject to change especially in a futuristic context through plastic surgeries, brain transplants and mind uploading, narratives and stories endure.

Indeed, Adam is able to present his identity, namely, by telling stories. These stories are generally told in order to give the listener—and often also the teller—the possibility make inferences about who and, more often, what kind of person the teller is and what context the person wants to be seen as belonging to. By telling about what has happened, the actions, "the self" and the identities of the past may cast their reflections on the present teller, investing him or her with virtues of the past in order to negotiate identity in the present (Hydén & Bülow 72). Therefore, Adam appears to retain the full repertoire of his prior linguistic and cognitive prowess, retaining his eloquence and acuity of thought, along with reliability and

validity. In line with Ricœur, Adam is the same person over the course of the novella because he can tell a coherent, reliable and meaningful story about the past, present or future.

So, in this philosophical literary inquiry, we try to make clear the notion that "human thought is fundamentally structured around stories" (Gerrig 473). We may also agree with Dennett that Adam's narrative self is like a center of gravity within the brain, "each normal [homo sapien] makes a self. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it does not have to know what it's doing; it just does it" (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 416). In a word, Adam epitomizes the enduring of the self within a new posthuman body. Adam's narrative and psychological self persists demonstrably through his first-person narration within the same web of consciousness:

I enjoyed all of it, and after chatting with the designer, whom I'd known slightly in my previous body, I was offered a job in one of his shops, with the prospect of becoming a buyer, which I declined. I did ask him, though, whether, by any chance, as I was a "student," he'd read any of "my"—*Adam's*—books or seen "my" plays or films. If he had, he couldn't remember. He didn't have time for cultural frivolity. Making a decent pair of trousers was more important. He did say he liked "me"—*Adam*—though he had found me shy at times. He said, to my surprise, that he envied the fact that women were attracted to me (61).

The narrative in the novel seems to lean towards the psychological continuity view, as Adam's internal monologue and interactions with others reflect his ongoing sense of self. We can also add that Adam attempts to re-establish his 'chronotopic identity' as a husband, a father and a writer. The concept of the chronotope was originally developed by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) for the analysis of space-time continuum in novels. Bakhtin's chronotopes of time and place are a way of analysing how different literary genres and texts represent the interrelation of time and space in their narratives. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84—85). Bakhtin explicates how people inhabit different concrete chronotopes in the course of history in two millennia of literary production and how this, in turn, is socio-historically reflected in social realities and practices. To Bakhtin, in these literary texts, time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically viable" and space becomes "charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). Indeed, the representational capacity of the literary chronotope lies in the inseparability of time and space in constructing narratives, characters and 'responsible actions' (Steinby & Klapuri 105-125). Identity in this

case is *chronotopically* organized in captivating time-space configurations that are never random. For instance, at the university, I am a lecturer; but at home, I am a father. So, the university is a chronotope that imposes the identity of a lecturer on me.

While Bahktin's concept of the chronotope has been extensively explored in literary studies, its specific characteristics, types, and functions have never been systematically examined in the context of mind-body relationship. Hence, time and space organization and configuration according the Bakhtinian notion tell us who we are; Adam in the following holds both spatial and time memories making his identity stable and consistent:

> I'm not sure why, but I returned to the part of London I knew. I felt safer, and more at ease in my mind, in a familiar place. In your own city, you don't have to think about where you are. Being pursued had frightened me; I was scared all the time now. I had no idea whether Matte would still be following me. I must have convinced myself that he'd lost interest in me. (113)

Spatial and temporal attachments and intrinsic connectedness are not damaged by the brain transplantation. Adam even tries to restore his chronotopic identity as a loving husband when he visits his home after being chased: "I put on my wife's favourite record. I kissed her hands and felt her body against mine as we danced. I knew where to put my hands. In my mind, her shape fitted mine. I didn't want it to end" (138) In fact, unlike the Cartesian principle, Adam's sense of self can be replaced with 'I feel, therefore I am.' Feelings and emotions can be more reliable, authentic and real for the protagonist.

Therefore, we can say that Hanif's novel uses Bakhtin's concept of chronotope to illustrate how brain transplantation does not affect memory and cognition. The existential dimension of Adam is unbroken: how he relates to himself, others, and the world through time-space. In short, space-time continuum gives Adam the impression of existence and self-assertion unlike his journey to Greece where he felt like a fraud and stranger by fabricating stories and living a lie.

The Persistence of the Self beyond the Flesh

At this stage, we will argue that Adam's personal identity and consciousness are by-products of the physical brain and nervous system, without which they cannot exist according to Materialist philosophy. Indeed, materialists agree that identity, personality and consciousness (the mind) are the functions of the brain. Personal

identity in this case is dependent on the physical continuity and functioning of the brain not the body. If the brain is damaged, altered, or destroyed, then personal identity is also affected or lost. Adam in the novel is aware that he cannot beat death or disrupt it, he is doomed in his old body: "age and illness drain you, but you're never aware of how much energy you've lost, how much mental preparation goes into death" (46). Adam is aware of the decay of his body and of all the bodies around him; "I have friends in worse shape" (2). He also believes that the body and the soul are not two ways of describing the same thing, namely a human being, but distinct, separate entities. He is like a ghost living inside an exhausted machine epitomizing the boredom of existence: "you say you can't hear well and your back hurts. Your body won't stop reminding you of your ailing existence. Would you like to do something about it?" "This half-dead old carcass?" I said. "Sure. What?" "How about trading it in and getting something new?" (1) In a transhumanist setting, this is what the 'Newbody' technology allows for—the possibility of changing to a new and younger 'facility' whenever the current one is deemed old or deteriorating. Ageing for the rich will be nothing more than a technical problem. Ralph, a newbody, proposes for Adam a brain transplant which is not really an organ transplant at all, but a "full-body transplant" as we will argue. It moves a person from one organism to another.

In this provoking story, Adam is similar to the 'Ship of Theseus' which is a famous thought experiment. In Greek myth, Theseus, a legendary king, sailed away after defeating a monster. Each year, the Athenians would repair the ship to keep it sailing. But over time, every single piece of wood was replaced. A question was raised by ancient philosophers: after several hundreds of years of maintenance, if each individual piece of the Ship of Theseus was replaced, one after the other, was it still the same ship? This philosophical experiment and symbolic story parallels with Adam's dramatic physical change. Indeed, as Hanif Kureishi puts in the novel: "The identity theorists are going to be busy worrying about this one" (45). The story offers a peculiar identity amalgamation in terms of form, material, body and mind. Adam himself is mesmerized by the result of this fusion that is debatable: "I loved this multiplicity of lives; I was delighted with the compliments about my manner and appearance, loved being told I was handsome, beautiful, good-looking. I could see what Ralph meant by a new start with old equipment. I had intelligence, money, some maturity, and physical energy. Wasn't this human perfection? Why hadn't anyone thought of putting them together before?" (64).

Again, science shows how the body can trap the mind, like a prison for our consciousness. Locked-in syndrome is a real-life example. This is a neurological

illness caused by damage to the brainstem, often from a stroke. People with this condition are completely paralyzed, but their minds are still alert and aware (Maciejewicz 476). For instance, Martin Pistorius, the ghost boy as the South African media calls him, spent twelve years locked in his paralyzed body. He says: "For so many years, I was like a ghost. I could hear and see everything, but it was like I wasn't there. I was invisible" (Snow). Ralph's wife in the story had a disease similar to the Locked-in syndrome that made her life unbearable: "His wife, with whom he had been in love, suffered from a degenerative illness that destroyed her body but left her mind unharmed… She said that all she needed was a new body. They tried many treatments in several countries, but in the end she was begging for death" (11). This postmodern story proves that we are ghosts within machines. The posthuman body is nothing more than a vessel that can be replaced, updated or enhanced.

Even before the transplant, Adam felt out of place in his decaying body. The world around him, shaped by youth, speed, and image, had already rendered him obsolete. His body could no longer serve as a viable interface with this postmodern landscape, prompting a deep existential estrangement. He describes himself as "*hollow*" (4), echoing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a reference that signals not only social invisibility but also a loss of embodied subjectivity. This sense of being a ghost in the machine anticipates the novel's central conceit: the transformation of the human into posthuman. Adam's decision therefore to undergo brain transplantation is not merely a medical or cosmetic procedure. It represents a full ontological leap into a posthuman mode as Adam escapes his "ailing existence" and "half-dead old carcass" (9) that has no touch with real life. This mid-life crisis of the hero is recurrent in Hanif's late novels. In this narrative instead, the author choses a peculiar tale of metamorphosis to help the protagonist restores his curiosity of the world, has a second chance, renews his narcissism and escapes mortality and decay:

> I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors, or serials on TV [...] It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can only grasp a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make out which side they are on. My age, education, and experience seem to be no advantage. I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate? (5)

The new body is not his own, biologically or historically; it is purchased (like

clothes and accessories) and disconnected from his natural life span. In this sense, Adam becomes a posthuman subject par-excellence—a hybrid entity in which the continuity of personal memory coexists with a posthuman constructed form. This creation of a posthuman body is not secondary; it is central to the novel's critique of identity in a commodified, post-biological age. Therefore, the body or the shell for Adam means realizing the ultimate transhumanist dream of combining the virility and stamina of a young sensual body with the wisdom and life-experience of his original brain.

Moreover, some diseases, like Alzheimer's, can cause people to lose their sense of self. Patients do not even recognize themselves in the mirror in the late stages of the disease. This shows that identity cannot be based solely on bodily criteria. In this line, Adam after the transplantation tries to examine his identity through and with the looking glass that causes a paradoxical image resulted from the coexistence of the familiar and the defamiliar, of the past identity and the present image in Adam's memory. This image produces uncanny feelings as Adam says:

> A theory-loving friend of mine has an idea that the notion of the self, of the separate, self-conscious individual, and of any autobiography which that self might tell or write, developed around the same time as the invention of the mirror, first made en masse in Venice in the early sixteenth century. When people could consider their own faces, expressions of emotion and bodies for a sustained period, they could wonder who they were and how they were different from and similar to others… My children, around the age of two, became fascinated by their own images in the looking glass… As I said to them: Make the most of it, there'll be a time when you won't be able to look at yourself without flinching… According to my friend, if a creature can't see himself, he can't mature. He can't see where he ends and others begin. This process can be aided by hanging a mirror in an animal's cage. (31)

This passage brings to mind the mirror stage and identity concept in psychoanalysis that was developed by Jacques Lacan. Adam is indeed like a child trying to relate to his image to self-identify. This stage is similar to the stage of childhood development. This identification forms the basis of the ego, which is the imaginary sense of self that persists throughout life. The ego thus depends on external images and symbols for its formation and validation. However, as we claimed in the introduction, body identity is not persistent through time. This takes us into the famous mind-body philosophical problem. Does Adam remain Adam because

she has the same consciousness and memories? Is identity maintained by bodily or brain continuity? Is Adam a physical object, such as his body or brain, or is he a non-physical entity, such as soul or mind? In fact, we cannot ignore Adam's consciousness, preferences, feelings and memories (these are central for Locke as we have seen) that form his personal identity. Besides, the author himself asserts the idea that bodily identity is not persisting and fragile. Adam now, half conscious, in his new body remembers his previous body, conversations and memories with his children. David Hume wrote: "Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person" (17). In fact, Adam is 'pleased' with the body he has purchased, which he will use for six months before returning to his original body, as mentioned earlier in the novella. In transhumanist discourse, the body Adam sees in the mirror feels like a new set of clothes, something to try on and get used to. He approaches this posthuman vessel with excitement, much like someone in a boutique changing room. Adam is fully aware that this body does not reflect his true self. He is not a newborn in the literal sense; he has already experienced childhood and knows how to 'use' a body. As a result, he can bypass the developmental stages that children typically go through. What he must adjust to, however, is the unfamiliar bulk of his new form. As he soon observes, "My feet were an unnecessary distance from my waist. […] I'd never been unfamiliar with the dimensions of my own body before" (40).

From an intertextual point of view, unlike Adam, Shelley's fragmented creature in Frankenstein experiences a failed and permanently incomplete mirror stage. The creature is forced to confront an identity crisis, confessing: "I was dependent on none, and related to none. […] My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them" (128). The creature's tragedy lies in the conflict between his intelligent, conscious mind and the grotesque, misshapen body that imprisons it; a body he cannot reconcile with his inner self.

Therefore, Adam's 'center of narrative gravity' that Daniel Dennett coined has shifted from the old body to the new body. Dennett argues that our sense of self is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic narrative constructed through various brain processes and can be maintained without a body (Brandon 73). Memories, experiences, and interpretations weave together to create a story of 'Adam' that evolves over time. The centre of narrative gravity represents the core of this story, the point around which our self-perception and experiences revolve. Adam is

aware that he is the same person, his identity is coherent unlike Shelley's creature aforementioned: "I was waiting in the crowded hotel foyer when Ralph hurried in and stood there looking about. It was disconcerting when he didn't recognize the writer he'd worshipped, whose words he'd memorized, the one he believed deserved immortality! It took him a few distracted moments to pick my body out among the others, and he still wasn't certain it was me" (43).

In this transhumanist story, transplanting Adam's brain to a new body would undoubtedly introduce new experiences and potentially alter his perception of the world. However, from Dennett's perspective, the key question is: How does this new information integrate into his existing narrative? As the author presented, we can see that there is a smooth integration. That is to say, the new experiences seamlessly fit into Adam's established narrative, maintaining continuity and coherence. The center of narrative gravity remains stable, and Adam still considers himself Adam.

Besides, in his paper, "Where Am I?" (1978) Daniel Dennett presents a philosophical theory of personal identity. He introduced a thought experiment in which his brain is detached from his body and placed in a vat in Houston, Texas while his body is sent on a mission to recover a warhead beneath the surface of the earth in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They are connected by radio so he can control his body. Dennett then proposes the question of, "where am I?" If his brain is in a whole different location than his body, then where is his personal identity? For the following thought experiment, he names his brain, "Yorick," his body "Hamlet," and he, his identity, is Dennett. He presents three possible answers to the question, "where am I?" The third answer to the question of "where am I" that Dennett provides and the one that seems to satisfy him the most is that Dennett is wherever Dennett thinks Dennett is. In other words, he says, "At any given time, a person has a point of view, and the location of the point of view (which is determined internally by the content of the point of view) is also the location of the person" ("Where am I?" 3). In short, Adam's center of narrative gravity is not located in the fridge with his old body preserved underground; Adam's self thus persists as a narrative thread. If one cuts his finger, does this finger have an identity of its own? Adam has control over how he sees himself in this new form as he reconfigures, invents, drafts and customizes his identity: "Staring at myself in the mirror again, attempting to get used to my new body, I realized my hair was a little long. Whichever 'me' I was, it didn't suit me. I would customize myself" (46).

Once more, Adam emerges, reborn into a fresh vessel, yet his essence remains unaltered—consciousness intact, memories preserved and selfhood undiminished. He transcends what he dubs: "my vanity and fear of decline and death" (22). His

consciousness now inhabits a new machine, marking the dawn of a posthuman age reserved for the elite: "My new body was taller and heavier than my last "vessel" (43). He 'evolved' in Ralph's words (15). Ralph goes on promoting a transhumanist vision of a brave new world for the readers where the body is reduced to nothing more than commodified flesh:

> You might, for a change, want to come back as a young woman… Or you could choose a black body. There's a few of those, he said ... Think how much you'd learn about society and … all that […] Whatever. All I want is for you to know that there are options. Take your time. The race, gender, size, and age you prefer can only be your choice. I would say that in my view people aren't able to give these things enough thought. (26)

At this point, we will focus on two key aspects of the previous quote as they relate to the fragility of bodily identity. The first is idea is that of 'coming back' which is frequent in the novel; it is a connotation that brain transplantation is similar to resurrection: "It was common, he said, that people living a "second" life, like people on a second marriage, took what they did more seriously. Each moment seemed even more precious" (19). Religiously speaking, resurrection is believed to occur in a new body because the old body will be gone. The question is whether are we going to be resurrected in our earthly bodies or new heavenly bodies. Certain religious monotheistic doctrines, such as Islam, suggest that in the afterlife, human beings are endowed with new forms of existence. These transcendent bodies are believed to be free from earthly biological needs and functions, such as excretion. Therefore, according to this and from a religious perspective, there will be no bodily continuity in heaven. The resurrected bodies are a new creation. What matters therefore is our consciousness, memories and all the patterns that define us. These memories, psychological and even genetic patterns are the essence of the self that can be preserved in the memory of God for the purpose of resurrection, or maybe stored in a powerful futuristic quantum computer. In this context, resurrection can be reimagined as a high-tech, futuristic event driven by advanced technology.

Indeed, a brain computational theory can therefore suggest a new paradigm of personal identity based on this psychological pattern. It focuses on the brain as a kind of 'hard drive' storing all our memories, experiences and life as data. The software and algorithms can be regarded as the mind within the body which are the key to our identity. In other words, it is not the physical body, but the patterns within our brains that make us who we are. This idea agrees with the Lokean criteria based

on memory (For Locke, memory is the same as consciousness) that is essential for self-continuity: "Nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person, the identity of substance will not do it. For whatever substance there is, however framed, without consciousness there is no person" (Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" 183).

Secondly, the quote also touches on gender identity. Ralph suggests Adam could return as a woman, hinting that our bodies might not define our gender after all. Some real-life conditions can make people feel disconnected from their bodies as many empirical medical studies support this. This is the case of 'gender dysphoria' as defined by Capetillo-Ventura et al: "gender identity disorder is defined as the inconsistency between physical phenotype and gender. In other words, self-identification as a man or a woman. Experiencing this inconsistency is known as gender dysphoria. The most extreme form, where people adapt their phenotype to make it consistent with their gender identity, through the use of hormones and by undergoing surgery, is called transsexualism" (54). In other words, transsexuals feel 'trapped' in the wrong body. Thus, personal identity and the concept of gender transcend mere biological determinism (i.e., genitalia), it is influenced by what is between our ears 'the brain'. For individuals with gender dysphoria, they will prefer transferring their consciousness or changing their bodies to align with their desires and fantasies mirroring the narrative of Hanif Kureishi: "Some men want to give birth. Or they want to have sex as a woman. You do have one of your male characters say that in his sexual fantasies he's always a woman" (26). But Kureishi makes it clear that Adam's identity is consistent and enduring, his fundamental desire remains—the return as a male. Ralph asks "are you particularly attached to your identity?" Adam replies: "It never occurred to me not to be" (27). All in all, this discussion of identity in a transhumanist age aligns with the radical deconstructing claims of philosophers such as N. Katherine Hayles and Francesca Ferrando, who argue that identity in the future will transcend gender, race, class, age, disability and the histories of the human body (Ferrando 219). Adam, however, resists this erasure of personal history favoring unity and persistence; he does not wish for it to be replaced by herstory.

Adam's answer suggests that he has always taken his identity for granted. It implies a natural, perhaps unconscious, attachment to his identity, as if it is an integral part of his being that he has never thought to question or detach from. This exchange also raises the question of whether our identity is something we actively construct and maintain, or if it is a fundamental aspect of our existence that we inherently accept without question. In a philosophical context, this dialogue

could be seen as a reflection on the mind-body problem. It aligns with the views of philosophers like John Locke, who believed personal identity was tied to continuity of consciousness, and Derek Parfit, who viewed personal identity as psychological connectedness and continuity. Parfit crystalizes this as follows: "If some future person would be uniquely psychologically continuous with me as I am now, and this continuity would have its normal cause, enough of the same brain, this person would be me" ("We are not Human Beings" 32). This approves the Lokean view of personal identity against animalists who believe brain transplant is similar to liver's transplant. Personal identity is not identity of the whole body but, merely, identity of that part of the body—which, contingently, is the brain—which is the central organ controlling memory, character and personality (Noonan 18).

Furthermore, as we read, Kureishi uses his literary talent to capture our attention on how it is possible wake up in a new body. Adam waking up after the transplantation is similar to a radio analogy in which the brain is a remarkable aerial or receiver. He regains consciousness as follow:

> This semi-sleep continued. Somehow, I became aware that I was without my body. It might be better to say I was suspended between bodies: out of mine and not yet properly in another. I was assaulted by what I thought were images but which I realized were really bodily sensations, as if my life were slowly returning, as physical feeling. I had always taken it for granted that I was a person, which was a good thing to be. But now I was being reminded that first and foremost I was a body, which wanted things (35).

Using a radio analogy to describe Adam's brain as it produces consciousness suggests that self may transcend the body, functioning as a configuration within the brain that receives signals from an enigmatic source. Our brains are fascinating indeed, they are the most complex piece of matter in the universe. This universe is supposed to be conscious by some philosophers, notably those who embrace panpsychism.

The universe being conscious is not as extravagant a hypothesis for panpsychists. Physics is just mathematical structure, and there must be something that underlies that structure, something that "breathes fire into the equations," as Stephen Hawking put it (Gleiser). Philosopher Philip Goff argues that it is a conscious mind that "breathes fire into the equations' (Ibid). This has the advantage of explaining fine-tuning. We may therefore understand Adam's identity this way. Without a signal, the radio (brain) will not work. Consciousness depends on the

brain for operation just as we need a lamp for light. The brain is the processor and receiver. The body is a mere vehicle and a machine with a ghost inside. If the body provides the platform for experiencing the world, the brain plays a crucial role in constructing our sense of self. In short, this suggests a non-physical aspect to identity, potentially agreeing with dualist views. So, transplanting Adam's brain (receiver) into a new body (different components) could be seen as 'fine-tuning' the radio to a new frequency. While the core configuration (self) might remain.

To conclude this part, within a dualistic framework, in which the body is regarded as a mere vehicle of the person, or a carrier of the brain, Adam's personal identity is persisting through time. Bodily continuity is not necessary. Besides, the Cartesian principle 'I think, therefore I am' can be applied to Adam as he has the ability to think, reflect, respond, and above all to use the pronoun "I". In short, the instances discussed in this article demonstrate that Adam's posthuman condition does not suspend his identity; instead, it amplifies the philosophical paradox at the core of the posthuman debate: the self as both mutable and enduring. Through memory, narrative, and reflexive language, Adam inhabits the body of a stranger while maintaining the voice of someone intimately familiar—himself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our exploration of Hanif Kureishi's The Body has delved into the complex question of personal identity. The narrative compels us to confront the boundaries between self and flesh. We tried to provide adequate evidence that leans heavily towards the brain as the architect of our identity. Adam's memories, his capacity for reason, and his persistent sense of self, all transcend the confines of his new body.

Using the novel as a thought experiment, we have encountered the terrain of Materialist philosophy, where the brain is the "hard drive" storing the essence of who we are. Locke's emphasis on memory and Parfit's concept of memory and psychological continuity resonate with Adam's experience. Borrowing insights from Ricœur, Dennett, Humphrey and Bakhtin also helped in understanding the nebulous nature of personal identity. Adam's exploration of his new body raises questions about the role of physicality in shaping the sense of who we are. Perhaps the answer lies in a symphony, rather than a singular note. Our identity might be a harmonious interaction between brain, body, and experience where the brain conducts the orchestra. Ultimately, The Body served a laboratory where the enduring power of literature can help illuminating the mysteries of our existence, reminding us that the greatest explorations are the journeys within.

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Blood and Blossoms: The Symbolic Power of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*

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Abstract This research examines the symbolic meaning of the red sorghum fields in Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum*, illustrating their importance as a symbol of survival, resistance, and cultural heritage. The research discusses how the novel blends historical events with highly personal accounts, depicting the horrors of war, the strength of human nature, and the unbreakable bond between humans and their country. With an appeal to elements of magical realism and non-chronological narration, the novel establishes the sorghum fields both as a conflict zone and refuge, exemplifying the oppositionality of ruin and renewal. Examining the aspects of literary methodology and thematic discourse, the article points out that the novel engages China's restless past and is concerned with the persistence of cultural identity. Finally, this analysis highlights the book's contribution to world literature since it presents an alternative understanding of memory, history, and the human spirit.

Keywords magical realism; Chinese Literature; historical narrative; Mo Yan; symbolism

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Introduction

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* is a leading novel in world literature due to its exploration

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of issues that affect all human beings, such as survival, love, war, and resistance (Dar, 2018; Xiao, 2023; Huang, 2010; Luo, 2024). The manner in which the novel portrays the violence of war, the resilience of the human spirit, and the profound connection of human beings with the land resonates with readers across the globe. Mo Yan's use of magical realism, along with his richly rooted conventions of storytelling, makes him comparable to Latin American literary giants such as Gabriel García Márquez (Masia, 2015; Inge, 1989; Ding, 2000; Zhang, 2011). His work, therefore, contributes to the world literary canon in that it provides an alternative perception of history and memory based on China's unique sociopolitical context.

Born in Gaomi, Shandong Province in 1955 as Guan Moye (管谟业) by birthname, Mo Yan spent his early years in a countryside environment that had a deep influence on his writings. He endured difficult living, having survived famine, political turmoil, and the stern institutions of Maoist China. Mo Yan looks back on those days in his Nobel Prize lecture, where he says:

> Perhaps I should write about something other than hunger in this brief story of my life, but whenever I think back to my childhood, I cannot avoid scenes of hunger; they are engraved on my memory (Mo Yan, 2012).

These experiences influenced his profound insight into the plight of common people, which later on became a unifying theme in his works. Having joined the People's Liberation Army in 1976, Mo Yan was able to study literature and compose fiction. His writing career took flight in the 1980s with *Red Sorghum* (1986) making him world-famous. As a writer, Mo Yan is noted for weaving together magical realism, history, and social comment, and often drawing on folklore, myth, and unconventional narrative methods to represent Chinese history and the survival of humankind (Chan, 2011, Moran, 1999).

Mo Yan's novels, especially *Red Sorghum*, illustrate his skills at interweaving personal memory and collective history. His novels typically portray the strength of people immersed in the flow of political and social change. His narrative method, just like William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, reflects a blend of grotesque realism, mythic elements, and stark historical precision (Wang, 2014). Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* trilogy, consisting of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995) and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006), demonstrates his expertise in storytelling that weaves mythic elements together with the stark realities of war, famine, and revolution. His skills in crafting realistic, multi-level stories have seen him become

one of the leading voices in contemporary Chinese literature (Akhavan and Zohdi, 2015), with his final achievement being named a Nobel laureate in 2012.

The *Red Sorghum* is a panoramic, multi-generational novel which mixes history, legend, and individual memory. The narrator remains unknown, and he narrates the turbulent lives of his grandparents, Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, in the rural area of Gaomi, Shandong Province. The novel chronicles Yu Zhan'ao, a bandit-turned-guerrilla, as he endures war, romance, and survival during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. The fields of sorghum are simultaneously a battlefield and a refuge, representing resistance, resilience, and the cyclical nature of existence. Mo Yan's disjointed and non-chronological narration captures the sense of war anarchy while interspersing strongly personal accounts of love, deception, and martyrdom (Lin, 2023).

The novel is composed in the style of connected episodes alternating between past and present, and richly depicting rural Chinese society. Dai Fenglian, the protagonist's grandmother, is a hard and passionate woman who defies convention, mirroring the uncontrolled character of the sorghum fields. Her relationship with Yu Zhan'ao is one of passion and conviction, and resonates with broader themes of rebellion and survival running throughout the book. In between, war's stark reality is portrayed vividly through gruesome pictures of cruelty, repression, and acts of bravery. The sorghum fields, at times green and verdant but smeared with blood and burned in the heat of combat, reflect the rise and fall of the fortunes of the characters and the nation.

Most strikingly, the *Red Sorghum* is a rich-textured exploration of history, memory, and the durability of human experience. Refracting the ordeal of a single family, Mo Yan presents us with an enriched narrative of China's bitter but unyielding passage through the 20th century. The combination of magical realism, grotesque details, and historical introspection in the novel qualifies it as a must-read of Chinese literature (Sung, 2021), both revealing the beauty and ugliness of life in wartime China. The red sorghum plant that pervades every page of the novel is itself a symbol of resilience, of passion, of the unyielding will of the Chinese.

The red sorghum plant, which pervades the novel, is rich in metaphorical significance. Scholar Shelley W. Chan in *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan* (2011) observes that "Mo Yan's landscapes often act as more than just a setting; they embody the struggles and spirits of the characters who inhabit them" (78). Equally, Li Zhinan in *Chinese Literary Landscapes* (2014) points out that "the sorghum fields in Mo Yan's fiction are more than mere vegetation; they pulse with the life force of the people, absorbing their suffering and joy alike" (95).

This essay analyzes how the sorghum fields have come to symbolize resistance to oppression, having intense passion and vitality, and as witnesses to China's historical woes. Through the thematic preoccupations of the novel, this research identifies Mo Yan's employment of nature as a narrative tool to capture the Chinese people's struggles and resilience.

Red Sorghum has been translated into numerous languages, disseminating its influence and availability to a global audience. Howard Goldblatt, the chief English translator of Mo Yan, has been instrumental in making his novels accessible to Western readers, initiating a global literary debate of Chinese history and culture. The adaptation of the novel into the award-winning 1987 film by Zhang Yimou cemented its significance even more, rendering Mo Yan's work accessible to an even wider readership. Red Sorghum remains relevant in its ability to bridge the gap between historical fiction and literary craftsmanship, making it a required reading in Chinese literature as well as international literature.

The Sorghum as a Symbol of Resistance

One of the most prominent themes of *Red Sorghum* is resistance. The sorghum fields are the setting for warfare against Japanese invaders, a site of refuge and defiance. The resilient plant, adapted to hardships, reflects the unbreakable spirit of the characters, especially Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, who resist both foreign invasion and social oppression. Lovell in *The Politics of Cultural Capital* (2006) avers "the guerrilla war in Red Sorghum brings the fields alive as a battleground, survival and nature's resistance being intertwined" (102). Jinhua Dai in *Gender and Narrative in Modern China* (2008) goes on to reason that "the red sorghum, soaked in the martyrs' blood, is rendered a sacred presence in Mo Yan's narrative, representing the inextricability of land and struggle" (213). The red sorghum is thus introduced as a source of nourishment and perseverance in the novel, once again reflecting the power symbolized by the plant. Mo Yan's depiction of the guerrilla war in the fields of sorghum highlights the interlink between the earth and the war for freedom, indicating that the people's survival lies trapped within the strength of the earth.

The resistance in *Red Sorghum* (hereby abbreviated *RS*) is not confined to physical strife but also found in the social and cultural context. The sorghum plant itself, an emblem of the land, is also closely identified with the resilience and identity of the Chinese. As the protagonist's grandmother, Dai Fenglian, guards in the field, defending her plantation, she reflects not just maternal love but also Chinese resilience. "She stood in the sorghum, and I could hear the wind whispering

her name—she had become one with the land, a figure of strength" (*RS*, 142). Here, the sorghum is not just a plant but also an emblem of the people's bond with the land. Dai Fenglian's affection for the land is an expression of a deeper cultural resistance, one rooted in the preservation of tradition and memory against foreign incursion.

With the unfolding of *RS*, the fields of sorghum are laid bare to represent the cultural continuity of the folks in the context of war and violence. It is also noted by Meaghan Morris in *The Politics of Identity and Memory in Contemporary China* (2010) who states, "The red sorghum fields are both memory and resistance, keeping alive the stories of those who fought even when their physical lives were taken away" (134). Here, the soil is not only a place of resistance against the Japanese but a storehouse of cultural memory where earlier struggles are traced out in the earth so that the spirit of resistance remains. The function of the sorghum fields as repositories of culture becomes an important element of the novel's resistance, as the characters' narratives are interwoven into the very fabric of the land itself, which persists to grow and flourish in the midst of destruction.

The red sorghum fields, therefore, are a battlefield not only for survival but also for the preservation of heritage. This dual purpose of the fields both as symbolic and real space of resistance is reflected when Mo Yan avers, "The Japanese invaders attempted to nullify everything we loved, but they were never able to lay waste to the soil. The sorghum remained, like a scar on our hearts, obstinate" (*RS*, 205). This is a turning point in the novel where the importance of the land as both individual and communal struggle is emphasized. While the people are pushed to the brink of despair, the land is there, a living testament to their defiance. In the same context, Julia Lovell, interpreting Mo Yan's writing in *The Politics of Cultural Capital* (2006), makes a point about "the resourcefulness of land and people alike in Red Sorghum presenting a moving image of how forms of resistance come to be held together by historical and cultural continuities rather than by survival itself" (110). The sorghum, therefore, is not just a background to war violence but a potent symbol of the struggle to maintain identity, memory, and the will to resist.

The sorghum's toughness is reflective of the toughness of the characters themselves. Yu Zhan'ao, for example, is a symbol of resistance, his body and spirit as hard and unyielding as the sorghum crops. His fight against Japanese occupation is both physical and psychological, one that identifies him strongly with the earth and the land. "Yu Zhan'ao fought not just for survival, but for the soul of our people. His strength, like the sorghum, was earthborn" (*RS* 168). The connection between Yu and the fields of sorghum is more than coincidental; it is deep, near-spiritual,

and it points to the fact that his struggle is not just for himself but for his people and their culture to survive. Mo Yan's writing is replete with such metaphors, where the literal and the symbolic are conflated, illustrating how deeply rooted the characters are in the land and their struggle in general.

In her analysis of Mo Yan's writings, Esther Yau in *Postcolonial Landscapes in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (2011) notes that the symbolic role of the sorghum may also be understood as a reclamation of a story that the conquerors had attempted to suppress. "The sorghum fields, in Mo Yan's depiction, are a defiance against the erasure of history, a refusal to let the oppressor dictate the memory of the land" (94). What is being suggested here is how the sorghum itself acts as not merely a material form of resistance but resistance to forgetfulness of past generations' tribulations and agony. In so much symbolic capital placing in the sorghum, Mo Yan ensures that people's memories of the resistance and the land become permanently embedded in the earth.

As Mo Yan's story progresses, the sorghum fields remain the site of contradictions in resistance. The earth is not only the site of conflict, but also of creation and rebirth. "In the midst of destruction, new life grew from the red soil. The sorghum was weapon and promise" (*RS* 249). This dual life of the sorghum both as war ammunition and sign of renewal reflects the richness of the fight for resistance. The actors fight to survive, but to ensure as well that the land—and the cultural and religious history it represents—is preserved. Therefore, the sorghum fields are a reminder in itself of hope, symbolizing that no matter if there is war and devastation, the earth itself gives hope for rebirth and endurance. In the words of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), this process of revival in the midst of destruction can be understood as an exercise in "strategic hybridity," in which "the oppressed create new meanings and forms out of the very elements that have been used to oppress them" (175). The sorghum thus stands as a symbol for this hybrid resistance wherein old wounds manifest new identities and hope.

Furthermore, the history of *RS* itself accentuates the symbolic meaning of the sorghum fields. During the Japanese occupation, many of the local villagers and farmers were forced to be part of guerrilla resistance forces. The sorghum fields, often used as hiding places and locations of strategic ground, remind the Chinese of their everyday struggle. "The sorghum fields were more than a mere setting for conflict; they were the arena where life was experienced and lost" (Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital* 105). For here, in this sense, the sorghum fields attain a sort of mythic status, as literal and metaphorical battleground. It is in these fields that the characters face the brutalities of war, but it is also where they discover

strength, solidarity, and the will to live. The fields are presented as a place where history is written in blood, but also where the hope of survival, unity, and cultural survival is fostered.

Overall, Mo Yan's *RS* uses the sorghum fields not just as the setting of the novel but also as a powerful symbol of resistance. By its representation of guerrilla war, social repression, and cultural continuity, the novel establishes the sorghum as a symbol of the resilience and perseverance of the Chinese people. The obstinacy of the sorghum also symbolizes the obstinacy of the characters who resist to preserve their land, their heritage, and their freedom. Red sorghum being a symbol of survival as well as uprising, it is a sacrosanct symbol of the intertwined quality of land, conflict, and identity. Mo Yan's utilization of the fields of sorghum emphasizes resistance as both concrete and symbolic act, rooted in the earth of the land, and mirrored by the resilience of the people. The sorghum is itself a symbol of the human condition, its root system deep in the ground, unshaken despite the damage of war and the passage of time.

Passion and Vitality in the Sorghum Fields

RS's sorghum fields are not just about resistance for they are full of strong emotions and feelings as well. In the novel, the romantic love affairs and acts of defiance happen in the fields, where the characters experience strong feelings of love, yearning, and the vital energies of life. Mo Yan himself has claimed that "the red sorghum plant symbolizes the vigor and unbreakable will of the Chinese people, as does the passion and love of its characters" (Mo Yan, Nobel Lecture, 2012). The interconnection of the land to the emotional depth of the characters underscores how the sorghum fields are not just a place of conflict but also a platform where deep, sometimes raw emotions unfold. The red sorghum color not only brings to mind bloodshed and war but also symbolizes the smoldering passion and raw feelings of the protagonists. The characters' encounters in the fields are described with a sensuality that testifies to the force of human passion in the midst of war's violence and chaos.

Scholar Howard Goldblatt, Mo Yan's chief English translator, explains in *Chinese Literature Today* (2013) how "Mo Yan's prose, heavy with sensual imagery, employs the sorghum fields as a canvas for human desire and struggle" (47). The lush imagery brings to life the primal quality of the land and its people. The sorghum fields are presented as a fertile soil not just for war but for life in all its manifestations—sexual, emotional, and physical. The crudeness of the feelings felt in these fields is mirrored in the affair between the protagonist's grandmother,

Dai Fenglian, and her lover, Yu Zhan'ao. Their whirlwind affair occurs against the historical context of Japanese occupation, mirroring how love, like the sorghum, can survive and thrive in the darkest of circumstances. "In the red sorghum fields, our love was like the soil beneath our feet, rooted deeply, untouchable, and alive" (*RS* 103). This is a reference to how love, holy or sin, can grow in a place marked by beauty and violence.

The red sorghum fields thereby serve as a metaphorical field in which the erotic and the tragic are inexorably interwoven. As Kang Liu maintains in *Narrative and Politics in Mo Yan's Fiction* (2015), "Mo Yan constructs a world where the erotic and the tragic are inseparable, where the blood of battle blends with the blood of passion, creating a fertile and fatal landscape" (89). This duality is evident in how characters within the novel go hand-in-hand with love and violence equally, both within personal relationships and in their greater war against foreign forces. At a climactic moment, Dai Fenglian's fiery defiance of both invader and traditional constraint is found in the sorghum fields, illustrating how the two can work together. "She rushed through the sorghum with fire of passion burning in her heart, leaving the marks of blood and love behind" (*RS* 137). The sorghum now symbolizes both fertility and destruction, as the lives of the characters are full of both love and sacrifice.

Aside from its symbolic identification with passion, the sorghum fields also depict the intense vitality of the land itself, which is reflected in the people's vitality. The sorghum flourishes under miserable conditions, as do the characters in the face of habitual threat by violence. Mo Yan's detailed descriptions of the fields highlight the intense life force that permeates both the land and its human population. "The fields of sorghum appeared to breathe with life of their own, each stalk throbbing in the beat of the earth" (*RS* 94). This imagery creates the effect that the earth is alive and is actively taking part in the emotional and physical battles of the characters. The characters' feelings are also heavily intertwined with nature, further instilling the notion that the liveliness of the earth reflects the liveliness of human struggles and desires.

This feeling of energy is also present in the turbulent relationships that develop in the sorghum fields. Love, lust, and loss are intensely experienced in this place, typically in the form of both exciting and heartbreaking ways. In the relationship between Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao, their love is marked by urgency and passion that seem to be fueled by the violence and turbulence around them. Mo Yan puts this sense of passionate rebellion in a single emotive sentence: "In the war and slaughter, our love was even brighter than the fire of blazing sorghum" (*RS* 163). The redness

of the sorghum that is similar to their love causes the idea to be formed that passion, such as the sorghum, is both durable and all-devouring. The fields are a metaphor for the way in war love is magnified, driven by an energy that sustains and destroys.

In the larger context of the novel, the sorghum fields symbolize the cycle of life, death, and resurrection. The fields' fertility reminds us that life continues to exist even in the face of devastation. The feelings of the characters, their acts of love and defiance, are not independent of the land but are a part of a larger cycle of survival and resurrection. Mo Yan illustrates how "The sorghum, streaked with blood from war, grows on, its reddish stalks thrusting up as if to cry out that life goes on" (*RS*, 221). This is a description which means that life and passion don't evaporate during war and hardship. The sorghum is not only a symbol of agricultural abundance but also a symbol of emotional and physical resilience, flourishing in the midst of the violence and conflicts that define its life. Sorghum fields are, therefore, not only a symbol of survival but also a symbol of a cycle of spiritual and emotional regeneration, where love in all its forms is a necessary part of the struggle to live.

This energy also finds expression in the characters' individual acts of rebellion and desire. In the case of Dai Fenglian, her sexual freedom is depicted as a subversive act of freedom, an act of resistance against both the oppressors and the patriarchal world she lives in. As scholar Christopher Lee writes in *Gender and Power in Contemporary Chinese Fiction* (2014), "Mo Yan's construction of female sexuality in *Red Sorghum* is not so much an articulation of personal want as an affirmation of agency within a context of patriarchal violence and oppression" (112). The sorghum fields are where Dai Fenglian and the other protagonists transgress the limits placed upon them, representing the intersection of individual passion with higher orders of resistance. It is here, in how Fenglian's sexual relationship with Yu Zhan'ao is both an instant of individual resistance and an expansion of the universal struggle for freedom and autonomy during the period of occupation.

In addition, the sorghum fields, as Mo Yan presents them, are the conflation of life and death. The raw physicality of love and sex in the novel is set against the horror of war, illustrating how passion can create as well as destroy. "In the fields, love and violence are indistinguishable. The earth is soaked with both" (*RS* 191). Blood of war tints the soil, but blood of passion also. The intertwining of life and death within fields of sorghum speaks of a cyclical view of human life, in which every creation is bound to be succeeded by destruction, and vice versa. This is also discussed in the works of leading scholar Yomi Braester, who clarifies in *The Politics of Modern Chinese Literature* (2011) that Mo Yan "uses the imagery of fertility and rot to demonstrate how human relations are necessarily shaped by

historical forces, where violence and love cannot be disentangled" (145).

Evidently, the sorghum fields in RS are more than a backdrop for the novel's action; they are a throbbing, living manifestation of passion, energy, and the uncontainable forces of life. Mo Yan uses the sorghum not only to represent the struggle to survive of the characters but also to illustrate the ferocity of human emotions—love, lust, and rebellion—amidst the violence and suffering of war. The fertility of the sorghum crops, under constant attack by the forces of destruction, symbolizes the ever-present liveliness of the characters' energies and their determination to fight not only the external invaders but also the limitations of society. The fields are a setting where life and death exist together, where brutality and love cannot be separated, and where the naked forces of nature symbolize the unconquerable will of those who struggle to live, to love, and to survive. Mo Yan's richly sensual account of the red sorghum, with a touch of tragedy and vitality, transcends terrain to become a key symbol within his novel to symbolize the complex intermingling of desire, resistance, and survival.

The Sorghum Fields as Historical Witnesses

The red sorghum paddies of *RS* also stand witness as mute witnesses to China's tumultuous past, from war and political turbulence to intergenerational conflict. The novel spans several decades and chronicles how the land drinks people's blood and tears. "History in Red Sorghum is not only told but written into the land itself, making the fields a storehouse of collective memory" (Zhao, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 135). Mo Yan's description of the fields as historical witnesses implies that the landscape is not a passive witness but an active participant in the survival narrative. The notion that the land carries the resonance of its people's experiences, both happy and unhappy, raises the sorghum fields from the status of a setting to a symbol for history itself—an inerasable one at that but constantly remolded.

Yu Sun in *Rewriting the Nation: Memory and History in Mo Yan's Works* (2016) affirms this by citing that "the battered landscape of Mo Yan's sorghum fields serves as a substitute history book, one penned with the pain and tenacity of the people" (154). Sun points out here how the fields are not just a metaphor for what happened in the past but a means to comprehend collective memory. The physical change of the fields—colorful and green during times of peace, to be destroyed by war—metaphorizes the receding tides of Chinese history, where advancement is always followed by annihilation. The war scars and the survival marks are inscribed on the very ground itself so that the history of China is not just recorded in books but also

in the landscape.

The use of fragmented narration by Mo Yan to describe the red sorghum fields adds to their significance as historical witnesses. The broken narrative structure facilitates the blending of the past and the present and implies that history is not progressive but repetitive. The narrator, the grandson, reminisces on the tales that his grandmother used to tell him about the war-torn days she experienced. "The tales of my grandmother, which she shared with me and those I now possess within myself, are such as the sorghum which rises in the fields, perpetually sprouting anew and again, however often it is mown" (*RS* 179). This imagery highlights how history keeps repeating itself, and how the land continues to be a repository of generations' stories and strife.

Furthermore, the sorghum fields are not merely a backdrop to private and public drama—their role is that of actors in the making of history. As the novel traces its path along the story, the fields are transformed from a site of cultivation to that of ruthless war. During the attack by the Japanese, the fields turn into a site of battle, drenched with the blood of both soldiers and civilians. "The sorghum, bathed in blood, developed taller and stronger, as was our resistance more resolute with each defeat" (*RS* 132). It shows how the earth testifies not just to the material wounds of war but also to the rise of resistance and resilience of the people. The growth of the sorghum during the bloodshed is symbolic of the Chinese people's resilience, whose spirit continues to endure despite the violence that they are subjected to.

So, the sorghum fields are the circular movement of history. The fields, which flourish after each harvest, are again and again ruined by violence and war only to recover. This process of birth and destruction reflects the political history of China, where cycles of war are traditionally followed by recovery and reconstruction. "Every step I took through the sorghum was a step through time, every grain of earth a signpost to those who had been before" (*RS* 144). The earth, therefore, is not so much a witness but a living witness to the people's past, holding in it both the ruin of war and the promise of renewal.

The historical relevance of the sorghum fields is more than just their involvement in the Japanese invasion. The novel's generation-long narrative shows how the events of the past have a long-lasting impact on subsequent generations. The narrator's personal relationship with his grandmother and her tales is the link between the historical woes of the past and the changing national identity. As Dai Fenglian tells her story, she points to the power of memory and how it helps to create the future. "What we remember is written in the soil, in the growth of the

sorghum that never forgets" (*RS*, 183). This assertion emphasizes the fact that history, as it is transmitted from generation to generation, is not a fixed thing but a living one and one that is constantly reinterpreted by those who bear its memory.

Mo Yan's choice of dwelling on the personal histories of everyday people, and not exclusively political leaders or historic figures, breaks with traditional conceptions of history. The history of peasants, guerrilla combatants, and farmers living among the sorghum fields constitutes a counter-narrative to China's official history. The sorghum fields, as a physical representation of the people's ordeal, bring home the significance of personal memory in the making of national history. "The sorghum contains the stories of those who perished namelessly, their offering incorporated into the very tissue of the earth" (*RS* 211). This indicates that history, as written in the country, is not the property of victors or the strong but of ordinary individuals who have suffered the most from war.

Also, the role of sorghum fields as history witnesses calls for contemplation on the manner in which historical accounts are constructed and preserved. The fields are not a location of old suffering but are also a terrain where new accounts are being constantly written. Through identifying the land as a repository of memory, Mo Yan overcomes the idea that history lies outside of the people and places it squarely within the people and land. The fields, as physical and symbolic locations, hold within them the memories of war, resistance, survival, and loss. "History is not something that is told; it is something that happens, something that lives in the soil and in the blood" (*RS* 221). The novel herein argues that history is not a static narration of what has occurred but a living and dynamic power that asserts itself in the future and the present.

History is also cyclical as it relates to an image of survival through memory. As the sorghum fields will be renewed in each harvest, similarly the memories of the people get transferred from one generation to another. Mo Yan's *RS* is thus an exercise on how history does not just happen to be remembered and written about in official papers or books, but in the very soil itself, and in people's ordinary narratives. The fields, much like the people, last. They bear the memories of what was lost, yet they themselves symbolize possibility and promise of things to come, as if indicating that no matter the huge losses, life continues to germinate and recollection endures. The sorghum fields themselves are, in effect, a living witness to the resilience of the human spirit in the teeth of historical turmoil.

Accordingly, *RS*'s sorghum fields are strong witnesses of history who put the people's collective memory in the very shape of the earth. From transforming from an image of abundance into one ruined through war and into a landscape for renewal

again, Mo Yan draws the repeating dynamics of history as well as human resilience through trials. The fields, dripping with blood and yet constantly renewing themselves, serve as an archive of living history, storing the suffering, tenacity, and histories of previous generations. By locating the sorghum fields as witness to history, Mo Yan problematizes conventional notions of history, compelling readers to think about how memory is transmitted across generations and inscribed on the earth so that the martyrdom of common people will never be lost.

The Sorghum Fields as a Reflection of Chinese Identity and Cultural Memory

In *RS*, Mo Yan also uses the sorghum fields as a powerful metaphor of Chinese culture and national memory. The fields that overcome war, conflict, and adversity symbolize Chinese cultural resistance and determination despite both foreign and internal threats. The novel takes us on a journey of a series of chaotic decades, from the civil war to the invasion of the Japanese, and thus the red sorghum fields bear witness to the sequence of events that constitute the identity of the nation. And as the sorghum is renewed and renewed in cycles of renewal and devastation, it represents the resilience of the Chinese people and their capacity to survive and emerge victorious in the midst of offending violence and dislocation. The farms, in their ruggedness, reflect the rugged nature of the land and the evolution of the country. As Maurice Halbwachs posits in *Collective Memory* (1992), "Memory is a social phenomenon, shaped and reshaped by the groups who pass it down through generations" (52). The above notion is exemplified in the novel's representation of the land as a container of cultural memory and resilience.

The novel emphasizes the position of landscape as a place of history and memory. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), contends that "time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (84). This is consistent with how the sorghum fields are not just a backdrop but a dynamic participant in the historical consciousness of the novel. "The sorghum was like us, having been planted deep in the earth, going through everything and yet reaching for the sky" (*RS* 102), a line which symbolizes the people's indomitable spirit and general survival in a world of turmoil.

Sorghum fields also become a landscape for storing and passing on cultural memory. Through the novel, people's lives and histories are not separable from the land, and histories that get passed down are transmitted through oral traditions. These stories—of sacrifice, resistance, survival, and love—are stitched into the communal memory of the Chinese people. As Jan Assmann explains in *Cultural*

Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination (2011), "Cultural memory is not history as such, but it is history transformed into myth, symbols, and meaning that shape collective identity" (36). Mo Yan's generation-spanning narrative, as the narrator looks back at his grandmother's life, underlines the decisive role of memory in shaping Chinese identity. "The old tales are spun into the very fabric of the land; they will not perish, for they live in the sorghum that springs from the earth of memory" (*RS* 117). This passage highlights how cultural memory is beyond time and space, with the land serving as a storehouse for past struggles and victories, ensuring they are never lost.

These oral accounts and the strong connection between land and identity imply that cultural memory is more than just a sequence of history but one which is being reformulated and refashioned with the everyday life of the people. The fields of sorghum thus represent a warehouse of these lives, bearing history as well as individual narrative in itself. Benedict Anderson remarks in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006) that "the past is not simply remembered; it is constantly reconstructed in ways that serve the present" (204). This is evident in the way Mo Yan portrays history in terms of the fields, both standing for personal and collective struggles. The narrative of Dai Fenglian, for instance, is closely connected to the land, and her agony and struggle against the Japanese aggressors are inseparable from the sorghum fields. Her own sacrifices become a part of collective cultural memory, reiterating the relationship between individual lives and national discourse. "The earth keeps the histories of the dead and the living, and the sorghum blooms every year, reminding them of their struggle" (*RS* 132).

Moreover, the sorghum fields in Red Sorghum symbolize the complex web of the subject and the country, illustrating how individual stories and experiences intersect with broad historical and cultural narratives. Hayden White posits in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987) that "Every representation of the past has ideological underpinnings, shaping our understanding of history itself" (21). This confirms that Mo Yan's novel never portrays history in a neutral context but organizes national identity through individual and collective struggles. "On the ground, our ancestors' blood was mixed with the soil, and the sorghum sown as our spirits did—firmer with every battle" (*RS*, 156). This statement is pointing to how the individual acts of insurrection and acts of sacrifice in the fields are interwoven with the act of national identity and the act of cultural preservation on a larger scale.

The connection of the people to the land is also emphasized through the

imagery of the red sorghum itself. The redness of the sorghum has the double meaning of both war's violence and bloodshed as well as survival's vitality and renewal. The fields, marked by both life and death, reflect the contradictions at the heart of Chinese identity—resilience amid destruction and the cyclical nature of history. Ban Wang states in *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (2004) that "Memory in modern Chinese literature often serves as a counter-history, challenging official narratives and restoring voices to the marginalized" (117). Here, Mo Yan's account of the sorghum fields not only commemorates historical adversity but also offers a counter-narrative historical consciousness in addition to formal records. "The sorghum was red, not from the light of the sun, but from the blood shed beneath it" (*RS* 142).

The fields of sorghum do represent, nonetheless, the cyclical process of cultural rebirth. As the fields are battered by war and yet grow from year to year, so the identity of Chinese is formed out of cycles of deconstruction and rebuilding. Mo Yan employs the repeated image of the sorghum growing again in new shoots after each harvest to symbolize how the Chinese, despite being severely traumatized by their own history of tragedy and brutality, can heal and survive. "Even after the Japanese left, the fields stood tall and thick, as if nothing had happened. The sorghum had learned to rise again" (*RS* 179). This regenerative quality of the sorghum is also a reflection of that of the Chinese people themselves, whose identity remains to regenerate and adapt in the face of the hardships which they have experienced.

Mo Yan also employs the sorghum fields to emphasize the theme of sacrifice in society, where the narratives of suffering and survival by individuals are integrated into the nation's larger narrative. "The history of this land is written in the blood of those who fought, died, and lived on it. We are all part of this endless struggle for meaning" (*RS*, 211). This quote emphasizes the notion that Chinese identity is neither fixed nor isolated but a dynamic and changing force created by the individual existence of the people and the overall national struggles that they undergo. The sorghum fields are the platform where the individual and national histories meet, a complicated network of connections that validate the importance of memory and identity in influencing the future.

Ultimately, the red sorghum fields in Mo Yan's RS are a deep metaphor for Chinese identity and cultural memory. Through the fields, Mo Yan underscores the circularity of history, the persistence of memory, and the endurance of both people and nations. By tying the earth to the existence of its people, Mo Yan suggests that cultural memory is not only passed through the printed page but exists in the

earth itself, that the stories, tribulations, and essence of the Chinese people endure generation by generation.

Conclusion

The red sorghum fields of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* are not only the backdrop for the events of the novel but also representation of resistance, passion, historical continuity, and cultural identity. In the nonsequential narrative of the novel, Mo Yan enacts the fields as witness to the tenacity and adversity of the Chinese people and discovers personal and national history in a deeply symbolic union. The red sorghum, a source of sustenance and bloodied field, represents the duality of human existence—war and love, creation and ruin. With the blending of history, folklore, and personal recollection, Mo Yan brings the fields to a representation of the endurance of human spirit.

As a symbol of resistance, the red sorghum fields illustrate how survival is organically bound to physical as well as cultural resistance. The fields are used to shield guerrilla warriors and serve as battlegrounds, further cementing their role as sites of suffering and heroism. The characters, especially Yu Zhan'ao and Dai Fenglian, derive strength from the land, reflecting the unbreakable will of those who resist oppression. Parallel to this, the fields are also a platform for romantic love, where human desire flourishes despite devastation. The contrast between war and romance reflects the intricacies of life in the novel, where beauty and violence cannot be separated.

Besides, the red sorghum fields are also a repository of history, carving the memories of the people who lived, fought, and died on them. Mo Yan's fragmented style of narration is a reflection of the way history has been passed down through the ages so that the toil of the past is never lost. The fields being described as living witnesses in the novel emphasizes the way the land holds memories of past struggles, further validating that history is not just recorded in books but also in the physical and cultural landscape. To this end, the red sorghum is not just a representation of China's history but also a reminder of the act of remembering, healing, and reconstructing.

At its essence, *Red Sorghum* presents the red sorghum fields as a powerful symbol of Chinese identity, power, and cultural memory. The novel teaches that survival is not only living in spite of hardships but also remembering the stories and traditions that define a people. Mo Yan's employment of the red sorghum as the overarching metaphor illustrates the recurring pattern of history, where there is always devastation before rebirth. In this symbol-rich setting, *Red Sorghum*

represents the embodiment of Chinese character—of war, of sacrifice, of passion, and of ardent love of the land.

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Spectacle and the Dilemma of Motherhood in *Feather Crowns*

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Abstract Bobbie Ann Mason's *Feather Crowns*, set against the backdrop of the social uproar caused by the birth and premature death of quintuplets in rural Kentucky, demonstrates the ethical pressures and psychological conflicts that arise when the otherwise private experience of motherhood is brought into the public eye. Taking Christie Wheeler's motherhood as the research object, this paper explores how spectacle culture and consumer culture hold the ethics of motherhood hostage at the turn of the 20th century and the maternal dilemma it triggers. The intervention of the spectacle reshapes Christie's perception of motherhood, forcing her into the ethical dilemmas regarding the handling of her quintuplets; while her gradual resistance to the mechanism of the spectacle reflects the awakening and reconstruction of the maternal identity. By presenting the erosion and oppression of motherhood by the spectacle culture, Mason reveals the intervention and rewriting of intimacy by public consumption, and points out that in the spectacle-dominated social landscape, individuals can still reclaim their proper subjectivity through ethical choices.

Keywords *Feather Crowns*; Bobbie Ann Mason; spectacle; motherhood; ethical dilemma

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Introduction

Motherhood is often assumed to be a natural, intimate, and ethically grounded

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identity, which seemingly insulated from the forces of consumption and spectacle. Yet the spectacularization of private life in modern culture demonstrates that maternal identity is far from immune to commodifying pressures. Bobbie Ann Mason's *Feather Crowns* offers a powerful examination of this collision. Set in early twentieth-century rural Kentucky, the novel recounts the extraordinary birth of quintuplets to Christie Wheeler, a young farm wife, and traces how a private miracle becomes an object of national fascination through expanding networks of mass media and commercial opportunism. As the story of the Wheelers circulates, spectacle becomes not merely a backdrop but a transformative force, which infiltrates the home, redefines family intimacy, and reconfigures Christie's understanding of what it means to a mother.

Previous scholarship has illuminated the novel's critique of consumer culture and small-town sensationalism, most notably Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong's analysis of how spectacle distorts the Wheelers' lives and reshapes the Southern community. While Armstrong has insightfully analyzed *Feather Crowns* as a critique of the culture of spectacle in small-town, her study concentrates primarily on the novel's social and communal dimensions. Building on her work, this article foregrounds the ethical dimension of Christie Wheeler's experience, showing how the spectacularization of the quintuplets not only distorts Southern community life but also destabilizes maternal identity itself. More specifically, this article will address the central ethical question raised by the novel: How does the spectacle of the quintuplets reshape, distort, and destabilize Christie's identity as a mother? and why do her life-and-death decisions emerge in such morally conflicted ways? Christie's maternal experience becomes a crucible in which competing forces, like love and grief, privacy and publicity, duty and display, collide under the weight of spectacle. The novel dramatizes one of the most ethically fraught situations a mother can face: when her children become objects of public consumption.

Therefore, the significance of *Feather Crowns* extends beyond its critique of sensationalized media culture. As Christie and her family become trapped in systems that commodify their story, the logic of consumption enters the intimate spaces of domestic life, reorganizing Christie's maternal identity around visibility, evaluation, and exchange. This study argues that Christie's contradictory responses constitute a narrative inquiry into the ethical instability of motherhood under spectacle. Accordingly, this paper examines the entanglement of spectacle and maternal ethics by addressing the following questions: What is the ethical environment of the spectacle? How does spectacle appropriate and redefine Christie's maternal identity? What does her conflicted subjectivity reveal about the pressures that early twentieth-

century consumer culture exerted on women's maternal roles? Methodologically, this article brings Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle into dialogue with Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism. While Debord and later cultural theorists illuminate how consumer capitalism converts private life into spectacle, Nie's framework foregrounds the ethical environment and moral dilemmas embedded in literary narratives. By reading *Feather Crowns* through this combined lens, this article repositions *Feather Crowns* as an extended meditation on the moral costs of turning motherhood into a public commodity, because Christie's maternal crisis is not only a sociological effect of spectacle culture but also an ethically charged struggle over love, grief and responsibility.

The Construction of Spectacle and the Reconfiguration of Maternal Identity

The formation of the spectacle is inseparable from its social and historical conditions. As Nie Zhenzhao proposes, "A premise for literary interpretation is to understand literature based on the ethical environment and the ethical context of its particular historical period" ("Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" 191). To understand how spectacle reshapes Christie's maternal identity, it is therefore essential to return to the historical and ethical milieu of *Feather Crowns*. The novel is set in a small Southern town at the turn of the twentieth century, a region often depicted as traditional and socially stagnant, since "most literary and historical depictions of the postbellum South emphasize its isolation from national trends in political, economic, and social development" (Matthew R. Hall 259). Yet the sudden national excitement surrounding the quintuplets suggests that the South is not simply "lagging behind." Rather, the cultural and technological shifts of the period create the very conditions necessary for spectacle to emerge. The intense public fascination with Christie's family indicates that the South is already entangled in the expanding circuits of modern consumption and mediated attention, making the construction of the spectacle not only possible but inevitable. Matthew R. Hall points out "national consumption patterns penetrated the region […] New South towns were not just important regional centers of industry and commerce. They were also places where southerners could and did glimpse, take part in, or consume the broader economic and cultural trends of late-nineteenth-century America" (260). Despite the aftershocks of the civil war and economic hardships, the southern society still yearns for all-round renewal at the spiritual level. This modernization drive is not solely dependent on external imposition but is inseparable from the active collaboration of local business elites in the south. As Jackson Lears concludes, "their (local business elites) rhetorical devotion to the 'Lost Cause'

and the supposed glories of the old order were the syrup that made the medicine of modernization go down" (145). Under the impetus of northern capital and the external cooperation of southern merchants, the south had already been involved in the national commercialization and modernization process at the turn of the 20th century, laying the historical foundation for the infiltration of the spectacle culture.

The intrusion of the newspaper *Hopewell Chronicle* marks the novel's first major conversion of private reality into spectacle. Mr. Jenkins from the *Hopewell Chronicle* is the first journalist who intrudes the Wheelers' house, saying "I just want to verify for myself that there was five babies born, so that I can inform our readers of this wondrous event" (103)[1], and only records a series of statistics: "What did they weigh? What hour were they born? What time did Dr. Foote get there?" (116-117) His insistence on quantifiable details reduces the complex emotional and physical labor of childbirth to a list of sensational facts. This fragmentation aligns with Debord's description of spectacular representation. "The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity a s a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at" (Debord 7). The newspaper's report exemplifies the fragmented views of reality, "the quintuplets were 'born to a simple country woman and her yeoman farmer husband'" (150). He even describes Christie's six rooms as a humble three-room abode (151). Here the spectacle constructs a world that is, in Debord's words, "a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving" (7): present in the public's imagination through the newspaper image, yet absent from the Wheelers' truth. These contents are not derived from on-site observations but are symbols constructed based on the stereotypical expectations of the southern countryside. As Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong states, "the reporter nonetheless writes the story with his 'tourist gaze'—to fit his expectations of a Kentucky farm […] Those aspects that do not correspond to the quintessential landscape he hopes to find are elided or adapted to fit expectations" (42). Thus, through journalistic discourse, the spectacle's first operation emerges clearly—the conversion of life into a consumable visual narrative.

It should be noted that the spectacle phenomenon reflects the essence of Western consumer culture, that is, to stimulate people's desires through the occurrence and dissemination of events. The consumer society creates a culture that affirms desires and indulgences. Desire is no longer the object of fear and

1 See Bobbie Ann Mason, *Feather Crowns*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. All references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in parentheses.

suppression; it has become the driving force for social reproduction and the foundation for promoting economic circulation. In the infinite affirmation of desires, the entire society has confused the distinction between desires and needs. When news of the birth of the quintuplets hit the front pages of various news outlets with the headline "MRS. WHEELER IS BLESSED WITH 5 QUINTUPLETS" (234), the private family event was immediately magnified into the national spotlight and quickly aroused the curiosity of readers, and the farm is swarming with tourists who travel to the farm by train from all directions. The media transformed private life into a commodity of spectacle to be consumed through constant replication and amplification.

If the newspaper coverage initiates the spectacularization of the Wheelers, the mayor's coronation ritual completes it by embedding the family within a public performance of civic authority. The mayor proclaims the Wheelers "the First Family of the city" and "Mother of the Year," declaring that "Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler have brought forth this eighth wonder of the world in the form of five healthy babies at one time" (149). By symbolically crowning Christie and James, he transforms their personal story into an affirming narrative of communal pride. This moment does not merely celebrate the event; it dictates the framework through which the public must interpret it. In line with Debord's assertion that "the spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification […] the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation" (7), the ceremony assigns meaning to the birth, rendering the Wheelers characters in a civic drama rather than agents of their own experience. The ritual thus becomes a form of social scripting, reinforcing hierarchical power by staging it as benevolent and unquestionable. Both the newspaper's sensational coverage of the quintuplets and the mayor's ceremonial coronation of Christie and James illustrate how *Feather Crowns* dramatizes what Guy Debord terms the society of the spectacle. As Debord argues, "the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7). In such a society, everyday life becomes increasingly mediated by images and symbolic performances that obscure lived experience.

Meanwhile, all individuals and groups that contribute to the dissemination, promotion and commercialization of the event, including media people, businesspeople, citizens and visitors, have become active participants in this popular culture, jointly promoting the generation and maintenance of the spectacle. As the spectacle was constantly magnified, the participation of local merchants became a key force in promoting the commercialization of the event. As Matthew R. Hall

suggests, “merchants had a central role on both national and local levels” (261). The scale of the event is rapidly magnified, and the addition of goods become an indispensable part of this spectacle. Just as depicted in the novel: “the merchants are getting together to provide supplies for you in this unusual time, Mrs. Wheeler. You’re going to need extra goods, and your neighbors, the citizens of Hopewell, are rallying to the cause” (149). This unity is not merely about mutual assistance among neighbors, but more like a carefully planned social performance. Under the guise of sympathy and assistance, the logic of business quietly intervenes, and social order is reconstructed by the discourse of spectacle. Merchants from all walks of life are taking active actions, trying to secure a place in this sudden public event: “They’re getting together a whole wagonload of goods—hams and meal and sugar and coal oil, and even furniture from MacNeill’s. Five little beds” (149). These goods are not merely daily necessities; they are symbols of the image of the products and the identity of the enterprises. They are packaged as expressions of care and dedication, but in fact, they form a spectacular display under the logic of capitalism.

Christie’s shifting maternal identity becomes most visible when consumer goods begin to arrive at her home, signaling the first major intrusion of the spectacle into her private world. The delivery of these items does not simply ease her family’s poverty. It initiates a narrative in which her motherhood is recast as an object of public investment, desire, and control. When she watches the wagons of merchandise pull in, filled with “Fancy goods, novelties like those in the wishbook. Maybe even playtoys and games and slates and books for school” (150), she is confronted with a domestic vision that is not of her own making. What appears before her is not the life she has longed for but an idealized scene produced by outside forces. The goods she “could never have afforded” highlight the class divide and, more importantly, expose her growing loss of agency within a system that turns her maternal life into a consumable story.

This moment marks Christie’s entrance into a consumer-driven narrative in which her identity as a mother is gradually shaped by visibility, novelty, and public fascination. The attention directed at the quintuplets does not arise from genuine compassion. It grows out of a desire to aestheticize and commodify the extraordinary. As the flow of commodities increases, these objects mediate the meaning of her experience and dilute the emotional depth of the quintuplets’ birth. A personal and sacred event is quietly transformed into something meant to be observed, discussed, and consumed by strangers. Christie becomes both a recipient of public generosity and a central figure in a national display. In this position, she is drawn into what resembles a collective wishbook, where her maternal role is used to

sustain social fantasies and commercial interests.

From the earliest days of the quintuplets' lives, the spectacle begins to redefine Christie's understanding of motherhood. Her identity is no longer grounded in intimate, private bonds but is shaped through material intrusions and cultural expectations introduced from the outside. The spectacle infiltrates the routines of her home, sets the conditions under which she performs her maternal responsibilities, and gradually alters her sense of herself. In this way, the spectacle becomes more than an external pressure. It acts as a force that transforms her maternal subjectivity into a public artifact, something to be admired, appropriated, and used for collective consumption.

The Intrusion of Spectacle and Maternal Ethical Dilemma

The intrusion of the tourist gaze converts the Wheelers' home from a protected domestic space into a site organized for public viewing. According to John Urry, the tourist gaze is directed to the features "which separate them off from everyday experience, such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary" (3). Thus, it reconfigures ordinary spaces into landscapes of spectacle, inviting visitors to collect visual experiences as if they were commodities. Christie realizes that home is no longer a safe haven but an exhibition hall under the gaze. She "felt paralyzed. The crowd filled her house […] She felt naked, like a picked chicken. And she was speechless. But the people supplied the talk" (166). The intrusion of spectacle not only redefines the meaning of domestic space but also places Christie in a profound ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma is "an unresolvable contradiction or conflict brought about by an ethical disorder to a character" (Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 258). Christie is caught between the tourist gaze and her motherhood. Her maternal responsibilities require privacy, care, and emotional presence, yet the spectacle demands exposure, accessibility, and visibility. The home, once the center of her maternal authority, becomes a stage upon which her identity is evaluated and consumed. What she confronts is not simply embarrassment or anxiety. She confronts a deeper erosion of her ability to act as a mother according to her own values. The visitors' presence forces Christie to negotiate between two competing ethical demands: the need to protect her children and the pressure to accommodate the public curiosity that overwhelms her household. Her silence, discomfort, and sense of nakedness reflect this struggle. She is caught between intimacy and exposure, care and display, maternal responsibility and public expectation. The spectacle reshapes her ethical landscape, leaving her increasingly uncertain about how to act and whom she is

acting for.

The establishment of donation fees and later a ticket system marks the institutionalization of curiosity, signaling a shift from communal interaction to market rationality. While financial pressure motivates James to adopt his uncle's donation-box idea, the transformation it initiates is structural rather than incidental. Christie is very uneasy about this potential risk, "I know we need the money. But they scared me, busting in here like that. I believe those train people would have busted the door down […] But that many people swooping in here around the babies—it ain't good for 'em." (171). Christie states "I don't know, Wad. "These babies ain't mules" (172). Her objection reveals her awareness of the risk that human beings will be reduced to economic functions. Once the babies become objects through which value circulates, their existence begins to operate within an economic logic that exceeds their biological reality. The donation box serves as the initial mechanism through which spectators convert affective responses into monetary offerings. When this evolves into a formal ticketing system, the family is fully integrated into the circuits of commodity culture. This institutionalization of visitation aligns with Guy Debord's concept of "vicious circle of isolation": "the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender 'lonely crowds'" (15). Under this logic, private life becomes a consumable attraction, subject to the market's control over access, value, and meaning. The ticketing system transforms the intimate family home into a site of regulated consumption, where spectators' engagement is no longer spontaneous but mediated through economic exchange. What begins as human curiosity and affective response is converted into a transactional relationship, demonstrating how the spectacle structures social interaction, objectifies private experience, and enforces a hierarchy between the observer and the observed.

Christie's maternal labor, such as feeding, soothing, and hosting visitors, becomes performative under the public gaze. She is no longer a private caregiver but a symbol, a spectacle whose actions are evaluated for both authenticity and entertainment. When she overhears men discussing finances, the narration underscores her new position: "This time she was the business" (172). The gaze now encompasses not only the quintuplets but also Christie herself, judging her clothing, demeanor, and emotional composure. In this process, her identity as a mother is reconstructed externally: she is cast as the idealized maternal figure through which spectators negotiate fantasies of rural life, fertility, and moral virtue. Urry's observation that the tourist gaze depends on display and difference reinforces this dynamic: "minimally there must be certain aspects of the place to be visited

which distinguish it from what is conventionally encountered in everyday life" (12). Christie's subjectivity is increasingly constrained, her interiority obscured, as her maternal identity is defined less by her own intentions or feelings than by her role within a commodified spectacle.

Christie's maternal dilemma intensifies with the tragic deaths of her quintuplets. Each child's passing forces her to make extraordinary ethical decisions, revealing how thoroughly the logic of spectacle has intruded upon traditional maternal values. After the death of the first child, Sam Mullins, the local funeral director, suggested using modern embalming techniques to preserve the body. As the quintuplets died one by one, Christie ultimately consents to have them embalmed. The children are placed in glass containers for permanent preservation. Christie agrees to embalm her quintuplets largely because of the overwhelming pressure of public attention and the demands of the spectacle. Each death is no longer a purely private tragedy; it becomes a matter of communal fascination, news coverage, and cultural expectation. The local funeral director proposes preservation techniques, and Christie, while instinctively protective of her children, feels compelled to consent. She recognizes that refusal might provoke criticism, pity, or even ridicule, and that the public already treats her children as objects to be displayed. Her agreement reflects a negotiation between her maternal instincts and the social forces reshaping her family's private grief into public spectacle. The maternal dilemma revealed here is profound. On one level, Christie wants to honor her children's lives and deaths with privacy, respect, and emotional authenticity. On another level, she is confronted with an external logic that treats her children as consumable objects and her grief as part of a public performance. Embalming the children ensures their preservation for the spectacle, but it also objectifies them permanently, turning a deeply personal maternal experience into an instrument of public consumption. Her consent, therefore, exposes the ethical tension between maternal love and societal expectation, demonstrating how the intrusion of spectacle can distort and compromise maternal agency.

Furthermore, their funeral, staged like a grand show with spectators consuming the tragedy, forces Christie to confront the painful reality that her children are being treated as objects rather than as human beings she is responsible for. "When those electric lights flickered on, Christie had had the impression that the deaths of her children were a grand show at an opera house. Amidst all the sorrow and tears surrounding her, she noticed the little beam of happiness on Thomas's face. And then she thought she saw it on everyone's face—a faint little tinge of excitement and wonder and privilege, as the town shared in a tragic drama" (265). Christie clearly

recognizes the essence of public viewing. The public's attention to the quintuplets is not out of genuine sympathy, but rather a kind of participatory consumption that seeks meaning and a sense of sublimity through the spectacle. This is exactly the tourist gaze, which "must be out of the ordinary. People must experience particularly distinct pleasures which involve different senses or are on a different scale from those typically encountered in everyday life" (Urry 12), as visitors observe the embalmed children as objects of fascination rather than subjects of mourning.

Despite this, when McCain proposed holding a traveling exhibition in the name of education, Christie still held a glimmer of rational hope. She and her husband readily agreed to the suggestion, "it would be for the public good if they could present the truth to the audiences in their own words, so that if such an event should hap- pen again the world would know what to expect" (304). She hopes to tell the true story through this exhibition to awaken the public's reflection on the essence of viewing behavior. In Christie's mind, exhibiting the quintuplets could serve a maternal purpose. By telling the story herself, she could protect the children's memory, assert some control over the narrative, and potentially guide the public toward understanding rather than mere consumption. Her consent reflects a complicated negotiation between preserving maternal authority and confronting the inevitability of public intrusion. However, she soon discovered that the essence of commercial exhibitions is not to disseminate knowledge or convey sadness, but rather to be a landscape machine that arouses curiosity, stimulates sensory stimulation and generates profits. It can be seen here that consumerism is not simply profit-inducing; it also satisfies human desires in the name of morality or education. When the boundaries between the desire for knowledge and the desire for curiosity become blurred, when the boundaries between private and public interests become ambiguous, consumerism has already put on the garb of morality and science and cleverly justified itself.

In this context, Christie's maternal intention to mediate the public gaze and protect her children's dignity is systematically undermined. The exhibition exposes the tension between private maternal care and the coercive logic of spectacle. Even as she acts in what she believes is the ethical interest of her children, the system of consumer display reconfigures her maternal identity, transforming her protective instincts into a performative role within the public spectacle.

Resistance of Spectacle and the Reclamation of Motherhood

The southbound exhibition represents the extreme consequences of consumer-driven spectacle, where private life, grief, and ethical significance are subordinated

to public curiosity. To her disappointment, at the first stop of the southbound exhibition, the Nashville Opera House, Christie is overwhelmed by the public gaze again. "The stage was hot and dark. When the curtain parted, a flood of light hit her face. Dimly, she could make out the audience, shrouded in darkness. Electric lights flickered along the side walls and above the stage. It felt so strange, to be in a windowless room, full of people, at night, with false lights beaming all over her. James was sitting far away from her, the babies a barrier between them" (326). The quintuplets in the glass bottle, along with their parents sitting on either side, form a highly materialized spectacle, becoming objects for people to look at. Under this cold light, the audience come forward in an orderly manner, observing carefully and commenting on the exhibits before them. This scene exemplifies the spectacle's social function, which "is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion consists primarily of the expansion of this particular sector of industrial production. The 'growth' generated by an economy developing for its own sake can be nothing other than a growth of the very alienation that was at its origin" (Debord 16). The audience's desire to watch overwhelms empathetic engagement, producing an alienating environment in which lives become consumable objects.

The touring exhibition intensifies Christie's maternal dilemma, but it also catalyzes the emergence of active resistance. The repetition of public scrutiny recalls her earlier experiences at home. As the spectators file past the embalmed quintuplets, "their casual utterances and their eagerness seemed so familiar. Christie was thrown back into the spring, when a multitude of strangers crowded around her bed, train passengers smothering her with their attention. She felt light-headed" (328). What she confronts here is not simply repetition but intensification. The babies, now "frozen in death as a wonder," become pure objects of display, stripped even of the fragile autonomy they possessed in life. Their material preservation in glass bottles renders their objectification total: they cannot resist, and Christie cannot protect them. As Debord writes, "The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires" (16). The spectators who move past the display exemplify this dynamic. Their desire to see overrides any possibility of ethical engagement. Their fascination paradoxically distances them not only from Christie's suffering but also from their own capacity for empathy; they consume the scene rather than inhabit it. This relentless viewing pressure drives Christie to the edge of psychological collapse. Confronted with the same extractive gaze that once invaded her domestic space,

now amplified by electric lights, stage settings, and institutional authorization,she erupts in a cry of anguish: “My babies was wooled to death—pure and simple, by people just like you. But now nobody can touch ’em” (328). Her outburst is an attempt to disrupt the spectators’ passive consumption, to force recognition of the harm their gaze has enacted. Yet no one responds. The crowd simply continues forward, their desire for spectacle overpowering any potential for moral reckoning. The silence that meets Christie’s accusation underscores the depth of their alienation: in the spectacle, the need to look overwhelms the ability to hear.

Christie’s reflection on the public’s behavior exposes the ethical limits of commodification and the failure of spectacle to promote understanding. She finally realized strongly that the exhibition not only failed to prompt the public to reflect on the consumption of wonders, but also exacerbated the secondary harm to children. During the later touring exhibition, she even raised a question, “But why don’t they listen? Yesterday Greenberry McCain was trying to tell one bunch that come through about what happened to the babies and why they died, but nobody was paying any attention to a word he said. They just wanted to gawk at the babies” (358). In her view, the quintuplets have long been detached from the context of real life and have become containers of words for others to express themselves, project their emotions and satisfy their curiosity, rather than being lives that need mourning and respect. This is because “consumption is a system of exchange, and the equivalent of a language” (Baudrillard 60), which emphasizes that modern society engages primarily with meanings, symbols, and social messages embedded in objects, rather than their practical utility. In the context of the exhibition, the quintuplets and even Christie herself are consumed not as living beings, but as signs of wonder, rarity, and spectacle. Visitors are more interested in what the children represent, such as the extraordinary event, social status, or novelty, rather than in their actual lives or suffering. This symbolic consumption explains why the public’s fascination neither produces empathy nor ethical reflection; instead, it reinforces the objectification of the children. The exhibition transforms human life into a language of signs, and the more the audience interprets these signs for personal curiosity or social display, the greater the secondary harm inflicted on the children’s dignity. It was precisely in this continuous state of visual oppression and emotional deprivation that Christie gradually developed a firm sense of resistance. She no longer believes that exhibitions can shoulder the responsibility of educating the public, nor does she fantasize that telling the truth can evoke empathy.

The subsequent refusal to participate in the exhibition marks Christie’s deliberate reclamation of maternal identity. She finally decided to end the touring

exhibition and send the children's body to a scientific research institute. This choice is not only an attempt to move closer to scientific rationality, but also reflects her defense of the dignity of motherhood. This decision allows her to reassert the moral and emotional boundaries that had been violated by public spectacle. Although this decision cannot eliminate the trauma caused by the past gaze and objectification, it marks Christie's effort to rebuild her subjectivity and motherhood in the face of consumption logic. She refused to let the quintuplets remain trapped in the exhibition cycle forever and refused to continue to serve as the mother of wonders, complementing the extension of others' emotions and imagination. With the last sober choice of a mother, she attempts to regain the due respect and the right to mourn, restoring her child to a dignified life rather than an exhibition item that never fades under the public gaze. Her choice restores her children's dignity, protects her own maternal authority, and signals that ethical agency is possible even within systems designed to subsume personal identity. This act of resistance marks a crucial turning point: although past objectification cannot be undone, she consciously separates herself from the logic of spectacle, restoring the moral and emotional boundaries violated by public consumption. In this way, the narrative demonstrates not only the pervasive power of consumption to alienate, but also the potential for individuals to reclaim selfhood and ethical authority, even within systems designed to subsume it.

Christie's resistance demonstrates the dual dynamics of spectacle. While consumption culture can alienate and objectify, it also produces the conditions for ethical intervention and reclamation. Christie and her children become materially and symbolically objectified, stripped of agency and intimacy under the persistent gaze of audiences. Her repeated encounters with public observation reveal the relentless pressures imposed by consumption culture, which commodifies both bodies and emotions, reducing private grief to public spectacle. The audience's indifference to explanation or mourning exposes the insidious nature of this gaze, that is the desire to consume overwhelms empathy. Yet, Christie's eventual resistance signals the potential for reclaiming subjectivity. Through her ethical choice, Christie reasserts her subjectivity and restores the moral authority of motherhood, illustrating that agency and dignity can be reclaimed even under pervasive forces of commodification.

Conclusion

Feather Crowns presents motherhood as an ethical practice shaped and constrained by the forces of spectacle and consumer culture. Through Christie's experience,

the novel reveals how public attention transforms domestic life into a site of display, where maternal care and grief are subjected to external evaluation and consumption. Spectacle operates not only as a mechanism of consumption but also as a form of ethical pressure that weakens maternal subjectivity and reshapes ethical choices. Christie's repeated compliance with public demands, alongside her growing unease, illustrates the instability of maternal identity under conditions of sustained public scrutiny. The novel ultimately locates ethical significance in refusal. Christie's decision to terminate the touring exhibition signals a reassertion of maternal responsibility and an effort to restore boundaries between private loss and public curiosity. This act does not undo the damage produced by spectacle, but it marks a recovery of ethical agency within a system designed to absorb and neutralize resistance. Therefore, *Feather Crowns* offers a sustained reflection on the moral costs of commodifying intimacy and grief. Its portrayal of motherhood under spectacle remains instructive for understanding how contemporary media environments continue to frame maternal experience as both consumable and morally exposed.

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Monstrous Feminine in Indonesian Folklore: Female Ghosts as Agents of Gendered Resistance

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Abstract We explore how Indonesian female ghosts—Kuntilanak, Sundel Bolong, Wewe Gombel, and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol—embody something far more complex than simple horror. These spectral women transform from victims of patriarchal violence into vengeful agents of justice. Their stories reveal deep cultural anxieties about women's place in Indonesian society. Our descriptive-qualitative analysis connects these folkloric figures to contemporary realities. We examine how ghost narratives reflect ongoing struggles with gender-based violence and inadequate policy responses. Statistical data on violence against women and limited healthcare access illuminate the gaps these stories expose. These female spirits don't just haunt—they critique. They challenge patriarchal structures while demanding recognition of systemic failures. We find that Indonesian folklore anticipates what policy-makers have been slow to address: the urgent need for comprehensive gender equality reforms. The ghosts speak where living women's voices are silenced. We argue their enduring power lies in making visible the violence that society prefers to ignore. This research demonstrates how traditional narratives can illuminate paths

toward more equitable legal frameworks and social structures.

Keywords female ghosts; government policies; Indonesian public policies; Indonesian urban legend

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Introduction

Female ghost figures have become central to Indonesian popular culture, evolving from oral folklore into multimedia phenomena that span horror cinema, television,

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literature, and digital platforms. Films featuring Kuntilanak have generated over 50 million viewers since the 1980s, while recent adaptations continue to break box office records (Khan and Afzal 90). These narratives have successfully adapted to new media formats, from traditional wayang performances to viral TikTok content, demonstrating remarkable cultural staying power (Adiprasetio 80). The commercial success of female ghost narratives in Indonesian entertainment reflects their deep cultural roots and ongoing relevance to contemporary audiences. Unlike imported horror content that often fails to achieve similar longevity, these indigenous supernatural figures maintain their appeal by addressing cultural specificities and social concerns that resonate with local experiences (Herlinawati 160).

The historical trajectory of Indonesian ghost narratives reveals their transformation from oral folklore into mass media phenomena. In 1933, the magazine *Penjebar Semangat* began featuring ghost stories as public interest in political content declined, marking an early shift toward supernatural entertainment (Ras 210; Halimah 47). Publications like *Djaka Lodang* and *Jaya Baya* subsequently popularized these tales through dedicated supernatural sections. By the 1980s, Indonesian cinema had adapted these stories into films, cementing figures like Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong as cultural icons (Khan and Afzal 92; Herlinawati 165). Significantly, female ghosts received greater emphasis than their male counterparts, consistently portrayed as beautiful women who transform into vengeful, monstrous beings. This pattern suggests a complex cultural preoccupation with female agency and the perceived threat of women who transgress traditional social boundaries. While these narratives appear to reinforce patriarchal control by depicting dangerous femininity, they may simultaneously function as allegories of resistance against gender-based oppression.

Despite extensive scholarship on Indonesian folklore and growing attention to gender-based violence, limited research has examined how supernatural narratives function as cultural responses to patriarchal oppression. This study analyzes four prominent female ghost figures—Kuntilanak, Sundel Bolong, Wewe Gombel, and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol—as allegorical texts that reflect and resist gendered violence in Indonesia. Drawing on Jameson's concept of allegory, this research positions these ghost narratives as cultural sites where anxieties about women's roles are expressed and contested (Jameson 134). The study argues that these figures operate beyond folkloric entertainment to critique inadequate legal protections for women and persistent gender-based violence. By examining how these ghosts transform from victims into agents of supernatural revenge, this research demonstrates how Indonesian folklore creates spaces for marginalized voices to challenge gender

norms. The analysis reveals that while these narratives appear to reinforce fears about dangerous femininity, they simultaneously offer critiques of social systems that perpetuate women's vulnerability to violence.

This study treats Indonesian female ghost narratives as more than entertainment or cultural artifacts—they function as embedded social criticism. Following scholarship by Elliott Oring and Simon Bronner, we approach these stories as "vernacular criticism" where communities encode their dissatisfactions with existing power structures. When a Kuntilanak story circulates through kampungs or appears in horror films, it carries implicit critiques of how society handles violence against women. These narratives persist because they address real frustrations that formal institutions fail to acknowledge or resolve.

Indonesian ghost stories operate as what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts"—spaces where marginalized groups can voice critiques of power without confrontation (Scott 136). Unlike academic papers or political speeches, folklore allows communities to discuss systemic problems through metaphor and symbol. A woman who becomes Sundel Bolong after sexual violence speaks to audiences about institutional failures without requiring them to engage in explicit political discourse. The methodology combines close reading of traditional folklore collections—particularly those documented by Zaenuddin and contemporary ethnographers—with analysis of how these stories adapt across different media. Rather than searching for simple allegorical meanings, we examine the complex ways these narratives both challenge and accommodate dominant ideologies, recognizing that folklore rarely offers straightforward resistance or acceptance of social conditions.

Indonesian folklore features four prominent female ghost figures whose narratives center on violence, injustice, and gendered suffering (Khairunnisa and Wardhaningsih 45). These spectral entities share common origins in traumatic death and transformation into vengeful spirits, yet each embodies distinct cultural anxieties about women's roles and experiences in patriarchal society (Hardi 150). Suster Ngesot appears as a crawling figure due to her mutilated legs, marking her tragic origin as a hospital nurse who suffered sexual violence from her employer and colleagues. After enduring brutal abuse, she was murdered and buried at her workplace. Her distinctive crawling movement serves as a physical manifestation of her trauma, while her haunting presence targets those who abuse positions of power over vulnerable women (Sembiring 85).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol, also known as Mariam or Siti Ariah, represents resistance against forced marriage and male dominance. Zaenuddin records her

story as a young woman who fled an unwanted marriage but was murdered after being sexually assaulted by criminals (Zaenuddin 33). Her spirit haunts the Ancol Bridge, specifically targeting men with questionable morals. Her selective haunting suggests a moral judgment system that punishes male exploitation while protecting potential victims.

Kuntilanak stands as the most recognizable figure in Indonesian supernatural folklore. Depicted as a vengeful spirit in a white dress with long hair concealing her face, she originated from women who died in childbirth. Her chilling laugh signals her presence as she seeks revenge on those who wronged her in life. The Kuntilanak's association with maternal death taps into cultural anxieties about motherhood and female reproductive roles. Her popularity spans regional variations—known as Pontianak in Malaysia and Singapore—and has generated extensive media adaptations, including Rizal Mantovani's film trilogy (2006-2008) and numerous literary works (Handoyo 112; Wisanggenti 67). On the other hand, Sundel Bolong embodies the trauma of sexual violence through her distinctive physical characteristic: a gaping hole in her back. She represents women who died shortly after childbirth following sexual assault. Unlike Kuntilanak's maternal focus, Sundel Bolong directly confronts sexual violence and its consequences. Her nocturnal haunting of solitary men serves as both a warning and a punishment for potential perpetrators.

These four figures share three critical characteristics that distinguish them within Indonesian folklore. First, their origins invariably involve sexual violence or gender-based oppression, connecting supernatural horror to real-world women's experiences. Second, their transformation from victim to vengeful spirit represents a shift from powerlessness to agency, albeit through supernatural means. Third, their selective targeting suggests moral judgment systems that challenge rather than reinforce patriarchal authority. As Adiprasetyo observes, the continued reproduction of these figures reflects “increasingly repressive situations against women,” indicating their function as cultural responses to persistent gender-based violence (Adiprasetyo 11). Their enduring presence in contemporary media demonstrates how traditional folklore adapts to address ongoing social concerns while maintaining its symbolic power to critique societal failures in protecting women.

This study draws primarily on Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous feminine" to analyze how Indonesian female ghosts challenge patriarchal structures. Creed's framework proves particularly relevant because it addresses the specific ways female horror figures embody contradictory roles as both victims and threats within patriarchal systems. Rather than simply reinforcing fears about dangerous

women, these monstrous feminine figures expose deep anxieties about female agency that patriarchal societies struggle to contain (Creed 56).

The monstrous feminine operates through what Creed identifies as boundary disruption—these figures refuse neat categorization as either pure victims or evil perpetrators. Indonesian ghosts like Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong exemplify this boundary-crossing power. They transform from women who suffered extreme violence into supernatural agents who enact their own forms of justice. This transformation reveals the inadequacy of patriarchal systems that create the very conditions they claim to prevent. When formal institutions fail to protect women or provide justice, these ghost narratives imagine alternative forms of accountability that operate outside official channels.

What makes these figures particularly subversive is their selective targeting. Unlike random monsters, Indonesian female ghosts demonstrate moral judgment by focusing their vengeance on corrupt authority figures and men who abuse power. This pattern suggests that their monstrosity stems not from inherent evil but from systemic failures that force women into supernatural resistance. The ghosts' beauty-to-horror transformation functions as a critique of how patriarchal systems reduce women to visual objects while remaining blind to the violence that creates these vengeful spirits.

The transformation from beauty to horror in figures like Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong reflects the male gaze's anxiety about female agency. These ghosts embody patriarchal fears that attractive women might possess hidden power. Their seductive appearance serves as a trap, luring victims before enacting revenge. This pattern suggests that female beauty, when combined with independence, threatens patriarchal order. However, these narratives also subvert the male gaze by granting agency to female figures. While the stories appear to reinforce fears about dangerous femininity, they simultaneously critique systems that create such dangers. The ghosts' monstrosity emerges from their victimization, suggesting that patriarchal violence produces the very threats it claims to prevent.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection explains the horror associated with female ghosts, particularly those connected to reproduction. Kristeva defines the abject as that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). Female ghosts embody this boundary-disrupting quality through their association with bodily fluids, death, and reproductive trauma.

Kuntilanak exemplifies maternal horror through her connection to childbirth and death. Her origin story—death during childbirth—links her to what Kristeva identifies as the abject realm of bodily fluids and reproductive failure (Kristeva 8).

The maternal body represents the ultimate abject because it challenges boundaries between self and other, life and death. The ghost's association with blood reinforces her abject status. Indonesian folklore often depicts Kuntilanak accompanied by decay or dripping blood. These elements trigger fundamental revulsion toward bodily reminders of mortality. Yet this abjection also grants power, as the ghosts use their disturbing presence to challenge those who wronged them. Kristeva's framework reveals how these figures transgress social boundaries through their very existence. They refuse categorization as either living or dead, pure or corrupt. This boundary-crossing enables resistance to patriarchal systems that depend on clear categories to control women's roles.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity illuminates how female ghosts challenge normative gender roles. Butler argues that gender emerges through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler 33). This perspective reveals how ghost narratives critique the constructed nature of feminine passivity. In life, the women who become ghosts performed traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, or victims. Their transformation into vengeful spirits represents a radical departure from these prescribed performances. Death liberates them from social constraints, allowing them to perform a different femininity characterized by agency and power.

The ghosts' posthumous actions demonstrate what Butler describes as subversive repetition within gender performance. While they initially conformed to traditional feminine roles, their spectral return reveals the instability of these performances. The transformation from victim to avenger suggests that patriarchal gender scripts contain contradictions that can be exploited for resistance. The timing of their rebellion—occurring after death—highlights extreme constraints on living women. Only through supernatural transformation can these figures access the agency denied in life. This structure critiques a social system so oppressive that resistance requires transcending human limitations (Butler 75).

These theoretical frameworks converge to reveal Indonesian female ghosts as complex figures that simultaneously reflect and resist patriarchal oppression. Mulvey's male gaze explains their initial construction as objects of desire and fear (Mulvey 12). Kristeva's abjection illuminates their power to disturb social boundaries (Kristeva 8). Butler's performativity demonstrates their challenge to gender norms (Butler 33). Together, these theories show how folklore creates spaces where marginalized voices can critique dominant power structures. Female ghosts represent responses to systems that fail to protect women or provide justice. Their supernatural agency compensates for inadequate human institutions, offering

alternative forms of resistance within patriarchal frameworks.

These theoretical frameworks intersect with Indonesian cultural beliefs about gender and spirituality to create complex representations of female agency (Dewi and Indriyanto 681). Traditional Javanese and Malay concepts of *Rasa* (intuitive knowledge) and *Sakralitas* (sacredness) emphasize women's spiritual purity, particularly in maternal and domestic roles. Female ghosts violate these ideals through their transformation from victims to vengeful spirits. Kuntilanak's association with childbirth reflects Javanese beliefs about *Darah Ketuban* (amniotic blood), which is considered both sacred and dangerous. Similarly, Sundel Bolong's narrative parallels the stigmatization of sexual assault victims, who are often blamed rather than supported.

Contemporary media representations reveal evolving interpretations of these figures. Indonesian horror films initially reinforced the male gaze by hypersexualizing these ghosts as both desirable and deadly. However, recent adaptations reinterpret female ghosts as resistance figures rather than mere objects of fear. These newer narratives challenge passive victimhood by allowing women to reclaim their stories. The ghosts now function as agents of subversion, embodying patriarchal fears while simultaneously critiquing the systems that created their suffering. This evolution reflects broader changes in Indonesian gender discourse and women's increasing agency in contemporary society.

Indonesian Female Ghosts as Symbols of Gendered Subversion

This analysis examines how Indonesian female ghosts function as sites of gendered resistance within patriarchal folklore. Through applying feminist theoretical frameworks to four prominent ghost figures—Kuntilanak, Suster Ngesot, Si Manis Jembatan Ancol, and Sundel Bolong—this study reveals how these narratives simultaneously reflect and challenge societal anxieties about female agency. The analysis demonstrates that these supernatural figures embody a fundamental contradiction: they emerge from victimization yet transform into powerful agents of resistance.

Indonesian female ghosts occupy a liminal space between victim and perpetrator, disrupting traditional gender boundaries through their posthumous agency. These figures challenge patriarchal expectations by refusing to remain passive after death. Kristeva's concept of abjection illuminates this boundary-crossing power, as these ghosts "disturb identity, system, order" by embodying both life and death, purity and corruption (Kristeva 4). Kuntilanak exemplifies this disruption through her connection to maternal death and childbirth trauma. Her

transformation from victim to vengeful spirit reflects societal fears about women who transgress prescribed roles, particularly those related to motherhood and domesticity. Rather than accepting their fate, these ghosts reclaim agency through supernatural means, creating alternative spaces where marginalized female voices can finally be heard.

Suster Ngesot and Si Manis Jembatan Ancol exemplify the monstrous feminine's subversive potential through their weaponization of female sexuality. These figures operate within what Mulvey identifies as the male gaze framework, initially presenting themselves as objects of desire before revealing their deadly intentions (Mulvey 12). However, their seduction-punishment pattern fundamentally disrupts the passive role typically assigned to women within patriarchal visual economies. Suster Ngesot's transformation from beautiful nurse to crawling predator demonstrates Butler's concept of gender performativity in reverse—she abandons the nurturing feminine performance expected of medical professionals to enact violent retribution against her abusers (Butler 75).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's selective targeting reveals the ghost's function as moral arbiter rather than indiscriminate monster. Her haunting of men with "questionable morals" establishes an alternative justice system that operates outside patriarchal legal frameworks. This selective violence aligns with Kristeva's theory of abjection, as these ghosts embody the return of repressed feminine rage that patriarchal society attempts to suppress (Kristeva 8). Their monstrous sexuality becomes a form of resistance that challenges the virgin-whore dichotomy by refusing categorization within either role. Instead, they create a third space where female sexuality serves as an instrument of justice rather than male pleasure, fundamentally disrupting the power dynamics that originally victimized them.

Indonesian female ghosts systematically subvert Mulvey's male gaze by weaponizing their visual appeal to enact revenge. Traditional folklore descriptions emphasize these spirits' initial beauty before revealing their deadly nature. Suster Ngesot appears as an attractive nurse whose beauty masks her vengeful intentions. Her crawling movement, caused by severed legs, transforms her from object of desire into agent of terror. This physical transformation disrupts the male gaze's assumption of female passivity, as her disability becomes a source of supernatural power rather than vulnerability (Mulvey 14).

Si Manis Jembatan Ancol employs a similar strategy of visual deception. Folklore narratives describe her as exceptionally beautiful, using this appearance to lure unsuspecting men to the Ancol Bridge. However, her selective targeting reveals moral judgment rather than indiscriminate violence. She specifically haunts men

with "questionable morals," suggesting an alternative justice system that operates outside patriarchal legal frameworks. This selective approach challenges the male gaze's reduction of women to visual objects by demonstrating that female beauty can serve purposes beyond male pleasure. The seduction-punishment pattern in these narratives fundamentally disrupts patriarchal visual economies. Rather than remaining passive objects of observation, these ghosts actively manipulate their appearance to achieve specific goals. Their beauty becomes a tool of resistance that inverts traditional power dynamics, transforming the male gaze from a source of female objectification into a trap that enables feminine revenge.

Kuntilanak and Sundel Bolong embody Kristeva's concept of abjection through their association with reproductive trauma and bodily boundaries. Kuntilanak's origin in childbirth death connects her to what Kristeva identifies as the ultimate abject—the maternal body that challenges distinctions between self and other, life and death (Kristeva 8). Indonesian folklore emphasizes her blood connection, particularly the *darah ketuban* (amniotic blood) that accompanies birth. This blood symbolism positions her at the boundary between sacred creation and dangerous pollution.

Sundel Bolong's physical manifestation more explicitly demonstrates abjection through the gaping hole in her back. This wound, result of sexual violence, makes visible the trauma typically hidden within patriarchal systems. Her physical deformity serves as permanent testimony to the violence she endured, refusing society's tendency to silence or forget such experiences. The hole functions as what Kristeva describes as a boundary disruption—it breaks the integrity of the body while simultaneously marking the violence that created it (Kristeva 12). Both figures use their abject status to challenge social boundaries and expose patriarchal failures. Their disturbing presence forces recognition of injustices that were previously ignored or minimized. By embodying the return of repressed trauma, they create spaces where suppressed truths about gender-based violence can finally be acknowledged. Their abjection becomes a form of resistance that refuses to allow society to forget or normalize the violence they experienced.

These ghost figures demonstrate Butler's concept of gender performativity by abandoning traditional feminine roles in favor of active resistance. In life, these women performed expected gender scripts—as nurses, mothers, or victims of male violence. Their posthumous transformation represents what Butler describes as the potential for subversive repetition within gender performance (Butler 112).

Kuntilanak's case illustrates this transformation most clearly. Her death during childbirth should have reinforced her maternal identity, yet she returns as a figure

who threatens rather than nurtures children. This inversion of maternal expectations demonstrates the instability of gender roles that Butler identifies as central to performativity theory (Butler 33). Her spectral performance of vengeance replaces the nurturing performance expected of mothers, revealing the constructed nature of feminine passivity. Suster Ngesot's transformation from caregiver to killer similarly subverts professional gender expectations. As a nurse, she was expected to embody feminine qualities of care and service. Her posthumous violence against men who abuse power inverts this caring role, using her medical knowledge for destruction rather than healing. Her crawling movement, initially a sign of victimization, becomes a distinctive feature that enhances her threatening presence.

These alternative performances create what Butler describes as spaces for resistance within gender norms. By refusing to remain victims, these ghosts demonstrate that feminine passivity is not natural but constructed. Their posthumous agency suggests that women's apparent acceptance of subordination may mask deeper forms of resistance that emerge when traditional constraints are removed.

The convergence of these three theoretical frameworks reveals Indonesian female ghosts as complex sites of cultural resistance. They simultaneously reflect patriarchal anxieties about female autonomy while providing spaces for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. Their transformation from victims to agents demonstrates the productive potential of resistance within oppressive systems. These ghost narratives function as cultural critiques that expose the inadequacies of existing legal and social protections for women. By creating supernatural spaces where justice can be achieved, they highlight the failures of human institutions to address gender-based violence. Their continued presence in contemporary Indonesian culture suggests ongoing relevance to current struggles for gender equality and women's rights.

This analysis demonstrates that Indonesian female ghosts function as sophisticated sites of gendered resistance through three interconnected mechanisms. First, these figures subvert Mulvey's male gaze by weaponizing their beauty to enact revenge rather than serving as passive objects of desire (Mulvey 14). Second, they embody Kristeva's concept of abjection by transgressing social boundaries through their association with reproductive trauma and bodily violation (Kristeva 12). Third, they exemplify Butler's gender performativity by abandoning traditional feminine roles in favor of active agency and moral arbitration (Butler 75). The convergence of these theoretical frameworks reveals that these ghost narratives serve as cultural critiques of inadequate institutional responses to gender-based violence. Their supernatural agency compensates for the failures of legal and social systems to

protect women or provide justice for crimes against them. This folkloric resistance becomes particularly significant when examined against Indonesia's contemporary policy landscape, where legal frameworks continue to inadequately address the systemic violence that these ghost stories have long criticized.

Folkloric Resistance and Contemporary Policy Failures: Indonesian Gender-Based Violence in Cultural and Legal Context

Indonesian female ghost narratives reveal cultural patterns that persist in contemporary gender-based violence and institutional responses. These folkloric representations illuminate structural continuities between traditional patriarchal oppression and modern policy failures. The ghosts' origins in institutional abandonment, incomplete justice, and victim silencing mirror current deficiencies in Indonesia's legal and healthcare systems. This analysis demonstrates how folkloric insights provide a critical lens for understanding persistent policy inadequacies despite legislative reforms. The following examination traces how folkloric themes manifest in current violence patterns, revealing deep structural issues that legalistic approaches fail to address.

Contemporary Indonesian gender-based violence statistics reveal disturbing parallels to institutional failures depicted in ghost narratives. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection reported 14,157 cases of violence against women in 2023. Significantly, 70% of victims knew their perpetrators, including family members, educators, and state officials (Triwidiyanti). This pattern mirrors the folklore theme of betrayal by trusted authority figures. Suster Ngesot's victimization by medical colleagues exemplifies this dynamic. The folkloric emphasis on workplace and institutional violence reflects ongoing realities where women remain vulnerable to abuse by authority figures.

Indonesia's maternal mortality crisis demonstrates the healthcare dimension of folkloric violence. The Ministry of Health reports 183 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2022. This rate significantly exceeds Malaysia's 20 per 100,000 (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia 87). This reality echoes Kuntilanak's origin in childbirth trauma, where inadequate medical care results in preventable deaths. The folklore's emphasis on reproductive trauma parallels how contemporary maternal mortality reflects institutional neglect of women's healthcare needs.

Ghost narratives' selective targeting patterns also mirror contemporary violence statistics. Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's focus on morally questionable men reflects evidence that perpetrators often abuse multiple victims. The *Lembaga Perlindungan Saksi dan Korban* data shows repeat offenses and systematic abuse patterns. These

parallels suggest that ghost narratives encode cultural knowledge about violence patterns that persist across generations.

The folkloric theme of victim silencing finds expression in contemporary reporting challenges. Many cases remain unreported due to social stigma, institutional barriers, and fear of retaliation. The ghosts' posthumous voice-claiming represents what living women often cannot achieve within existing systems. This continuity between traditional silencing mechanisms and contemporary institutional failures reveals structural issues that legislative reforms alone cannot address.

Traditional beliefs about women's spiritual purity continue to influence contemporary victim-blaming attitudes, creating direct continuities between folkloric themes and institutional responses to gender-based violence. Indonesian cultural concepts of *kesucian perempuan* (female purity) position women's moral worth as dependent on sexual innocence and submission to patriarchal authority (Blackburn 78). The transformation of pure women into vengeful spirits in ghost narratives directly parallels how sexual violence victims face social stigmatization in contemporary Indonesia. Research by Komnas Perempuan demonstrates that 60% of sexual assault victims report experiencing victim-blaming from family members, with common responses including accusations that the woman "invited" the attack through improper behavior or dress (Komnas Perempuan 23). This stigmatization mirrors folkloric patterns where women's spiritual corruption following violence makes them dangerous to society.

Recent documented cases reveal how these folkloric themes of corrupted purity directly influence institutional responses to sexual violence. In 2019, police in Central Java advised a teenage rape victim to marry her attacker, treating marriage as a mechanism to restore her "damaged" honor (Tempo Magazine). This response demonstrates the persistence of traditional beliefs that position sexual violence as contamination rather than crime. Similarly, the Indonesian Council of Ulema's controversial 2021 fatwa suggesting that rape victims bear partial responsibility for their assault echoes folkloric narratives where women's transformation into vengeful spirits results from their own moral failings (Jakarta Post). These institutional responses reveal how cultural beliefs about female purity function as mechanisms for transferring blame from perpetrators to victims, effectively protecting patriarchal authority structures.

The ghost narratives anticipate and critique these victim-blaming patterns through their emphasis on institutional betrayal. Suster Ngesot's victimization by medical colleagues, Si Manis Jembatan Ancol's murder following attempted escape from forced marriage, and Kuntilanak's death during childbirth all involve

failures by authority figures who should have provided protection. These folkloric patterns of institutional abandonment directly correlate with contemporary evidence of systemic bias in sexual violence cases. A 2022 study by the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation found that 40% of sexual assault cases were dismissed by police due to "insufficient evidence," with investigators frequently questioning victims' credibility rather than pursuing perpetrators (YLBHI 156). The folklore's emphasis on supernatural revenge emerges precisely because human institutions consistently fail to provide justice or protection for women.

Indonesia's Sexual Violence Crime Law (UU No. 12/2022) reveals why communities might turn to supernatural narratives for justice. The law caps sexual violence sentences at four years with fines of IDR 50,000,000—penalties that hardly match the lifelong trauma victims endure. More problematic is the law's implementation. Adimaja found that investigations drag on for months, with many cases simply abandoned by authorities (Adimaja 44). Police departments lack clear protocols, leaving officers unprepared to handle sensitive cases appropriately.

The gap between legal promises and reality becomes stark in specific incidents. In one documented case, police told a sexual assault victim to marry her attacker—treating marriage as a solution that would eliminate the need for prosecution. This response exposes how the new law fails to challenge deep-rooted attitudes that position women's honor as more important than their safety. When formal justice systems consistently disappoint, it's hardly surprising that ghost stories featuring supernatural revenge maintain their cultural power. These narratives don't just reflect frustration with inadequate legal protections—they imagine alternative forms of accountability that actually work.

When legal systems consistently fail women, ghost stories offer imagined alternatives. Si Manis Jembatan Ancol doesn't hunt randomly—she targets men with questionable morals, creating the kind of moral accountability that human courts struggle to provide. Suster Ngesot focuses her rage on supervisors who abuse their positions, addressing workplace harassment that employment laws barely acknowledge. These selective patterns suggest communities use supernatural narratives to work through their frustrations with institutions that protect powerful men rather than vulnerable women.

The ghost stories point toward three persistent problems that legal reforms haven't solved: corrupt authority figures face minimal consequences, justice processes favor perpetrators over victims, and healthcare systems neglect women's needs during medical crises. Individual prosecutions won't fix these structural issues. Real change would require mandatory reporting for institutional abuse,

specialized courts trained in gender-based violence, and judicial education that challenges victim-blaming assumptions. But current policy discussions rarely acknowledge how deeply these problems run.

Contemporary feminist theory helps explain why these folkloric critiques remain relevant. When legal proceedings treat women primarily as evidence rather than people, they replicate the same objectification that creates conditions for violence in the first place. When healthcare policies ignore how reproductive trauma connects to broader patterns of gender-based violence, they miss opportunities for prevention. When institutions refuse to recognize that gender roles are learned rather than natural, they perpetuate the very attitudes that justify abuse. Indonesian ghost stories have been making these connections for generations, suggesting that policy makers might benefit from taking folklore more seriously as social commentary.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that Indonesian female ghost narratives operate as sophisticated forms of cultural critique, transforming victims of patriarchal violence into agents of alternative justice systems. Kuntilanak, Suster Ngesot, Si Manis Jembatan Ancol, and Sundel Bolong demonstrate how traditional folklore encodes community knowledge about violence patterns and institutional failures. These spectral figures subvert conventional gender expectations by weaponizing feminine attributes—beauty, vulnerability, and bodily disruption—to challenge corrupt authority figures and morally compromised men. Through their selective targeting and posthumous agency, these ghosts create parallel systems of accountability where formal legal structures prove inadequate. We find that their persistent presence in contemporary Indonesian popular culture directly correlates with ongoing institutional failures to address gender-based violence, as evidenced by current statistics on violence against women and insufficient policy protections.

The theoretical framework combining feminist film theory, abjection studies, and performativity analysis illuminates how these narratives function as sites of resistance within patriarchal constraints. We argue that these ghost stories serve as cultural barometers, measuring the gap between social expectations and institutional realities regarding women's protection and justice. Their enduring relevance suggests that supernatural resistance emerges precisely where legal and social systems fail to provide adequate recourse for gendered violence. This research contributes to feminist folklore studies by demonstrating how traditional narratives anticipate contemporary policy needs and encode critical insights about systemic violence.

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Non-human Subjects and Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*

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Abstract Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* examines how the lives of the people of the Banda Islands are intrinsically connected to their landscapes and the environment. Their livelihoods and culture revolve around the nutmeg, which is traded with other countries. The study will examine how the text challenges the traditional Western anthropocentric views of nature as an inert object that led colonizers to exploit the nutmeg trade, resulting in destructive changes like resource extraction, environmental exploitation, land ownership, displacement of indigenous people and the imposition of the nutmeg monoculture. By examining how Ghosh's work depicts the agency of non-human subjects, the paper emphasizes the need for recognizing the interdependence between humans and the natural world, the intrinsic value of biodiversity, and the ethical significance of land, which form the core concerns of environmental ethics. The paper will use ideas from environmental ethics as the theoretical framework to understand the urgent need to recognize non-humans as subjects and call for developing ethical relationships between humans and non-human beings so as to save the planet from further environmental catastrophes.

Keywords Biocentrism; Capitalism; Environmental Justice; Indigenous Communities; Sustainable development

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Introduction

The relentless pursuit of economic growth remains a dominant aspect that continues to influence societies in different regions of the world. Capitalism and its intricate connection to the economic system based on resource extraction have profoundly impacted the natural world. In the process of economic expansion, humans have often disregarded the implications of their actions on non-human entities, causing disruption to entire ecosystems, resulting in the loss of biodiversity. This has led to severe environmental degradation, which has now caught the attention of environmental ethicists. Globalization has led to rapid growth in international trade. Demand for material goods has accentuated carbon footprints from transport, industrial activity and excessive consumption, encouraging deforestation and leading to impoverished biodiversity (Huwart and Loïc 112-15). According to The Living Planet Report 2024, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) publication declared an average decline of 73% in species populations between 1970-2020 (*Living Planet Report 2024*). The recognition of non-human subjectivities and their agency has become crucial in understanding the challenges for today's planetary crisis. Acknowledging the agency of these entities, including landscapes, trees, rivers, and animals, prompts a re-evaluation of our understanding of nature as well as questions the traditional anthropocentric perspectives. Ghosh's nonfictional work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable Planet* (2016), which discusses the colonial legacies of Western thought and the intersections of history, culture, and climate crisis "reveals how climate change is the result of a set of interrelated histories" (Vincent 2). *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022), critiques human actions and their impact on nature and urges us to heed the warning signs of environmental apocalypse. His *Smoke and Ashes* examines the cultural history of the opium plant and unearths its connections to most of the modern industries in the globalized world. Ghosh's works have contributed to a

1 This research is on the name of The Special Program of Zhejiang University "Comparative Studies of Languages and Cultures of BRICS Countries: A Perspective of the Global Civilization Initiative"supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of China.

much more critical understanding of colonial modernity by exploring historical events and showing the root causes of how they are connected to today's planetary crisis. Ghosh's writings often incorporate discussions on climate change and how the colonial conquest of natives and resources has contributed to the modern climate crisis. Similarly, *The Nutmeg's Curse* traces the history of the Banda Islands and how the coming of Dutch ships on these Islands marked the beginning of their economic power with the imposition of nutmeg monoculture. Ghosh highlights how this has altered the relationship with nature, causing severe environmental devastation, habitat loss, soil erosion, and disruption of ecosystems, affecting local flora and fauna because of the nutmeg industry.

This paper tries to explore how Ghosh depicts the agency of non-human beings and their role in shaping human history. The paper examines how capitalism affects not just humans but also non-human entities and ecosystems by looking at the practices imposed by European colonizers, as it serves as a good template for devastations happening today. Environmental Ethics is used as a theoretical framework to analyze how *The Nutmeg's Curse* reconfigures the category of 'subject' to include non-human beings within a biocentric ethical framework. This paper also tries to understand to what extend Ghosh's work aligns with ideas of environmental justice and the challenges that capitalism poses in recognising non-human agency.

Environmental Ethics: A Biocentric Approach

The paper draws on environmental ethics and not ecocriticism as its framework to foreground the moral status of non-human life and the ethical dimensions that need to be examined in the context of the relationship between man and nature. Although ecocriticism often analyses representations of the environment at a cultural level, environmental ethics poses direct questions as to how humans can morally account for non-human beings. Ghosh places strong emphasis on how non-human entities are active participants in *The Nutmeg's Curse* and not mere passive spectators to the historical suffering. This paper draws its central idea about non-human subjects from Holmes Rolston III's biocentrism.

Rolston argues that all organism are teleological centers of life, having welfare and good of their own (111). In this study, non-human subjects can be understood not just as a metaphorical personification, but as beings who have intrinsic value. This means that a tree is significant because of its inherent existence, by virtue of its own self nurturing capacities unlike human life that is transient. Its agency, in biocentric terms, is expressed through forms of purposive activity grounded in

biological flourishing (Rolston 110-13). This framework complements Ghosh's idea, which consistently features nutmeg trees as entities whose life cycles were violently altered by colonial extraction through monoculture.

This differs from the Post-humanist, new materialist, and actor-network models, which conceptualize agency as relational entanglements that are distributed and not purposive. Rolston on the other hand grounds subjecthood in biological purposiveness, which is the organism's evolutionary drive to sustain itself. A biocentric understanding of non-human beings demands ethically interpreting Ghosh's representation of trees as historical agents, an agency that is grounded in the biological reality that organisms strive, adapt, and enact self-maintaining processes, independent of human intervention.

Ghosh does not merely depict trees as symbols of loss or resources under threat, but sees them as historical agents whose lives were altered by imperial domination. Colonialism has not only impacted the communities on the Island, but trees and ecological life forms as well. Thus, the ethical lens of biocentrism helps us in reading Ghosh's work as a narrative of ecological injustice, where non-human subjects are central to the story of colonial violence.

Textualizing Moral Narrative in *The Nutmeg's Curse*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* traces the violent colonial history of the Banda Islands and exposes how colonial expansion reconfigured both human and non-human worlds. Ghosh avoids the conventional historical narrative style while foregrounding the agency of plants, landscapes, and ecological systems, and adopts a parable format interweaving history. This kind of narration allows Ghosh to portray the ecological and human devastation caused by the spice trade not merely as an episode of colonial conquest, but as an ethical crisis. Driven by their capitalistic agenda of capturing the nutmeg trade, the European colonizers unleash violence on the natives and non-human entities. The text highlights the implications of these actions through the trading networks that brought European navigators to Maluku, leading to the spice race. As nutmegs traversed the globe far and wide, their price soared. The value of these spices is accounted not just for utilitarian purposes, medicinal properties, or culinary uses, it had even become an expression of luxury and wealth desired by people during the sixteen century (Ghosh 9). To establish a monopoly on the nutmeg trade, the colonizers altered the land by imposing terrestrial terraforming through extensive nutmeg plantations, consequently creating a new economy in the archipelago.

Ghosh's reconstruction of Jan Coen's policies on mass displacement,

enslavement, and the imposition of plantation monocultures draws attention to the catastrophic consequences of colonial capitalism. A tragic pattern of displacement of indigenous people and the seizure of land ownership by Dutch colonizers marked their dominance over the Banda Islands. Under the authority of Jan Coen, brutal tactics were used to maintain their control, conforming perfectly to the doctrine of liberal interventionism (Ghosh 27). Furthermore, the Bandanese people resisted the Dutch attempts to seize their lands and resources, which resulted in a massacre. Their resistance was suppressed by brutal force that made the council sign a treaty and "burn everywhere their dwellings" (23), by destroying the existence of Banda settlements that claimed the lives of native people, wiping off their cultural heritage and identity. As Ghosh explains, "Once a proud and enterprising trading community had ceased to exist as people" (30). The massacre did not stop with displacement and dispossession of indigenous people. Those who survived the initial onslaught were captured and enslaved, forced into labor on Dutch-owned nutmeg plantations. This act of violence and enslavement was part of the Dutch strategy to control the spice trade and suppress any resistance. However, the fact that the tragic history of this incident revolves around a nutmeg tree brings us to question the influence of the capitalistic approach of the West on global affairs. This reinforces the belief held by many global South convictions that the planetary crisis can be addressed by fixing capitalism (160). Although Ghosh is touching upon historical events of the sixteenth century, they are very much relevant to the current times. A notable example in this regard would be Bolsanaro's administration of Amazon policies that aimed to dismantle the protective environmental measures that limited capitalistic extraction. His policies that boost deforestation such as merging the Ministry of Environment (MMA) with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food Supply (MAPA) for economic development (Deutsch 825) raised apprehensions about the well-being of Amazon ecosystems.

Ghosh's text is subtitled as *Parables for a Planet in Crisis* signalling that these narratives are meant to prompt moral reflection rather than simply documenting historical events. By allowing the reader to view ecological integrity violations as moral failings, the parable gains momentum for engaging with environmental ethics. Through this approach, Ghosh presents the Banda Islands history as a moral lesson on how modernity is shaped by recurrent patterns of excessive extraction and environmental degradation. He also foregrounds local ways of knowing that attribute vitality and relational significance to trees, seas, and volcanic peaks by bringing the cosmologies of indigenous communities. These perspectives push back against the old colonial habit of separating humans from everything else.

Indigenous knowledge has long recognised the worth of non-human life and the web of relationships that bind species together, well before environmental ethics tried to formalise these ideas. This way, they line up closely with the principles of biocentrism. For Ghosh, these worldviews are not just folklore, they are serious ways of understanding the environment. His writing does not place nature in the background, but it shows a world where non-human life is caught up in the same unfolding of history as people. By narrating ecological entanglements through the form of a parable, Ghosh makes visible the agency of non-human subjects that colonial epistemologies attempted to erase.

Non-Human Subjects , Agency and Environmental Ethics

Early environmental philosophers like Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and John Muir contributed to the field of environmental ethics by paving the path for a more sustainable future. Leopold's depiction of land ethics contends that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold 211). His emphasis is on seeing land as a community that grows out of intertwined relationships based on caring. Carson's emphasis on ecological management and human use of unchecked chemical pesticides illustrate how the eradication of one species inflicted by pesticides can have detrimental effects on other, leading to ecological imbalance as well as their effect on soil, water, wildlife, and humans too (Carson 11). John Muirs' environmental ethics centered around preserving wilderness, continues to resonate with the modern establishment of national parks and the protection of natural landscapes. These perspectives of early philosophers anticipated the dangers of biodiversity loss. They propagated the idea of ethical concern for humans to be stewards, which remains relevant today as the world wrestles with environmental challenges due to ecological imbalances. These aspects of ethical responsibility align with contemporary environmental ethics, which calls for "a more inclusive ethics that asks about appropriate respect toward all living beings" (Rolston 93).

Holmes Rolston developed this at length in his regard for biocentrism, which refers to an ethics of respect for all life. Ghosh too acknowledges the agency of non-human subjects by respecting the ecological roles they exhibit within the environment. There were times when nutmegs ceased to be rarities, and their value began to decline. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) officials started a campaign to eradicate the existence of these trees to limit the supply of these spices. They decreed that nutmeg trees would only grow on the Bandas and clove trees only on Ambonn Island. Every nutmeg and clove tree grown on other islands

had to be destroyed. Nevertheless, these colonizers should have realized that these spices were picky to flourish. The practices of transplantation and replicating their natural habitat for cultivation purposes may hinder their growth, considering their needs and requirements, making them more susceptible to pests and diseases, which Ghosh makes clear when he indicates that "it is said that nutmeg trees must be able to smell the sea, whereas clove trees must be able to see" (Ghosh 159). They also have their home to grow. Indeed, the agency of these trees was not realized because the colonizers could not locate intrinsic value in nature. They perceived nature as anthropocentric, that is valuing non-human life instrumentally and not intrinsically. A biocentric focus makes clear what was really at stake in the Dutch East India Company's push to control nutmeg and clove trees beyond the designated islands. It was not just an economic strategy, but was a violent disruption of the ecological home of the trees. This encompasses Rolston's biocentric ideas that these trees have precise ecological conditions under which their life projects unfold and it helps us in understanding questions like what nutmegs can give us, or what these nutmegs require and what it means to sabotage that. After the European colonization, the trees of Banda Islands were stripped of subjectivity and reclassified as instruments of capitalism.

Ghosh challenges the traditional European anthropocentric view of natives as brutes and non-humans as mere commodities (190). In his book *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh highlights the agency aspects of non-humans and their entwined existence with humans by referring to the people of Sundarbans as those "who live around the Mangrove forest and have never doubted that tigers and many other animals possess intelligence and agency, and even for Yukon people who considered that glaciers are endowed with moods and feelings" (85). The Scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose has also indicated that plants can feel pain and fear (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse* 197). This shows why acknowledging the agency of non-human life is not optional, it is an ethical obligation. They resonate strongly with Rolston's insistence that respect for life is not limited to sentient beings and the key question is not only "Can it suffer?" but "Is it alive?" (Rolston 110).

However, from the colonizers perspectives, the idea that volcanoes can make meaning, or that trees hold significant cultural memories and are woven into songs, is merely a superstition. They had discarded every belief and the agency of these entities, that encompass the land of the native people. Ghosh explains this when he says, "the trees, volcanoes and the landscapes of the Bandas had no meaning except as resources that could be leveraged to generate profit" (36). The attribution of accounting value is subjective; the fact that native people could interact with the

landscape shows the vitality of the landscape as they consider the Earth as a living entity and believe in the vitality of trees, rivers, and mountains. Their lives are enmeshed with non-human forces as they consider these forces to have an intrinsic value, and that is how they keep the stories alive through songs and storytelling. Their belief systems are deeply rooted in the agency of non-human entities based on the indication of the entire spectrum of non-humans as relatives, including forests, landscapes, mountains, rivers, trees, animals, and spirits of the land, which are intrinsically bound to humans. Recognizing these interconnections and interdependence is the thrust of co-existence, as Timothy Morton writes in his *Dark Ecology*, "realizing that non-humans are rooted deep within us, not just biologically and socially but in the very structure of thought and logic. Coexisting with these non-humans is ecological thought, art, ethics, and politics" (159). This alignment can be seen in Rolston's argument for a win-win situation, where he claims that the collective endeavour of inheriting the Earth is not just for human benefits, but for the fact that our happiness is bound with it in nurturing a diverse ecosystem (Rolston 153).

Highlighting the ethical significance of inclusivity, Ghosh projects how crucial it is to consider the Bandanese natives and their bonding with terrestrial spaces, whose lives are tied explicitly to their landscapes. Their ways of life developed through their belief systems, reflect their identity associated with a specific region. This concept of bioregionalism is responsible for shaping human identity. However, the colonial dominance over the Banda Islands was seen as an opportunity for development by exploitation of resources and terraforming native lands. But terraforming involves environmental interventions which impact non-human entities (Ghosh 5). The drive for resource extraction played a central role in this process, as colonizers sought to enframe the project of terraforming, a process carried out by colonizers to alter and reshape the natural environment of native lands to make them more suitable for human habitation precisely to resemble European ways of life. Leopold's argument on land alteration suggests that land ethics cannot prevent resource alteration, management, and use. However, it does affirm their right to continued existence in a natural state (192). Ghosh argues that these terraforming projects involve conflicts where entire populations, including non-human entities are subjected to violence, causing ecological disruptions. This involves displacing indigenous inhabitants from their traditional ancestral lands, disrupting their way of life, and promoting the erasure of their cultural heritage. Colonizers have reduced the terrain as a resource to fuel economic growth, simultaneously believing that they bear no blame, as their conquest using material forces falls under nature's domain

(58). Ghosh argues that this Western idea considers 'nature' as inert and subdued, and that the Europeans fail to recognize the agency of non-humans.

It is true that the nutmeg was also an object of commerce for the aboriginal people. However, their approach differs from the colonizer's intention. Bandanese lifeways present an alternative ethic that is strikingly compatible with biocentrism. "For the Bandanese, the landscapes of their Island were places of dwelling that were enmeshed with human life in ways that were imaginative as well as material; the land did not exist solely to produce nutmeg and mace" (Ghosh 36). On the other hand, the colonial view is reflected in their capitalistic principles of a profit-driven approach, introducing a nutmeg monoculture while violently carrying out the extermination of the aboriginal people for the sake of economic gains. They do not see these trees as agents in themselves and their interdependence with the natives, but rather look upon them as inert brutes that would convert the island into a lucrative nutmeg-producing factory. The initial act of extermination such as mass killings of animals and deforestation ensures the destruction of vital aspects (42). Ghosh illustrates instances from the text, such as livestock disputes, the extermination of buffalo herds of the Great Plains (68), and the unleashing of violence by destroying the natives' ways of life, through the process of terraforming. This is similar to other events during King Philips's time, when the colonizers indulged in ecological interventions, to curb conflicts that arose between settlers and native people. The settlers attacked natives by destroying the entire web of life that sustained them. Rolston argues that by terminating all diverse life forms, the mistake that humans are committing is stopping the historical vitality of life, as the interruption of biodiversity has disrupted the stability of ecosystems (154). The colonial rule has exploited the resources without concern for long-term consequences. Environmental ethics plays an essential role in dealing with these issues on sustainability, as it calls for reversing the colonial damage, by advocating holistic approaches such as sustainable practices, recognizing the intrinsic values of all beings, conservation, preservation of wilderness, acknowledging indigenous knowledge, and seeking environmental justice.

Resistance movements like that of the native Americans is based on an ethic of familial instinct to protect 'all our relatives,' including the entire spectrum of non-human kin. Ghosh emphasizes that the legal victories won by indigenous peoples on vitalist grounds, highlight the kinship between non-humans and humans. He cites the examples of the Sarayakus, a tiny Kichwa group in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Maori tribe, and similar instances where the indigenous communities have fought for their rights (Ghosh, 237-38). These cases concerning environmental

justice reveal that acknowledging and rectifying historical environmental injustices require placing human and biotic communities together for a more equitable and sustainable future that respects both human and non-human entities. This mandates an ecological responsibility that advocates the welfare of humans and the protection of non-human entities. It challenges us to reorient the economic systems with ethical considerations for the environment. However, one of the major problems with contemporary global capitalist-based development, which Rolston argues, is that the privileged grow more affluent and the poor become even poorer. The unequal distribution of wealth has coincided with increasing environmental consumption, intertwined with issues of overpopulation, overconsumption, and under-distribution, which are now addressed under environmental justice (Rolston 202).

Vandana Shiva in her work titled *The World on the Edge*, argues about the unequal distribution and injustices of environmental risks and the lack of access to a healthy environment among marginalized communities. She critiques global free trade and the deregulated commerce of power and control where "resources move from the poor to rich, and pollution moves from rich to the poor" (112). She also comments on the ecological threat to the food chain, the force feeding of genetically engineered foods where harvesting of safe food is stolen from consumers worldwide (122). Shiva's view on how capitalistic-driven economic value is now a threat to the ecological crisis is evident in her statement, "diversity is replaced by monoculture, the ecological web of life is replaced by the engineering of life, the sanctity of life is replaced by the marketability of life" (129). While capitalism has leveraged economic progress, it also needs to bring in ethical commitments that need to be executed for the welfare of our planet's human and non-human inhabitants. Daniel Faber in his book *Global Capitalism, the Ecological Crisis and the Quest for Environmental Justice*, highlights how environmental injustices are a consequence of global neoliberal ideas. His view that capital accumulation is based on unsustainable consumption of nature is exactly what Ghosh tries to highlight through the nutmeg's story, emphasizing on the threat to ecological democracies.

Global Capitalism and the Biocentric Critique of Planetary Crisis

Ghosh challenges the idea of capitalism by stating that modern citizens have become 'Homo Economicus' (Ghosh, 116), which refers to an individual who acts to maximise his well-being (Jan and Staveren). The idea here is the characterization of an economic man who pursues opulence for self-fulfilling interests to maximise utility. Capitalism as a system is deeply intertwined with the history of imperialism that continues to shape today's market systems, starting from colonial conquests of

mercantilism. Rolston's discussion on global capitalism helps in clarifying why this economic order is ethically incompatible with a biocentric worldview. He argues that the contemporary world faces three linked problems including overpopulation, overconsumption, and under distribution produced by a system in which high net worth individuals are ready to exploit people and nature including animals, plants, species, ecosystems, and Earth itself (Rolston 202).

The Dutch colonial rule associated their power structures with the ideology of global free trade, which allowed them to dominate in securing nutmeg supplies during the colonization of Banda Island. The strategy for economic development requires a tenacious increase of private ownership over natural resources, accelerating industrial monoculture growth, which they have implemented mainly on nutmeg plantations in the Islands of Malaku. It becomes imperative to look at the diverse historical factors that shaped capitalism's development, as its formation has often operated from the colonial conquests beginning from imperialism. Under the facade of trade, the colonization of the Banda Islands was driven by a capitalist motive as the spice trade turned into a global trade economy, which signifies the impact of how non-human subjectivities and their exploitation played an essential role in shaping modern history. Looking at capitalism's development, one must recognize the intertwined relationship between geopolitical dominance and imperialism. An understanding of capitalism is rooted in historical imperialism that is often based on the model of economic rationality built on violence, such as exploitation of labour, mass enslavement, and excessive extracting of resources at the cost of the environment. The idea of unregulated free markets often influences the profits generated from this kind of conquest as capitalist principles align within the system of economic forces rather than environmental sustainability or the well-being of certain indigenous groups. One example is Indonesia's demand for palm oil expansion where the State is determined to increase palm oil production for economic development. As such, Indigenous communities were forced to surrender their unused lands to palm oil companies (Brainard 175). While a capitalist-oriented system may have contributed to the growth of the economic system, it has drawbacks as it creates inequality, income disparity and environmental concerns. Addressing these issues has become a challenge as modern society grapples with the demands of excessive consumerism and advancement in economic growth. With an ever-increasing capitalist economy, there is a demand for ethical regulations that aim to address the most significant issues, such as income disparity and environmental degradation, for the welfare of the most vulnerable groups and our ecosystems. The historical exploration of the Banda Islands in *The Nutmeg's Curse*

challenges us to rethink the interconnected history of colonial ambitions, which has laid the foundation for a capitalist economy at the cost of the environment, which Ghosh believes to be connected to today's planetary crisis. Global capitalistic ideologies often come with practices that erode the cultural diversity of Indigenous communities. The Bandanese Islands are a stark example, wherein colonial rule did not just reshape their economy, but also led to the enslavement of the people of the Island. The narrative reveals how this capitalistic mindset disrupted the harmony between man and nature.

As Çıraklı and Karmakar state in their article "capitalist progress perpetuated an objectifying ethics culminating in a systemic dismantling of human-nature interconnections and the subjugation of the indigenous epistemic structures that believed in the primacy of nature and its enormous role in the web of life" (ii). Particularly within the context of an imperialist economic model, conquest driven by capitalist motives has led to the instrumentalization of nature at the expense of the environment, which has resulted in the degradation of ecological imbalance. As Ghosh points out, "the questions of who is brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis" (Ghosh 195). This explains how colonial Western belief systems have the tendency to categorize certain indigenous groups and the denial of the agency of non-human subjectivities. This raises questions about the power dynamics of the West which tends to devalue the identity of marginalized groups as well as disregard the agency of non-human subjectivities. According to Karmakar and Chetty, the prevailing paradigms of the interrelated history of "colonialism, capitalism, and the anthropocene act as corollaries in perpetrating varied forms of injustice on the environment, indigeneity, and indigenous people" (4). Ghosh challenges the colonial mindset that "have actively muted others by representing them as brutes, as creatures whose presence on Earth is solely material" (195). These unfair practices of historical injustices have led to the demand for social and environmental justice today. In the same way, environmental ethics emphasizes on managing the ecosystem properly, as this will protect natural values and support cultural values to sustain ecological productivity (Rolston 187). However, it is evident that the acceleration of globalization is a direct result of the adoption of colonial practices, where several economic policies have been promoted to spread free trade after the decolonization period. Even then, colonized regions maintained dependency relationships that were initiated during the colonial era (Lodigiani 19). The need of the hour is not to prolong historical dependencies in exchange for environmental damages and social injustices, but ensure environmental justice too, which cannot be confined to human victims

alone, and must address non-human subjects also whose lives "good of their own" (Rolston 111) have been compromised.

Conclusion

As discussed, this analysis contends that *The Nutmeg's Curse* reconfigures the definition of 'subject' by granting non-human entities agency that is grounded in their intrinsic value. It needs to be noted that the history of the Banda Islands cannot simply be understood without attending to the lives, needs, and vulnerabilities of non-human beings. Drawing on Holmes Rolston III's biocentrism, the analysis demonstrates how the life processes of nutmeg trees, volcanic islands, and other more-than-human beings get disrupted by colonial monoculture and capitalist extraction.

The study deepens existing understandings of Ghosh's work and moves beyond readings that treat *The Nutmeg's Curse* primarily as a postcolonial critique of global capitalism, by emphasizing on the sustained environmental ethical vision emerging from the text. Rather than confining the analysis to human victims of colonial violence, this study also shows how Ghosh time and again locates agency and vulnerability in non-human entities. It is fundamental to acknowledge that the nutmeg tree was not just a symbol of trade, but a subject whose ecological needs and forced displacement reveal the moral cost of treating life as capital. This biocentric emphasis shows that Ghosh's narrative is not only about history, but also about who counts as a subject in a multispecies world.

The study also contributes to environmental ethics and environmental humanities by placing Rolston's biocentrism in direct conversation with colonial history and global capitalism. Rolston is often discussed at the level of abstract principle such as respect for life, intrinsic value, duties to organisms and ecosystems. Viewed through the biocentric lens, *The Nutmeg's Curse* shows how biocentric ethics can be applied to concrete histories of terraforming, monoculture, and extraction. It also demonstrates to what extent biocentrism can be stretched, and that questions about intrinsic value cannot be separated from that of environmental justice.

As we face global challenges today, environmental ethics provides scope for making necessary interventions. It is imperative to acknowledge the agency of non-humans by recognizing the ethics of biocentrism, which is centered on intrinsic value and respect for all life. Indigenous people have always considered themselves as an intrinsic part of the web of life and therefore, often view non-humans as agents and sentient beings possessing consciousness and have reverence for the

natural world. Traditional knowledge must be included in the decision making processes regarding environmental issues. It is pertinent to revisit the philosophy of environmental ethics in the neo-liberal era, so as to ensure sustainability, inclusivity and environmental justice.

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Decentering the Human in *Sir Alzafaranah*: Albeshr's Anti-Anthropocentric Perspective

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Abstract Ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary lens for scrutinizing the relationship between literature and environment has been growing rapidly in literary studies and criticism since 1990, reaching many parts of the world (Johnson 2009). In Arabic literature, however, ecocriticism is still in its early stages (Hamoud et al. 2012). In other words, such studies remain relatively rare; hence, opening up the field in Arab academia is greatly valuable for diversifying and enriching contemporary debates. Drawing on ecocritical theory, particularly Glotfelty's insights, among others, this paper examines Badriah Albeshr's *Sir Alzafaranah* (2023) through an ecocritical lens, focusing on the novel's portrayal of the interrelationship between humans and other creatures. It argues that Albeshr has challenged human-centered narratives by emphasizing the agency of nature and the interconnectedness of all living things. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals Albeshr's subtle yet profound engagement with ecological thought and environmental concerns. The story intricately describes the interrelation between humans and nature. Through the characters of Naflah and Zafaranah, the author skillfully illustrates the strong bond between humans and nature and other world creatures, emphasizing the connectivity and affinity between women and nature, in particular. Such keen environmental consciousness positions Albeshr as a distinctive voice in contemporary Arabic/world ecocritical literature.

Keywords anti-anthropocentrism; ecocriticism; Badriah Albeshr; Saudi Novel; ecological consciousness

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Introduction

As a female author in a traditionally conservative society, Albeshr has established a unique space for herself. She used literature to explore complex social issues, particularly those related to women, identity, and the evolving nature of Saudi society. Albeshr's works have been pivotal in highlighting the evolving roles and challenges of women in Saudi society. Her writings often integrate personal narratives with broader social commentary, making her a prominent voice in contemporary Arabic literature. Her contribution to literature and her influence in discussions about gender and society accentuate her prominence in the literary world.

Algahtani (2016) considered Badriah Albeshr a leading member of a new generation of women writers representative of a developmental phase within the Saudi novel who have addressed a range of feminist concerns to advocate for their rights and challenge the patriarchal society. She further observes that those writers used their novels to highlight certain topics such as love, tradition, and sexuality, disseminated through the voices of their protagonists (28).

Indeed, Albeshr has dedicated many of her novels and short stories to feminist issues. Her insight into the inner dynamics of her society has influenced her fictional writings. Hence, Albeshr's novels are characterized by sharp critical discourse and opposition to patriarchal traditions and radical religious restrictions of Saudi society. The central theme in al-Urjūḥa (*The Swing*), for instance, is the resistance of young Saudi women to patriarchal dominance, traditional norms, and the rigid constraints that cause their suffering (Almarhaby 193). Indeed, this has been a defining feature of the Arabic novel since its inception. As Alkodimi observes, a sustained

1 This research is one part of The Special Program of Zhejiang University "Comparative Studies of Languages and Cultures of BRICS Countries: A Perspective of the Global Civilization Initiative"supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of China.

engagement with social issues has constituted an essential aspect of the Arabic novel from its early stages (1).

Her recent novel, *Sir Alzafaranah* (2023), however, shifted the focus to environmental issues. This novel manifests what Glotfelty calls deep "ecological awareness" (xxiii). It is deeply concerned with the human-nature relationship, reflecting the interconnectedness and interaction between humans and the rest of the earthly world. The story, thus, lends itself well to ecocritical interpretation. In other words, Albeshr's description of the interrelationship between humans, animals, plants, and all living things showcases that this text is an ecologically oriented literary work. This paper, therefore, reads Albeshr's *Sir Alzafaranah* through the lens of ecocriticism to highlight how Albeshr's text portrays the intricate relationships between humans, nature, and the interconnectedness of all living beings, and by extension, shows the significance of literature in highlighting such connections. As Veenstra rightly observes, "[t]he relationship between art and society is characterized by processes of negotiation and exchange that are as complicated as those in the economic domain" (186). In this regard, the study highlights Albeshr's anti-anthropocentric perspectives, which align with ecological critiques that challenge the human-centered worldview. As Madsen (2024) puts it, anthropocentrism as a philosophy of life promotes a view of humanity as the conqueror of nature, which has led to environmental degradation worldwide. This perspective, Madsen argues, should be replaced with ecocentric or biocentric worldviews, in which the biosphere becomes the primary focus of ethical and ecological concern.

Several studies have been conducted on Albeshr as an important emerging female voice in Saudi Arabia. Those studies, however, are mostly concerned with her treatment of the patriarchal social system, the changing gender roles, and social transformation. Perhaps this is because gender issues and patriarchal social systems are inseparable aspects of female Saudi novelists, including Albeshr. As Huda Al-Matrafi (2023), for example, notes, a "female novelist is understandably influenced by her life, and gender issues are inseparable for these emerging writers" (179). In her article entitled, *The Power of the Saudi Woman's Novel: From Silence to Empowerment,* Al-Matrafi, for example, points out that *Sitr* (*Covering*) by Raja Alem (2005) and al-Urjūḥa (*The Swing*) by Badriah Albeshr (2010) introduce a world revolving around the concerns of the Saudi woman and the uprising of Saudi women against social restrictions and women's conditions, hopes, and difficulties. Both novelists narrate the Saudi woman's inner personal and social world and, explicitly or implicitly, they reflect the details of their suffering, problems, and

vulnerability as a result of the complexity of the social system. It was not possible to ignore the role of their female characters. In short, the female voices throughout these novels announce an attempt by Saudi women to demand their rights, an ongoing issue that stimulates women's empowerment (Al-Matrafi 184).

Ali M. Alshhre (2024) also rightly observes that Albeshr's writing "endeavors revolve around a dominant literary vision that prioritizes the investigation of women's issues within her social context" (3). In *Gender in revelations: Unraveling gendered struggles and revisiting the Construction of Cultural Identity Paradigms in Badriyah Al-Bishr's Hend Wa alʿaskar (2006),* Alshhre explored the intricate workings of gender dynamics in Badriah Albeshr's *Hend wa alʿaskar*. His study attempted to investigate how the author challenges traditional gender norms through the representation of female characters who strive for liberation. Alshhre states that his reading attempts to explore how the author disrupts established gender norms through the discursive representation of male and female characters striving for liberation and independence. According to him, Albeshr skillfully unravels the complexities of gender roles and constructs a compelling counter-narrative that explores women's journeys towards empowerment in the Saudi context. He simply puts it, she exposes the intricate dynamics of gender roles in the Saudi Arabian context (1-2).

Similarly, in his PhD. thesis, Almarhaby (2016) claims that Albeshr's novels are characterized by "sharp critical discourse and opposition to the patriarchal traditions and radical religious restrictions of Saudi society" (193). According to Almarhaby, criticism of the radical views and behavior of religious extremists in Saudi Arabia is a recurrent theme in all of her novels. In his discussion of Albeshr's al-Urjūḥa as part of his thesis, Almarhaby states that the central theme expressed in the novel's fifteen sections is the struggle of young Saudi women against the patriarchal system, traditions, and authority, as well as the radical religious restrictions that cause their suffering. Hence, Albeshr's al-Urjūḥa, according to him, is concerned, as in all of her novels, with the issues of male domination and injustice against women, adding that Albeshr reveals her theme mainly through the stories of the major female characters, Maryam, Salwā and ʿUnnāb, who are all from Riyadh but from different social classes. Maryam, the problematic heroine, is tribal and middle-class, whereas the others belong to marginalized social groups. Salwā is also middle-class but of Khaḍīrī (non-tribal) origin and ʿUnnāb is of black origin (193).

Alkodimi and Mustafa (2026), on the other hand, using New Historicism as the conceptual framework, analyzed the contextualization of Saudi history in *Albeshr's*

Sir Alzafaranah, providing an in-depth analysis of the representation of social changes as depicted in the novel (4). They argue that the author skillfully employed history as a narrative framework to illuminate the complexities of Saudi society and highlight the profound dynamics of social transformation. Alkodimi and Mustafa have rightly observed that many Saudi novelists, including Albeshr, rely upon social history as a source for writing their novels; consequently, such novels provide detailed descriptions of significant societal issues. As such, these novels primarily focus on portraying the past and present of Saudi society, emphasizing the social changes that have occurred over several decades. Yet, although their study focuses on social transformation that occurred in Saudi Arabia over many years as depicted in Albeshr's story, they contend that those social changes brought about significant social changes pertaining to the empowerment of women and the changes of gender roles (8), which further emphasize that such a theme is a recurrent issue in her work.

However, while Alkodimi and Mustafa's view is generally true, I would argue that Albeshr's *Sir Alzafaranah* reflects a profound engagement with ecological thought and the complexities of the ecosystem relationships. In other words, it illustrates her anti-anthropocentric perspectives. Yet, as far as this study is concerned, no studies and/or little attention has been paid to Albeshr's ecological perspective, especially as expressed in her recent work, *Sir Alzafaranah*. This paper aims to examine Albeshr's anti-anthropocentric perspective, which posits that all living things are equally important. This will be achieved through textual analysis of the narrative, focusing on the novel's portrayal of the man-nature relationship.

Thus, this article contributes to Arabic ecocriticism by extending existing scholarship on ecological consciousness to theorize the environmental imagination in Arabic literature, particularly that of Mohsen and Hashim, Al-Ghafees, and Alkodimi. It highlights how contemporary texts articulate human-nonhuman relations, environmental ethics, and healing practices, providing a nuanced reading that foregrounds ecological themes within Arabic literary traditions. Concurrently, the study engages with global ecocritical debates by examining how local ecological imaginaries intersect with questions of identity and gendered environmental experience. In this way, the article situates Arabic literature within broader ecocritical conversations, demonstrating both its cultural specificity and its resonance with international scholarly frameworks. By bringing Arabic literary ecology into dialogue with international ecocritical frameworks, the article underscores the importance of a more plural, multilingual, and globally attuned environmental humanities.

This paper argues that Albeshr's literary text is widely engaged in ecology,

offering a nuanced exploration of environmental issues and the interdependence between human society and the natural world. In other words, the relationship between man and nature appears to be the driving force behind Albeshr's narrative style, offering rich material for ecocritical analysis. The study employs an ecocritical close-reading approach, examining how the text portrays relationships between human and nonhuman beings, cultivates ecological consciousness, and fosters environmental imaginings. The analysis involves close textual and thematic attention to narrative structure, characters, scenes, and descriptive details that thematize interspecies relations, including moments of direct interaction, empathetic alignment, or shared vulnerability. It also considers the articulation of healing practices connected to the land, nonhuman agencies, or ecological attunement. Furthermore, the analysis examines the engagement of celestial bodies and atmospheric phenomena, exploring how they shape characters' perceptions, ethical orientations, and ecological imaginaries. Passages were selected according to these thematic criteria, focusing on scenes that most clearly illustrate interspecies relations, healing practices, and interactions with celestial or atmospheric elements, ensuring that the analysis highlights the text's ecological and ethical concerns.

Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty puts it, is the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Similarly, Sheenam (2014) defines it as "an approach analyzing the representation of nature in literary texts" (155). Glotfelty further pointed out that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies", just like feminist criticism, which "examines language and literature from a gendered perspective", and Marxist criticism that "brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). Buell (2009), on the other hand, provided a more inclusive definition when he viewed it as an "umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and the art, and the theories that underline such critical practice" (138). Buell's view was emphasized by Glotfelty and Fromm, who rightly observe that ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move towards a more bio-centric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human conception of the global community to include non-human life forms and the physical environment. According to them, texts that indicate an engagement with the world around can be evaluated eco-critically (The Ecocriticism Reader 1996).

Indeed, the notion, "all living, mutually interdependent entities as 'persons' that draw on ancient traditions is at the center of Ecocriticism" (Monani 4). According to ecocriticism, readers appreciate nature, which is represented in literary texts as

beautiful natural aspects, such as plants, flowers, rivers, and animals, as well as the overall structure of the physical environment that encompasses all human and non-human beings (Ismail 1). This critical method, de facto, has been widely used by critics and researchers to analyze works of literature related to nature writing and ecological themes in literature. Drawing on Glotfelty's insights, among others, this paper examines the profound ecological consciousness embedded in Albeshr's text. It focuses on the author's anti-anthropocentric attitude through the representation of the interrelationship between humans and other creatures such as animals, plants and trees.

Albeshr's Ecological Consciousness: Human and Non-Human Bonds in *Sir Alzafaranah*

Arguably, Albeshr's novel offers rich material for ecocritical reading as it is deeply engaged in the "reciprocal interdependence" between man and nature, to use William Rueckert's words (112*).* The narrative reflects Albeshr's non-anthropocentric perspective by centering the interrelationship between human beings and nature. Such ecological consciousness is largely depicted through the mysterious characters, Naflah and Alzafaranah. Naflah, for example, expresses such engagement when she explains how Zafaranah, her mentor, teaches her to love nature and other creatures. As Naflah explains, "she taught me how to love trees, animals, and rocks, she said to me one night: "These are our partners in this life, they have a soul (nafs) but not a spirit (ruh)" (23). Hence, Zafaranah's biocentric attitude succinctly sums up the main concern of Albeshr's text, that man should appreciate other creatures as they are our partners or equally important. In this sense, the author appears to emphasize what Glotfelty refers to, "the reciprocal relationships between humans and land" (xxi).

This view is further emphasized when Naflah reveals that Zafaranah "gave [her] a wondrous talk", then she says, "[d]on't deny beings. Give them your brotherhood and be kind to them, because in God's world, we are human beings who perceive what other beings perceive. Our light is only obscured by pride and vanity" (23). This anti-anthropocentric view of Zafaranah further illustrates Albeshr's ecocritical concern. In other words, through Alzafaranah and Naflah, Albeshr disseminates the ecocritical perspective that other creatures are equally important. In doing so, she elucidates the intrinsic value and interrelationship of all living beings, expressing ecocriticism's view of the concept of "horizontal society" as an ecosystem that emphasizes the coexistence among all living beings (Ismail 142). She seems to articulate in Rueckert's words, the 'first Law of Ecology' that "[e]verything is

connected to everything else" (108).

Having learnt that other creatures are equally important, Naflah admits that she has been completely changed and enlightened. She admits that Zafaranah "took away the darkness from [her] heart and planted light in its place" (25). This symbolically captures Naflah's emotional and intellectual transformation, which has been fully realized through her ecological awareness. This invites the reader to explore the interconnections between humans and the nonhuman world, emphasizing how literature reflects and shapes ecological consciousness. This, indeed, emphasizes the message that the author aims to communicate: "how language and literature convey values with profound ecological implications" (Glotfelty xxv). As Glotfelty points out, in an "increasingly urban society, nature writing plays a vital role in teaching us to value the natural world" (xxiii). This, indeed, is the essence or the main concern of ecocriticism, according to Sheenam (2014), "creating awareness in society about environmental degradation" (155).

In this sense, Naflah's psychological development is not merely an individual awakening but also a reorientation toward a more inclusive, ecological worldview. Her experience of enlightenment, transition from 'darkness' to 'light', reflects a shift from anthropocentrism (human-centered thinking) toward ecocentrism, wherein the intrinsic worth of all living entities is acknowledged. It is as though Naflah was metaphorically wearing dark glasses, blind not only to her inner turmoil but also to the significance of the nonhuman 'other' in her life. Yet, through her exposure to teachings that emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings, she starts to perceive the world in a new way. This ecological "consciousness raising", to borrow Glotfelty's words, has transformed Naflah into a different person, a person who appreciates nature and all living things (xxiv).

In this light, the transformation she undergoes is both psychological and ecological. While the light planted within symbolizes awareness, empathy, and environmental awareness, the darkness removed from her heart may represent ignorance or emotional detachment from the more-than-human world. This metaphor resonates with the ecocritical idea that reconnection with the natural world can lead to personal healing and a deeper understanding of one's place in the web of life. In other words, this shows how engagement with natural environments can promote psychological wellness, foster empathy, and ecological awareness. From an ecocritical perspective, disconnection from nature, especially among children, has profound negative effects on physical health, emotional well-being, creativity, and ecological consciousness. Conversely, reconnecting with nature fosters emotional balance, creativity, resilience, and a deeper sense of identity awareness (Louv 2005,

Kimmerer 2013). Thus, Naflah's enlightenment is not merely a personal awakening but a shift toward environmental consciousness, realizing that the human psyche is intimately tied to the health of the environment and the well-being of all its inhabitants.

Perhaps this is why Naflah ultimately perceives herself as a plant, aligning her identity with other nonhuman beings and engaging in intimate dialogue with them. She explicitly identifies with other creatures, a perspective shaped by her mentor, Zafaranah: "I walked, talking to everything I saw... "I am like them, a weed that grows in the land of the spirits, wakes up and goes away" (78). Hence, in this passage, Naflah's first-person narration and introspective focalization invite readers to inhabit her consciousness, blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman. By representing herself as a weed, she emphasizes resilience, rootedness, and interconnectedness with the land, while the narrative mediation of her voice allows nature itself to be experienced as an active participant in her ethical and ecological sensibilities. Through this technique, the scene deepens our understanding of how identity, empathy, and ecological awareness converge in the text. Naflah's behavior is further emphasized as she addresses the weeds and trees directly, asking, "[d]o you recognize me now? Have you seen me ... The tree seems to know me and I know it" (79). By speaking to nonhuman beings, the narrative not only conveys her deep identification with the natural world but also mediates nature's "voice" through her perspective, allowing readers to experience a reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman entities. This moment reinforces the theme of interconnectedness and positions the natural world as an active participant in both ethical reflection and personal transformation.

In doing so, the author appears to echo Ted Hughes's persona in the poem of the 'Wodow' in which the persona addresses the weeds and asks, "do these weeds know me and name me to each other, have they seen me before, do I fit in their world?" (All Poetry.com 2011). However, while the character in the 'Wodwo' seems to be uncertain about his connection to the weeds, conversely, Naflah is quite certain about her connection to them. Indeed, as the author's mouthpiece, Naflah appears to express Albeshr's ecocritical perspective, the anti-anthropocentric stance by "challenging dominant anthropocentric systems" (Endres 2) that "man is merely a member of the ecosystem and no longer the lord of nature" (Alkodimi 62). According to Endres, anthropocentric belief systems assume that nature is separate from culture, thereby raising humans to a special status outside of nature, the environment, animals, and other non-human beings (3).

To further reinforce the themes of interconnectedness and equality among all

living things, the text personifies various nonhuman creatures, particularly trees and animals. Palm trees, for instance, are addressed as sentient beings capable of feeling and sympathizing with villagers during the smallpox pandemic. In her portrayal of the village's conditions, Naflah elucidates, "only the palm trees remained standing tall, looking at us and raising their hands to the sky, as if praying for our hardship to be lifted" (83). Furthermore, in her exchange with Rahmah, Naflah conveys the notion that a dog can embody virtues that some people fail to demonstrate. She elucidates, "I hit her head lightly and said, "[...] doesn't know the value of a dog. It's more beautiful than humans sometimes. I had a dog that watched over me, even in my sleep, and ..." (227). Hence, the picture of the palm trees that continue praying for people during the pandemic that hit the village, and Naflah's remarks on the innocence of the dog, clearly illustrate how Albeshr uses her narrative style to challenge the 'dominant anthropocentric' discourse, in Endres' words, to convey her message and to emphasize her anti-anthropocentric attitude. This, indeed, demonstrates that the text is grounded in the decentering of the human, thereby reinforcing the notion of a deep interconnection between humans and the natural world.

However, not only is the earthly world important in Albeshr's text, but the sky, along with the moon and the stars. The narrative consistently emphasizes the importance of the moon and stars, particularly in shaping human experiences, which reflects the bond between them and human beings, serving as a guide for those villagers. "The chandelier has returned to decorate the clear sky" (51). Naflah, for instance, clearly admits this when she says that "the moon is almost full. Travelers will use its light at night" (56). She further refers to the significance of the stars in our life: "The star Aquarius hangs low, clouds obscure the sun, and a light, capricious wind blows, ..." (33). Hence, the stars and the moon not only adorn the sky and the natural world but also serve as guides for travelers on land, suggesting that the world is beautifully and meticulously created, with all elements intricately interconnected.

The portrait reaches its peak when Naflah effectively conveys Albeshr's ecocritical sensibility through her detailed depiction of Zafaranah's interactions with animals and plants. From Naflah's perspective, we see that Zafaranah treats animals with the same attentiveness and care afforded to humans: "Her gentle beings follow her. She distributes her greetings to them equally, feeds the chickens, laughs with the baby cattle and kisses them, waters the dam, and jokes with the maidservants" (111). The narrative focalization through Naflah emphasizes not only Zafaranah's compassion but also the seamless integration of human and nonhuman

communities. By presenting these interactions through Naflah's attentive gaze, the text mediates nature's 'voice,' allowing readers to perceive animals and plants as active participants in ethical and social life. This scene thus underscores the text's ecological vision, highlighting relationality, care, and interspecies empathy as central to its moral and environmental framework. This view is further emphasized through the episode with the long insect: "[a] long insect with spiny legs landed and jumped in front of me. I caught it and went to my mother, Saffron. She was hunched over a herb, groping its limbs and singing to it, as she always does, pampering the herbs like her own children ..." (119). Through Naflah's focalized perspective, this scene emphasizes the intimate, reciprocal relationship between humans and plants, highlighting the text's ethical and ecological vision. The narrative mediates nature's 'voice' by showing how attentiveness and care transform ordinary plants into participants in a shared, relational world.

Arguably, Albeshr is an ecocritic par excellence whose novel "manifests ecocritical awareness" that is carried over throughout the text in question (Glotfelty xxiii). The book shifts attention away from human dominance to value nonhuman life, the ecological ecosystems, and the intrinsic worth of nature. The story reflects the author's "deep ecology", to use Arne Naess' term, which emphasizes the "basic interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features" (qtd in Zimina and Sargsyan 244). As such, she used the two female characters, Zafaranah and Naflah, to highlight the interconnectedness of humans and the non-human other. The novel frequently emphasizes the significance of treating those creatures as human beings. This exaggeration reflects the extent to which this text tries to establish/emphasize the interrelatedness of man and nature. In this regard, she also maintains that human cures lie in the environment; trees, plants, as will be discussed in the following section.

Women, Identity, and the Politics of Healing in *Sir Al Zafaranah*

In *Sir Alzafaranah*, Badriah Albeshr crafts a narrative in which women, landscapes, and healing practices are deeply intertwined, offering fertile ground for an ecocritical reading. This section explores how the characters of Zafaranah and Naflah embody a convergence of gendered identity and ecological consciousness, positioning their relationship with nature as both subversive and restorative. Through healing rituals, embodied knowledge, and an intimate connection to the land, these women challenge the patriarchal system that seeks to exploit both female bodies and natural environments, asserting an alternative worldview grounded in interdependence and respect for nature. That is to say, Albeshr uses the figures

of Zafaranah and Naflah to critique dominant power structures and to reimagine healing as a political and ecological act. By foregrounding the intersection of gender, nature, and resistance, the novel engages critically with environmental discourse while articulating a regionally rooted ecofeminist vision, deeply grounded in Saudi cultural and ecological specificities.

Indeed, women play a significant role in Albeshr's text, as evidenced by the presence of two major female characters, Zafaranah and Naflah, which emphasizes the prominence of the female voice in the narrative. More significantly, they are portrayed in a way that shows an intrinsic connection between women and nature. Both of them suffer from the crisis of identity and the patriarchal social system that enslaved Zafaranah and marginalized Naflah. However, while Zafaranah seems to accept her situation as a slave, Naflah, on the other hand, continues to struggle until she changes her social status by marrying Hashem (215). She was a well-known 'Bedouin' figure among women in the village, recalling, "I was known among them as the Bedouin storyteller [...] What I tell became the most important event ..." (45). Naderah addresses her as Bedouin when Naflah visits her at home. "Bedouin! Come closer", Naderah said (34). She further reacts, "[w]e don't marry Bedouins" (34). This may explain why Naflah, as a storyteller, chooses to narrate an allegorical tale about a beautiful Bedouin girl who marries a leader of his tribe (50). She begins, "[th]e tale tells how humans are quick to judge others as inferior. That Bedouin girl's beauty was renowned across the lands" (49). This allegorical story serves as a critique of the human tendency to pass swift judgments and to perceive others as inferior. Through this allegory, Naflah not only highlights the social dynamics within the tribal context but also underscores a broader moral about prejudice and the dehumanizing effects of hierarchical thinking. In doing so, the narrative functions as both a cultural revelation and a commentator, demonstrating how storytelling can be employed as a subtle form of social commentary.

Unfortunately, this inferior social rank has become a source of shame for Naflah. In her conversation with Naderah, Naflah, for instance, goes on, "[t]hen I said, opening my wound for her, "… I'm just a Bedouin, no one will care about me here ..." (91). Her remarks reveal a deep sense of pain and alienation, as she perceives herself to be unworthy of recognition or value within the village community. Her sense of loss is entirely elaborated later when she explains, "[m]y sense of inadequacy and shame of being a poor Bedouin still scratches my heart with the head of a scythe ..." (135). Hence, Naflah's reflection of her psychological state showcases that she is haunted by the fact that she is looked at as a Bedouin girl. "They look at a stray Bedouin like a stray animal ...", she said (136). Her

remarks showcase her deep psychological agony of being marginalized. This feeling tormented her, instilling a persistent sense of inferiority toward all those around her. Her agony has increased when she hears Naderah's mother rebuking her daughter for mixing with outcasts. "Didn't I forbid it, Naderah? What will people say about us? A free woman doesn't buy and sell with the outcasts by herself" (91).

Naflah further elaborates on this point by recounting the case of her brother, who, despite becoming one of the important men, remains defined by his Bedouin origins in the eyes of the village. "He became one of its men [...] but the village never forgot that we were the children of the mud nest ..." (52). Her brother used to fight against those who addressed him with such a low-ranking title. She remarks, "[h]e couldn't bear it as I do when he heard them mock him for being a Bedouin; he'd leap with his whole body and hurl himself at the offender" (54). Unfortunately, Naflah's sense of alienation and estrangement culminates in an identity crisis, encapsulated in her existential question: "Who am I?" (185). This moment signals a deeper psychological rupture, as Naflah grapples with a profound sense of insignificance that erodes her perception of self. Her experience of "transient memory loss" (189) functions not merely as a medical condition but as a potent metaphor for her fragmented identity and disconnection from her past and sense of selfhood. It is a metaphor of identity loss that she suffered from. Interestingly, when she regains her memory, she discovers her true identity, which symbolizes her complete transformation. "I realized who I was, I realized it with Saffron. She goes on, "I knew, despite my darkness, who I am" (190). As Mohsen & Hashim (2015) observe, Arabic literary texts frequently underscore the natural environment as a formative element in identity formation and resistance, revealing the interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds ("Greening of Resistance").

However, despite being marginalized and oppressed, Naflah and Zafaranah are introduced as agents of healing. Zafaranah, in particular, appears to possess extensive knowledge of all herbs and their medicinal uses. She is introduced as the agent of healing. She uses her medical skills to cure/heal illnesses in the village. This, indeed, makes her a significant woman as many people rely on her (30). She becomes a source of life who helps to heal illnesses, particularly during the pandemic (82-85). Naflah, who accompanies Zafaranah to her medical visits, learns the art of healing from her. As she explains, "Zafaranah noticed that whenever I accompanied her to treat a patient and helped in caring for them, I would end up experiencing the same symptoms for a day or two". Zafaranah then tells Naflah, "[t]his happens to every novice healer". She continues, "Do not entangle yourself in the fates of others [...] Do not think too much about your patients' past or future;

just look at them with eyes of compassion and love, and leave their fate to God" (82). "Since that day [...] I became nothing more than a humble servant guiding the patient on the path to healing", said Naflah (82).

In this sense, their roles transcend mere survival; they actively mend the social and spiritual fractures within their communities. Healing, in this context, becomes an act of resistance and renewal, an assertion of agency in a world that has marginalized them. Through their care and resilience, they reimagine power not as domination, but as a means of restoration. *Sir Alzafaranah* thus draws a deep symbolic connection between women, the natural world, and traditional healing. This, de facto, highlights the internal and intricate connection between women and the environment. In other words, it underscores Albeshr's narrative strategies in using the characters of Naflah and Zafaranah to highlight the interrelationship between humans and nature, particularly in relation to women. Indeed, nature with its details in the novel, as Al-Ghafees (2025) puts it in another context, "is not merely a backdrop but shapes the identity of the people in those villages, as they depend on it for their social and spiritual lives" (641).

Moreover, Zafaranah and Naflah's role as healers positions them at the intersection of womanhood and nature, both sources of wisdom and care, yet devalued in modern, patriarchal systems. The two women, for example, appear to have an intimate bond with nature, which highlights the interconnection between them. Their healing practices, rooted in traditional knowledge and intuitive connection to the body and environment, reflect an ancestral wisdom often passed down through generations of women. This alignment not only affirms their authority within their communities but also highlights how female agency can manifest through nurturing, care, and the cyclical rhythms of nature. Such interconnectedness has been powerfully expressed in the explicit comparison between women and the palm tree. "Women standing like palm trees, patient, fruitful, watching with envy those who come and go" (65). Hence, Naflah explicitly compares women to palm trees, a type of tree recognized by its resilience to environmental difficulties. In doing so, the story further emphasizes the close affinity between women and nature, that they are patient, fruitful, and resilient. Hence, the metaphor of the palm trees has been carefully used as a concrete image to highlight that intended connection between women and nature.

To conclude this part, *Sir Alzafaranah* draws a deep symbolic connection between women, the natural world, and traditional healing. The transmission of herbal knowledge can be seen as a form of ecological resistance, preserving indigenous knowledge in the face of elimination. Zafaranah and Naflah's

relationship to healing activities and the natural world places them in historically feminized realms: nurturing, caring and insight of both the corporeal and earthly realms. Their techniques suggest a holistic approach to health and security, vis-à-vis patriarchal models of control. It is, indeed, a thing that brings strength by reaffirming an agency and knowledge based on bodily and ecological awareness. Their work as healers becomes an act of resistance as they reassert their authority through healing practices. Yet, subversively, Zafaranah and Naflah are challenging dominant power hierarchies by adopting these roles as sites of power, rather than weakness. Their harmony with nature becomes a tactic of survival and rebellion, not of subordination. In summary, their interrelation with healing, the corporeal form, and the land encapsulates the tensions explored in ecocriticism, challenging conventional separations between the human and the natural, and exposing the mutually reinforcing structures of patriarchal and ecological oppression. This demonstrates the author's keen ecological awareness. According to deep ecology, the self should be understood as deeply connected with and as part of nature, but not separate from it. Deep ecologists often refer to that conception of human nature as the "ecological self," which represents humans acting and being in harmony with nature rather than against it (Madsen 2024).

Conclusion

This study has examined Badriah Albeshr's novel *Sir Alzafaranah* through the lens of ecocriticism, focusing on her ecological consciousness and the anti-anthropocentric perspective. The findings demonstrate that Albeshr presents a nuanced and deliberate portrayal of nature, challenging anthropocentric paradigms and foregrounding nonhuman agency. Through Naflah and Zafaranah, the author challenges anthropocentric narratives by decentering human dominance and recognizing the agency of non-human entities and ecosystems, affirming the intrinsic value of all life forms. That is to say, Zafaranah's respectful and empathetic engagement with other species reflects a worldview in which nonhuman lives are not subordinate to human interests but are instead recognized as co-inhabitants of a shared ecological space. This portrayal disrupts hierarchical binaries between humans and nature, reinforcing the ecocritical argument that genuine ecological awareness necessitates decentering the human perspective.

By introducing Naflah and Zafaranah as agents of healing, the text underscores the profound restorative power that nature holds for humanity. Their intimate connection with natural remedies and their roles as caretakers illustrate a longstanding association between women and the natural world. This bond is not

merely symbolic, it is rooted in traditional knowledge systems where women have often served as guardians of ecological wisdom and herbal healing practices. Naflah and Zafaranah embody this legacy, illustrating how female figures can channel the nurturing forces of nature to restore balance and well-being. Their presence affirms that healing is not only a physical process but also a spiritual and cultural act, deeply entwined with both gendered experience and environmental awareness.

Hence, through a particular treatment of characterization and species, Albeshr's text demonstrates a strong resistance to the anthropocentric mode, which has dominated modern society. She devoted her language and imagination to creating an awareness of the interconnectedness of landscapes, animals, trees, and humans. Such environmental consciousness contributes to the social function of fiction as it raises environmental awareness. She shows a sense of ecological consciousness and a deeper understanding of the intrinsic connection between environmental awareness and sustainable human existence. In so doing, she introduces herself as a significant voice within contemporary ecocritical thought, deeply committed to environmental ethics and ecological awareness.

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Interior Dialogue and Female Voice: A Feminist Dialogic Reading of Mohammed Abul Wali's "The Land, Salma"

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Abstract Despite the growing application of Bakhtinian dialogism in feminist literary criticism, scholarly attention remains concentrated on Western or female-authored texts, leaving a gap in applying this framework to Arabic literature authored by men. By exploring the dialogic structure of the female protagonist's interior monologue, which constitutes the primary narrative mode in Mohammed Abul Wali's short story "The Land, Salma," this study explores how dialogism can illuminate female interiority in male-authored, non-Western narratives where the interior discourse of a female character can enact ideological resistance and reveal complex negotiations of gendered identity. This narrative strategy allows Abul Wali to construct a nuanced, feminist portrayal of a woman negotiating her identity within a patriarchal context. The present paper, through qualitative close textual analysis, argues that Abul Wali uses interior monologue not merely as a psychological device but as a site of ideological confrontation, staging a complex dialogue between dominant cultural narratives and emergent subversive counter-narratives. Ultimately, the paper situates "The Land, Salma" within broader feminist debates in Arabic literature, particularly in relation to the dialogic representation of the "woman question," gendered voice, and ideological heteroglossia.

Keywords Dialogism; Arabic literature; women's agency; feminist literature; representation.

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Introduction

In response to the stark formalism of the Russian Formalists and the abstract objectivism of Saussurean Linguistics which tended to strip literature of its social roots, Bakhtin and his colleagues—known as the Bakhtin Circle—proposed a counter approach that emphasized the inseparability of language from its social context. Their pioneering ideas paved the way for the reintroduction of the social dimension into literary studies. Viewing language and discourse as inherently social phenomena, they challenged the prevailing structuralist models (Selden and Widdowson 38). Literature, as Salman Rushdie aptly puts it, is "the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way" (16). It is a space where multiple voices, perspectives, and discourses intersect.

Indeed, literature is a pluralistic space reflecting the complexities of society and human experience. Emphasizing this social nature of literature that goes beyond the level of abstract verbalism, Bakhtin (1984) writes in his analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction:

> It could be said that Dostoevsky offers, in artistic form, something like a sociology of consciousness—to be sure, only on the level of coexistence. But even so, Dostoevsky as an artist does arrive at an objective mode for visualizing the life of consciousness and the forms of their living coexistence and thus offers material that is valuable for the sociologist as well. (32)

Bakhtin shows how Dostoevsky, through his artistic technique, captures the coexistence of diverse consciousnesses. He argues that Dostoevsky depicts consciousness as inherently relational and shaped by interaction, thereby presenting valuable insights into human consciousness as a social phenomenon.

Literature, in this view, appears as a means of visualizing and understanding the social dynamics of life. Literature can also function as a means of ideological critique. Drawing on Bakhtin's perspective on language, some scholars argue that fiction by virtue of its formal and imaginative dimensions, can offer a

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distanced perspective that exposes ideological contradictions and enables critical consciousness (Abrams and Harpham 184). In Bakhtin's view (1981), language is not only verbal exchange between people; rather, it is the main factor of inter-relations between self and other (294). Thus, for him, the whole life is dialogic and through its 'dialogicality,' the meaning is always in process of formation and creation because of the dialogic nature of language that is never born in isolation. Even when an utterance does not appear explicitly interactive, it still contains traces of dialogue, as "all utterances involve the, as it were, 'importing' and naturalization of the speech of others, all utterances include inner tensions, collaborations, negotiations which are comparable to the process of dialogue" (Hawthorn 46-47). According to Bakhtin, dialogic relations demand the presence of another person as, at least, a mere listener: "In fact, a fully self-sufficient and isolated consciousness cannot possibly exist: the very process of acquiring self-consciousness from birth to maturity is, in Bakhtin's eyes, utterly dependent upon discursive interaction with another 'I' " (Gardiner 28). This presence of multiple voices is what Bakhtin refers to as 'dialogism' which stresses the dynamic interaction and exchange of ideas between these voices.

A key distinction in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism lies between "authoritative discourse" which demands submission and resists critique, and "internally persuasive discourse" which engages in dialogue with the self and may be integrated into one's personal worldview (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 342-348). According to Bauer and McKinstry (1991), Bakhtin challenges traditional narrative forms through his insights of the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Bauer and McKinstry further maintain that a feminist dialogic reading brings these two discourses together in dialogue (2). Thus, Bakhtin's "dialogism" becomes a valuable lens for analysing how literary texts not only reflect but also question and resist dominant ideologies. This feminist reading facilitates nuanced interpretations of female characters' internal speech, revealing how narrative fiction dramatizes the ideological processes through which these characters internalize, reject, or negotiate dominant social norms.

Through a feminist lens, the present study applies Bakhtinian dialogism to Abul Wali's "The Land, Salma." It attempts to show that dialogism provides a valuable framework for analysing how the female protagonist, Salma, articulates both inherited social values (such as domesticity, womanhood, and sexual restraint) and internally persuasive discourse that contest or reinterpret these values. Based on a textual stylistics analysis of Abul Wali's use of interior dialogic monologue, the present study shows that this narrative technique serves as a site of ideological

struggle, where Salma engages in an inner dialogue shaped by competing discourses of conformity, resistance and autonomy. The dialogic portrayal of female subjectivity underscores the value of Bakhtinian theory in analysing how ideological tensions are embodied and dramatized in "The Land, Salma." Abdul Wali's artistic depiction of Salma's dialogic interiority highlights how her consciousness is shaped by a dialogical interplay between dominant cultural narratives and emergent subversive counter-narratives.

While the term *interior monologue* traditionally refers to a literary technique that renders a character's unmediated, seemingly univocal inner speech, this study reinterprets it as an *interior dialogue* because the protagonist's inner discourse is inherently polyphonic, ideologically plural, and dialogically structured. This is not a mere semantic shift but a theoretical reorientation. This reorientation, grounded in Bakhtin's principle of the inherently social and polyphonic nature of consciousness, reframes Salma's seeming solitude as a site of ideological struggle. Her thoughts are not a private stream but a contested space where multiple internalized voices—of duty, desire, tradition, and resentment—engage in a "double-voiced" dialogue (Gardiner 28-29). In this reading, the internal negotiation of patriarchal constraints becomes the very mechanism of her agency. Introducing this dialogic framework from the outset clarifies the methodological approach and the article's intervention in feminist narratology.

Mohammed Abdul Wali (1940-1973) is, widely regarded as a pioneer of modern Yemeni fiction, known for breaking away from traditional literary forms rooted in religious and historical writing (Al-Maqalih 1999). His fiction introduces a realist portrayal of ordinary Yemenis, especially the marginalized, with a compassionate and often critical lens (Weir 1). As Abdul-Rahman Mohammad (2003) notes, two deeply intertwined subjects define Mohammed Abdul Wali's literary work: immigration and women (226). Although several studies have addressed Abdul Wali's literary works (e.g., Nasser et al. 2024; Rashed 2022; Obaid 2022; Albalawi 2015; Al-Maqalih 2003; Mohammed 2003; Ṣabrah 2002), most of these studies focus on different aspects related to the theme of immigration. The few that consider the issue of women do not provide in-depth analysis of female representation and tend to overlook Abdul Wali's portrayal of women from a feminist perspective. Abdul-Rahman A. Mohammad (2003) presents a concise study, written in Arabic, on Abdul Wali's treatment of women and sexuality. He emphasizes that in most by Abdul Wali's stories, female characters are portrayed in a positive light despite the oppressive realities they face (226). Also, in her introduction to *They Die Strangers*, a novella and short stories from Yemen and

the first work by Abdul Wali to be translated into English, Shelagh Weir (2001) notes that Abdul Wali depicts Yemeni village women as "sad, repressed, abandoned victims" (9) to highlight the negative effect of male long-term immigration.

To contextualize this gap, it is necessary to situate the present study within broader feminist debates in Arab literary criticism. While feminist readings of Yemeni literature remain limited, this article aligns with wider Arab feminist discussions on women's agency and representation. Foundational works by Miriam Cooke, Nadje Al-Ali, and Elora Shehabuddin highlight the complex ways Arab women negotiate patriarchal, political, and communal expectations. The present study's dialogic approach resonates with these perspectives by foregrounding the plurality of voices within Salma's interior monologue and illustrating how competing social discourses shape her self-understanding. In contrast to frameworks such as postcolonial feminism or Islamic feminism—which focus primarily on material, historical, or religious structures—a Bakhtinian dialogical perspective emphasizes the dynamic interplay of internal and external voices that constitute Salma's agency. This approach complements existing feminist methodologies and positions the analysis within contemporary Arab feminist literary discourse.

This analysis of agency in Abdul Wali's text also engages directly with broader feminist debates on Arab women's representation. It echoes Miriam Cooke's concern with how literary form shapes feminist resistance—particularly in her analyses of war narratives and the postcolonial Arab novel (Cooke 1988, 1996)—and draws on Nadje Al-Ali's attention to the intersectional social and political pressures shaping women's lives in the Arab world (Al-Ali 2000, 2007). It further resonates with Dalal Sarnou's (2016) application of a Bakhtinian feminist lens to Arab women's writing, demonstrating how dialogic strategies function to navigate patriarchal discourse. While these scholars often centre women's own activism or writings, the present article extends such feminist inquiries to the analysis of a male-authored narrative, asking how the dialogic representation of female consciousness may perform similar critical work.

Within this broader context, however, a notable gap persists in applying dialogic feminist frameworks to male-authored Arabic literature, particularly in the Yemeni context. Although dialogism has gained traction in feminist criticism, its application has largely focused on female authors or Western texts, leaving the complex representation of female interiority in male-authored narratives from non-Western contexts relatively underexplored.

Therefore, attempting to fill this gap in the literature, the present study provides a feminist dialogic reading of Mohammad Abdul Wali's short story الأرض ياسلمى

[Al-Arḍ Yā Salmā], translated by Abu Baker Bagader and Deborah Akers into English under the title "The Land, Salma" in *They Die Strangers* (2001). It shows that dialogic structure can illuminate female interiority in male-authored, non-Western narratives where the dialogic discourse of a female character can enact ideological resistance and reveal complex negotiations of gendered identity. It shows that it is in dialogism, as Bakhtin tells us, identity develops; it is through the illumination of the conflicts between the multiple voices, as this paper will attempt to show, Salma's identity develops. The reader can trace the struggle of the protagonist for agency and detect how despite her restricted freedom, she does not yield but she determines to bring a change in society that helps improve women's conditions.

Mohammed Abdul Wali's "The Land, Salma": An Overview

Abul Wali's short story "The Land, Salma" appears in his first short story collection which bears the same title as the story itself, issued by Dar Al-Adab in Beirut in the mid-1970s. As Abdul Aziz Al-Maqalih (2003) notes, "after the publication of this first collection of his short stories, Mohammed Abul Wali had become the pioneer writer of the modern short story in Yemen" (8). Al-Maqalih further emphasizes that Mohammad Abdul Wali is considered as "the pioneering figure of the Yemeni modern fiction without dispute" (8). Al-Jumly et al also state that Mohammad Abdul Wali "is one of the most masterful fiction writers not only of Yemen but of the Arab world" (41).

Abdul Wali's "The Land, Salma" is set in the second half of the twentieth century, a critical period in Yemen's history during the Imamate regime (1948-1962) marked by rigid social hierarchies and deep patriarchal values. The narrative opens with a brief third-person narrator introducing the protagonist, Salma, a Yemeni village woman, as she works the land preparing it for the anticipated rainfall. Upon returning home, the rain begins to fall, preventing her from the usual outdoor work, so she rests in her room. Meanwhile, the narrative shifts to Salma's interior monologue, revealing her emotional isolation after her husband, Dirham, who immigrated five years ago, unaware she was pregnant. Salma grapples with conflicting thoughts: while one voice recalls her domestic duties and roles, another voice reveals her aspirations for personal freedom and her escapist fantasies. She worries that her husband might marry and never return, while also fantasizes about love with a young man named Hassan.

The inner dialogue continues to become more intense as we hear the voice that tempts her with ideas of divorce and emotional fulfilment swiftly conflict with

another that highlights the harsh realities of her gendered position: inaccessible divorce, unlikely remarriage, and limited freedom. Finally, her internal confrontation leads to a hard-won clarity: not to pursue fantasy but to root herself in something lasting. Salma realizes that like her husband and other men in the village, Hassan would also immigrate, leaving her to care for his parents and land. Meanwhile, Salma's inner voice fades, followed promptly by her son entering the room. She then firmly decided to teach him to love the land. She chooses the land, which she has toiled on, and which sustains her and her son. The story ends with Salma having a clear purposeful mission to tackle the roots of immigration by empowering the next generation to find value in staying in their land.

Dialogism, Interior Dialogue, and Feminist Ideology in Narrative Prose

The application of dialogism to literary analysis has significantly enriched critical approaches to the study of voice, ideology, and self-representation in narrative fiction. Originating in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism conceptualizes language not as a neutral or unified system but as a socially and ideologically saturated field in which multiple worldviews coexist and engage in dynamic tension (Smith 45). Central to this theory of dialogism is the concept of polyphony, or the "multiplicity of voices" in a text, which shows the coexistence of conflicting and unmergeable ideological positions within a single narrative (Morris 49).

Bakhtin (1984) situates literary language within a broader sociopolitical framework, affirming that every narrative voice embodies a "particular point of view on the world" (Bakhtin 47). According to Bakhtin, these voices generate "heteroglossia," a condition in which diverse and often conflicting socio-ideological perspectives are revealed through language (291). "Heteroglossia" thus signals not mere stylistic variation, but ideological contestation enacted through discourse.

A central aspect of Bakhtin's theory is the contrast between "authoritative discourse," which demands submission , and "internally persuasive discourse," which interacts with the self and may shape personal belief. Bakhtin (1981) explains: "Authoritative discourse [...] demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" (343). He further stresses: "The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what fills the structure of the dialogue and in fact determine its entire stylistic profile" (342).

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism has been extended into psychological domains, most notably through Hubert J. M. Hermans' Dialogical Self Theory (DST). Drawing on Bakhtin, Hermans (1996) conceptualizes the self as a dynamic

multiplicity of "I-positions," each representing a distinct internalized voice, whether from personal experience, social roles, or cultural authority. In this framework, intrapersonal communication mirrors interpersonal dialogism, as identity becomes an ongoing negotiation between these various internal positions (Hermans and Dimaggio 35). Inner dialogue, as theorized by DST, plays a crucial role in psychological functions such as self-reflection, conflict resolution, and identity construction. Further, studies have shown that self-talk encompasses both evaluative and emotional functions, including self-criticism, self-reinforcement, self-management, and social judgment (Brinthaupt et al. 90). The presence of what DST calls confrontational dialogues (conflicts between opposing internal voices) underscores the dialogic nature of the self as it navigates diverse and often conflicting social expectations. In literary texts, such inner dialogues often serve to dramatize internal ideological tensions, portraying characters who grapple with competing discourses and contradictory desires.

Although in his literary analysis, Bakhtin himself neither addressed feminist concerns or gender topics directly, nor he referenced female authors, prominent literary feminist theorists, including J. Kristeva (1966), S. Lanser (1992) and D. Bauer (1988), have drawn on his ideas to explore how narrative fiction gives voice to marginalized and gendered subjectivities. Significantly, the first English rendition of some of Bakhtin's thoughts appeared in Julia Kristeva's seminal essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in 1966 (Gasparyan 126). Hence, the initial introduction of Bakhtin's ideas to Western literary analysis is closely associated with Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's work plays a key role in bringing Bakhtin's thought to the attention of Western scholars and stimulating academic interest in his theories (Gasparyan 126). In this text, Kristeva integrates Bakhtin's notions of "dialogism" and "carnival" with semiotic theory, laying the groundwork for the foundational concept of "intertextuality." Likewise, Lanser (1992) in *Fictions of Authority*, provides a crucial bridge between feminist narratology and Bakhtinian dialogism by theorizing narrative voice as a locus of both power and ideological positioning. She argues that female-authored texts often subvert dominant narrative conventions through what she calls "communal voice" and strategic disruptions of narrative authority, anticipating the kind of multiplicity that Bakhtin describes. Vice (1997) further clarifies the theoretical foundation of this tradition by outlining how Bakhtin's core concepts—such as heteroglossia, polyphony, and internally persuasive discourse—illuminate the ideological tensions and dialogic multiplicity inherent in narrative voice. Together, these works meet in viewing the self not as a stable or unified subject, but as a site of ongoing ideological negotiation, echoing Bakhtinian

conceptions of discourse and identity.

More recent scholarship extends these insights into broader geographic and cultural contexts. Bakar, Yusof, and Vengadasamy (2016) apply a feminist dialogic lens to Southeast Asian drama, highlighting how female characters use dialogic strategies to contest authority and assert autonomy within the Southeast Asian socio-political context in Malaysian drama. Moving to Arabic context, Sarnou (2016) examines how Anglophone Arab women writers employ dialogic and polyphonic strategies to construct ideologically complex and politically significant narrative voices. Her work clarifies how combining feminist concerns with narratological approaches informed by both Bakhtin and Lanser enables women writers to navigate and challenge patriarchal discourse. Moreover, Diana Gasparyan (2023) traces the feminist appropriation of Bakhtinian ideas, pointing out: "Their initial introduction was deeply intertwined with the evolution of feminist theory, feminist criticism, and discussions surrounding gender identity" (125). Gasparyan argues that Bakhtin's theory provides a fertile ground for feminist interpretive strategies, demonstrating its relevance to discussions of power relations, cultural marginalization, and political resistance (126-127). While she acknowledges the adaptation of Bakhtin's ideas to foreground female subjectivity and articulate gendered voices, she stresses that "to truly harness their potential, there is an imperative to engage with them holistically" (138). Therefore, applying Bakhtin's dialogic theory to a male-authored, non-Western text within feminist analysis requires methodological caution. As many feminist theorists have noted, Bakhtin's work does not explicitly account for gendered power relations, raising questions about how female interiority is mediated within such narratives. This necessitates a critical reflection on the application of Bakhtinian dialogism, as Salma's voice is inevitably mediated by Abdul Wali. We must therefore navigate the tension between interpreting her resistance and acknowledging the authorial framework that contains it. The feminist potential of the text thus lies not in claiming an unmediated female consciousness, but in analysing how the dialogic space *within* the narrative opens a possibility for subverting the very patriarchal logic that the author himself may have consciously or unconsciously documented. It is in this constructed, contested dialogue that Salma's agency—and its structural implications—becomes most powerfully legible.

In short, these feminist studies demonstrate that dialogism serves as a powerful tool for feminist literary criticism by disrupting the notion of a singular, authoritative narrative voice and highlighting the presence of multiplicity, ideological conflict, and discursive resistance. Within this framework, female characters are depicted not as fixed identities but as dynamic, contested spaces where inherited norms and

subversive counter-narratives co-exist and interact. Within this feminist analysis, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism offers valuable insights into how, in the text under study, the female protagonist's subjectivity is dialogically constructed through competing internal voices, each shaped by a specific worldview.

It is worth noting here that while the term "interior monologue" conventionally refers to a character's unmediated inner speech or a discourse with one voice, interior monologues reveal intrinsic dialogism among different voices (Riccioni and Zuczkowski 268). The present study adopts the term "interior dialogue" to emphasize the inherently dialogic structure of the interior monologue in the text under study. Michael Gardiner distinguishes the *dialogic* word from the *monologic* one in two respects:

> Unlike the monologic word, which always 'gravitates towards itself and its referential object,' the dialogic word is locked into an intense relationship with the word of another. It is always addressed to someone - a witness, a judge or simply a listener - and it is accompanied by the keen anticipation of another's response. Nor is the dialogic word a passive vehicle of neutral description or information: because it is designed to provoke a response, to initiate dialogue, it is an 'arena of battle between two voices' and is charged with polemic, parody, evaluation and so on. This is what Bakhtin means when he refers to the dialogic utterance as being 'double-voiced', 'vari-directional', and 'multi-accented'. (Gardiner 28-29)

These two aspects are considered in this study exploring the quality of dialogism in Salma's interior monologue. As this study seeks to demonstrate, Salma's inner speech is not monologic; it is not a passive vehicle of neutral description or information. Rather, it is intended to incite a response and to open dialogue; it is a site of struggle between two voices. Hence, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of "internal dialogization" (or "microdialogue," a contemporary term inspired by Bakhtin's notion of internal dialogization in Dialogical Self Theory), the analysis treats Salma's inner discourse as a site where multiple I-positions and competing voices coexist and interact. Even in the absence of external conversation, her inner speech becomes polyphonic, a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal ideological forces. Hence, the shift from *monologue* to *dialogue* is not merely terminological but conceptual, reframing the protagonist's consciousness (conflicting thoughts, un-reconciled strivings, competing discourses regarding her roles in a patriarchal society, her desires, her reflections on the judgements of others, and so on) as a

space of ideological tension and feminist resistance.

Entering the Dialogue: Inner Speech and Polyphonic Consciousness

The story opens in a rural Yemeni village, where the protagonist, Salma, is labouring in the fields, preparing the land for the anticipated rain. As she returns home, the rain begins to fall, interrupting her work and forcing her indoors. This enforced pause in her physical activity becomes a rare and significant moment of stillness that allows her to chill alone and connect with herself; "Everyone in the house was asleep, and Salma found herself alone in her room" (95). This moment of stillness becomes a fertile ground for inner dialogue. This quiet space, when the external world is muted, is the narrative's entry point into her inner speech. Salma's shift from outer work to inward dialogue is critical: it signals the spatial and psychological transition that facilitates her dialogic consciousness. It is an "interior chronotope," where the linearity of action pauses and a space opens for self-dialogue. In such moments, time is charged with significance. It is here that the ideological becoming of Salma's being is established. We see Salma's "imagination leads her away" (59), indicating the first break from social routine.

Salma listens to a whispering inner voice: "Salma, finally, you're facing yourself, you must admit the truth; don't run away from yourself, for that won't help you" (95). This voice initiates the internal dialogue that frames the rest of the narrative. This voice is not merely a thought, but a dialogic utterance, a second self-speaking to the first. It addresses Salma directly, using the second person "you," as if standing apart from her, casting judgment and posing questions. This juncture is the pivotal dialogic moment, where external time slows, allowing interior voices to emerge and Salma's ideological transformation to begin. This reminds us of Bakhtin's words, "in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is— and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well" (252). This voice starts to confront and interrogate Salma:

> Admit it, you've been waiting for him a long time and can't bear it any longer. Try to remember how long your husband Dirham has been away. Five years, exactly. Oh, Salma, five years and you are starting the sixth year of waiting. How old are you? Count, you don't need to rush. You're twenty-six years old. Yes, you've started to feel that you're getting old—quickly, without noticing and without enjoying life. (95)

The dialogue here appears between different parts of Salma. In other words,

Salma seems to be other or two-faced, within herself. This evokes what Mikhail Bakhtin terms 'polyphony,' where the self is not singular but composed of multiple, interacting consciousnesses. Through this voice Salma's subliminal fears and desires are revealed; we are allowed to know what is unsaid or suppressed. It is a rebellious feminist voice through which Salma confronts herself as being trapped by her marriage to Dirham who has immigrated behind the sea abandoning her for five years. As years pass, she worries about aging and desires to enjoy life.

Interestingly, this voice is not a unified monologue; it exemplifies what Bakhtin calls an "internally persuasive discourse". This voice confronts and interrogates Salma, echoing what Bakhtin (1984) calls the "multi-voicedness of consciousness" (35). It presents her with facts she knows but avoids admitting, pulling her into a deeper awareness of her lived contradictions. It openly challenges her suppressed feelings, telling her: "Admit it, you've been waiting for him a long time and you can't bear it any longer." The voice then continues its interrogation: "How old are you?" The answer follows: "You're twenty-six years old." Here, Salma is both speaker and respondent, the subject and object of her own inquiry.

Through this "internally persuasive discourse"—which conflicts with the "authoritative discourse" that suppresses her desires and fears—Salma's consciousness begins to be reshaped. Reflecting on her emotional unfulfillment and loss, this inner voice confirms: "Yes, you've started to feel that you're getting old—quickly, without noticing and without enjoying life." In this moment, we trace a critical point of personal growth, as Salma's consciousness starts to grapple authentically with the full weight of her situation.

Voices in Tension: Salma's Dialogic Struggle with Her Selves

The narrative moves back in time, continuing and intensifying the internal dialogue that dominates the story's structure. Salma's dynamic conversation between her conflicting inner voices manifests most clearly when one voice recalls past events while another simultaneously interrogates and critiques them, creating sustained dialogic tension. For instance, one voice nostalgically asserts: "You were happy to get married to Dirham" (96). Yet this is immediately challenged by a counter-voice: "But Salma, did you really love Dirham? No, I don't think you did" (96). We clearly hear two selves: the young Salma, whose heart was full of joy at marriage, and the present Salma, interrogating the true foundation of that joy. The dialogic struggle continues: "Then what was the secret of that happiness of yours?" (96). This is not just narrating the past; it is rigorous self-questioning. The interrogative voice investigates her own motives, challenging her past assumptions.

The hidden reality behind her 'joy' is revealed by this deeper, questioning self, which rhetorically asks: "Was it because you were a young girl or that you thought you would be freed from your father's house? From the hard work you did there? Did you think you would find peace and comfort at your husband's house?!" (96). Notably, throughout this internal dialogue, no single voice dominates or offers a definitive conclusion. Instead, the narrative unfolds in a state of open-ended self-examination, exemplifying Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, where multiple consciousnesses coexist and interact without final synthesis.

Salma's internally persuasive voice persists, but its tone now shifts to one of discontent and weariness. This voice interrupts her submissive self, actively challenging the narrative of endurance. It catalogues in detail the nature of her life of toil, the suffering she has endured in her husband's house for ten years:

> You woke up every day before the dawn prayer, milked and fed the cow, then went to the well. After filling your water jar, you came home to fix your husband's breakfast. At noon, you went to the fields to work with your-father-in-law, plowing, sowing and clearing, only to return home exhausted to fix lunch: you ground the grain, knead the dough, and baked the bread to feed your husband.
>
> After lunch he left to chew qat. You rarely had lunch, which was usually your breakfast, too: bits of bread with bits of coffee beans or a pudding with milk.
>
> Then it was after-the-lunch work: washing clothes, going to the mountain to collect firewood, going to the well again at sunset to get the evening water and then cutting grass for the cow. You fix dinner and offered it to your husband … you lay down midnight dead tired and wake up at the dawn prayer call to work again- till you were exhausted. (96-97)

The internal voice here confronts Salma with the crushing strain of her labor, signaling that her patience is exhausted. This serves not only to reveal her burdens but to critique the traditional gender roles that cast women as domestic servants. Crucially, this voice also seeds defiance. It sparks a vision of autonomy and self-worth, enacting a form of resistance that challenges patriarchal oppression.

Salma's perception of change—what may have once felt like progress—is reinterpreted by this inner voice as a shift in subjugation. It states bluntly, "This has been your life, every day", and then, with palpable discontent, demands, "Has there been anything new in the last ten years?" (97). Salma grows aware that the supposed liberation of her marriage to Hassan was merely a replacement of one patriarch with

another. This realization is captured in her regretful reply: "It's the same life you used to live at your father's house. Nothing has changed except your boss—first your father, then your husband" (97). In the tension between past happiness and present exhaustion, between love and illusion, the writer dramatizes the polyphony of Salma's selfhood. This internal dialogue establishes a direct chronological confrontation between her present awareness and her past submission.

Dialogism becomes sharply present as an agitating thought creeps into Salma's mind: the suspicion of her husband's infidelity. This causes her two inner voices to grow even more intense and alarming. A voice of doubt tells her:

> You waited for his return to you and his child. A year passed. And another. And five years, but still he hasn't appeared. He's still alive overseas, over there. Across the big sea, the one they say has no end.
> How do you know, Salma, whether he's alone or not? (97)

Yet, a soothing voice tries to calm her and alleviate the burden of this dreadful doubt: "Don't tremble and turn pale. It's merely a thought, a guess" (97). The voice of doubt, however, is neither silenced nor placated. Instead, it grows more forceful, intensifying her fears:

> He might be alone, and he might not. No one trusts men, especially when they are far away, unseen by the familiar eyes. Why should your husband be any different? You know the story of your uncle, Zaid, who deserted his wife for twenty years. He is alive and has a wife and children. They say one day he will return to his first wife, who still waits for him. (97)

These internal voices continue to operate in collision, with neither overcoming the other. While the first voice presses its rhetorical interrogation—"Why won't your husband do the same. Yes, why wouldn't he cheat on you?"—the second contradicts its premise by responding, "[t]he truth is unknown; it's there overseas with your husband" (97). This dynamic embodies the true nature of dialogism: the two voices coexist in unresolved tension, where no single perspective has the final word. Each maintains its integrity, contributing to the polyphonic diversity that sustains the story's ongoing internal dialogue.

Salma's internal dialogue deepens into another layer of multiplicity, marked by further conflicting voices. One voice yearns for autonomy and emotional fulfillment through a happy marital life with Hassan, the man she loves. In stark contrast,

another voice articulates the weight of internalized social codes, shame, and patriarchal control. Salma's fantasy of divorcing her absent husband and beginning a new life emerges through a voice that openly challenges her repressed desires:

> "The truth, Salma, is that you're wearing make-up for him, for Hassan."
> "No, no—don't let your heart flutter. Don't get embarrassed and blush—you'll reveal your secret." (98)

This voice gives utterance to Salma's "unspeakable" thoughts, echoing what Bakhtin (1984) identifies as "extreme internal dialogisation" (237). However, it is immediately conflicted by another voice, one shaped by social surveillance and internalized as guilt and fear:

> Haven't you noticed that for the past two days everyone has been following you with eyes full of doubt? Haven't you noticed? Why are they throwing those silent looks your way? You're smart, Salma. You know. You're wearing make-up. Yes, make-up. They haven't seen you wear make-up since your husband left five years ago. (97-98)

Though the internally persuasive voice offers quiet resistance, affirming, "There is nothing wrong with loving someone" (98), the authoritative patriarchal voice asserts its ideology: "But it is shameful to betray another. You betray your husband when you love someone else" (98). It further enforces a gendered double standard, forbidding her from reciprocating her husband's infidelity: "Don't think about acting like him, cheating on him" (98). Through this voice, the reader's attention is drawn to the hypocrisy of gender roles in Salma's world, where men may leave, cheat, and remarry, while women are bound by expectations of loyalty and silence.

This dialogic interplay reflects not only Salma's psychological fragmentation but also her internal struggle between personal desire and societal expectation. The tension, shaped by gendered double standards, is crystallized in the internalized voice of patriarchal morality confronting her: "A woman in your position here doesn't have the right to love whom she wants, nor to enjoy her youth" (98). This voice articulates the full weight of oppressive ideology, asserting that "a woman is merely a servant. The man marries her to serve his parents. He leaves her to go far away and not come back. She doesn't have the right to seek divorce. Divorce is disdained" (98).

Significantly, the very articulation of these beliefs within Salma's consciousness demonstrates her growing awareness of her oppression, while

simultaneously opening them to internal scrutiny and criticism. Here, the text reveals a nascent feminist perspective, implicitly questioning the injustice of these prescribed roles.

Thus, Salma's conflicting inner voices stage the central ideological conflict of the text: patriarchy versus self-determination. The patriarchal logic denies her the right to divorce an absent husband or pursue love and happiness. Yet a competing, internally persuasive voice insists, "Divorce is something you'd like since you would enjoy the life that your husband has stolen" (98). The presence of this counter-voice—expressing her repressed desires for autonomy and fulfilment—reveals a self that is dialogically fragmented, not unified. In sum, this layering of memory, social norms, judgment, and desire shows that Salma's subjectivity is constructed polyphonically, through a contested chorus of voices rather than a single, authoritative perspective.

Attainment of Dialogic Agency and Meaning-Making

This dialogic struggle culminates in Salma becoming fully aware of her aspirations, fantasies, and submissive subjectivity. By weighing her options, she demonstrates that she is not passively accepting her circumstances. She actively engages in critical thought about her situation, reflecting: "But, Salma, what can you do?" (98). This question initiates an active search for a way to change her life, highlighting her growing agency amid conflicting internal voices.

She then begins to consider the potential consequences. She recognizes that love with Hassan and divorce from her absent husband may not bring positive change: "You won't gain a thing by loving Hassan" (98). Furthermore, she weighs the negative consequences of divorce—namely, the potential loss of her son's future and her connection to the land: "Where will your child go? […] How could you leave your land and for whom? [...] Nobody values the land like you do. […] Isn't the land your life? (98). This voice further frames Hassan as a duplicate of her husband—another man who will ultimately immigrate, leaving behind a woman to serve his family and work the land. It warns her that even if she divorces and remarries, "he [Hassan] won't live in the village forever. He will depart tomorrow, leaving behind a woman to serve his parents, to work the land" (99). The voice presses the point home, asking: "Even if you were that woman—what's the difference between your present life and life in his house?" (99) It then answers definitively: "There is no difference, Salma, no difference" (99). Thus, Salma realizes her situation would remain fundamentally unchanged. Through this internal debate, the reader recognizes that male emigration plays a key role in structuring the

challenges faced by Salma and other women in the village, locking them into cycles of servitude and abandonment regardless of their personal choices.

At this moment of awareness, the "dialogic self" fades, and the narrator returns, shifting the imagery to the rain and the land presented at the story's opening. We see the rain fall softly, music-like, nurturing the land. The narrator observes, "the water streams on the terraces embraced the dry, yellow roots, giving them life" (99). This interplay between rain and land, recalling the opening scene's 'thirsty' earth, emphasizes themes of growth and change, suggesting that even in difficult times, there is potential for a new beginning.

This natural metaphor parallels Salma's emotional shift from passive endurance to growth and active decision-making. Holding her son, she decisively determines: "I will teach him. I will teach him to love the land" (99, italics in the original). Her decision to teach her son to love the land is the act that enables her to instigate change, signifying a new beginning. The dialogic struggle thus culminates in Salma locating herself within the discursive multiplicity and making a definitive choice. The agency reflected in this act is not a simple assertion of will but the active process of navigating a dynamic, multifaceted internal dialogue to arrive at a decisive resolution.

Indeed, this is the moment when Salma reclaims her agency. She neither yields to the authoritative social voice—surrendering to despair and submission—nor escapes into the romantic dream of marrying Hassan. Instead, she reclaims agency by choosing to invest in her son, in continuity, and in a legacy of rooted resistance.

Salma's mission to teach her son to love the land is a form of agency that is feminine, maternal, moral, and strategic. It is not the agency of public rebellion but the agency of transformation from within—of planting new values in her society. In a society where men leave the land and women are left behind, raising children who value it is an act of resistance against structural forces: migration, patriarchy, and abandonment. She uses her maternal role to reshape the future, both for women and for society as a whole.

While Salma's decision to root her son's identity in the land signals an act of resistance, it also invites counter-readings. One could argue that her return to the land risks reinscribing traditional gender roles by locating her agency within the maternal sphere and confining her influence to domestic space. Yet, as scholars of agency within constraint have shown, such margins can themselves become powerful sites of critique. Drawing on Stuart Hall's discussion of the margin as a space with its own political logic, Miriam Cooke (2015) observes that the social periphery often functions as a locus of resistance (107-108). Similarly, Saba

Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that agency can operate productively within socially prescribed roles. This perspective is powerfully affirmed by feminist theorists who frame motherhood itself as a site of empowerment. Bell hooks (1984) argues that motherhood can be a profound source of personal and political affirmation (87), while Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes it fosters a culture of resistance within marginalized communities (178).

These conceptual frames help us see how Salma's maternal agency operates. Sara Ruddick's (1989) concept of "maternal practice" reframes mothering as intellectual and political labour aimed at preserving and nurturing future life. In this light, Salma's pedagogy constitutes a profound maternal practice that resists a destructive social cycle. Audre Lorde (1984) similarly identifies maternal love as a transformative source of empowerment against oppression. Furthermore, James C. Scott's (1985) notion of "everyday resistance" highlights how subtle, quotidian acts can subvert dominant power relations. Viewed through these lenses—Cooke's margin, Ruddick's practice, and Scott's resistance—Salma's teaching is not a passive gesture but a deliberate, strategic form of resistance. It imagines a different social order, one in which a man's connection to the land mitigates the patriarchal cycle of abandonment.

This is a structural feminist intervention. In Abdul Wali's fictional world—as in many Yemeni communities—the cycle of male out-migration is sustained by a gendered ideology that valorizes men's departure as economic duty while rendering women's suffering invisible. By cultivating in her son an attachment to the land, Salma symbolically interrupts this generational cycle: she plants the idea of rootedness as an alternative to the masculine ideal of departure. This act reframes the future not around the father's absence but around a mother's vision for stability, belonging, and communal continuity.

Ultimately, Salma's power lies in her dialogic self-awareness, in her refusal to be pacified by either submission or fantasy. She listens to her fears, desires, duties, and doubts and finally takes a decision. By doing so, she constructs a quiet but powerful act of resistance: to remain, to cultivate, and to teach. Consequently, Salma is neither a tragic heroine nor a submissive figure; she is a woman who thinks, doubts, endures, and resists. Her final decision, "I'll teach him to love the land," is not a surrender but a reclamation of agency—a decision forged in dialogue, in contradiction, and in the soil beneath her feet.

Conclusion

Though formally an interior monologue, the protagonist's inner discourse is deeply

dialogic, echoing Bakhtin's notion of internal dialogization. Salma's story is not told by one Salma, but by Salma's multiple selves, who debate, confront, and question each other. These multiple voices exemplify Bakhtinian dialogism in literary character construction. This narrative technique makes Abdul Wali's depiction of his female protagonist complex and obliterates the authorial voice throughout the entire story. Salma's self-consciousness, to quote Bakhtin (1984), is "represented and not merely expressed, that is, […] does not become the mouthpiece for [the author's] voice" (51). "The Land, Salma" is not a reflection of Abdul Wali's views regarding his female protagonist, but both a critique of the oppressive patriarchal system and hegemonic discourses about women and a recognition of female agency and struggle.

Earlier in the story, Salma appears in a dilemma; she is emotionally fragmented, weighed down by loneliness, desire, social norms and expectations and shame. Her inner voice reflects doubt, aspirations, fantasies and internalized oppression. But by the end, she chooses a direction, and that choice gives her strength. Though she doesn't change the oppressive system, she makes meaning from within it: finding her own voice amidst conflicting forces. Interestingly, Salma's agency echoes Bakhtin's notion of agency as emerging through dialogue (rather than against it) and it also aligns with feminist dialogic theory as Salma asserts meaning in the very space where voices clash.

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Navigating Between Necrocene and Hope in Edward Bond's Dramaturgy

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Abstract In recent years, there has been a claim in contemporary dramaturgy about the shift from the state of the nation to the state of the mind. The production of the biopolitical body as the original activity of sovereign power is related to understanding the nature of contemporary human beings and the society in which they live (Agamben 1998). In response to the contemporary questions of citizenship, grief and madness in society, this paper aims at exploring our exposure to death and human catastrophism in the present Capitalocene through selected plays by the recently deceased playwright Edward Bond. Coined as 'rational' theatre, his latest productions explore hope and optimism for the salvation of the human being through radical aesthetics and narratives of death. My approach in this paper delves into his concept of social madness as illustrative of the politics of society and evaluates hope as an ontological human characteristic that embraces more inclusive conceptualizations of distributive justice. Following the framework of this analysis, I will approach the literary corpus of this paper, the plays *Chair* (2006) and *Dea* (2018), from the lenses of anthropological and hope studies.

Keywords hope; Necrocene; Edward Bond; British contemporary drama.

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Introduction

This research paper explores Edward Bond's rational theatre, specifically the plays *Chair* (2006) and *Dea* (2018), to address contemporary issues of citizenship, grief, and madness in the "Necrocene". The paper will analyze Bond's concept of social madness, evaluate hope as an ontological human trait related to distributive justice,

and apply frameworks from anthropology and hope studies. The proposed paper compiles strong relevance and significant novelty. It uniquely connects Edward Bond's later work with contemporary concepts, offering a fresh re-evaluation of his legacy after his recent death in 2024. The ideas explore current conversations and discussions among experts on this field about his place in theatrical history, especially in relation to his later, less-studied work. While scholars have analyzed Bond's social and political critiques, an anthropological approach explicitly examining issues like hope/unhope and the sociocultural implications of Necrocene is an unconventional and fresh perspective.

Necrocene, Hope and Oppression

In 2016, Justin McBrien proposed the recognition of Necrocene as the biogeological moment of our era through the process of becoming extinction. This extinction is explained due to the accumulation of capital and will eventually imply not only the biological extinction for species but also for cultures and languages. He argues Necrosis as the explanatory example of a cell destroyed itself through its own enzymes action. For McBrien, "the Necrocene traces the relation between the material unfolding of extinction and the history of its scientific enquiry" (118). This ontological idea of extinction clearly recalls Edward Bond's philosophy and his writings about the Third Crisis (a clear reference to a potential Third World War). Indeed, most Bondian productions are set in apocalyptic scenarios with constant war conflicts: the trilogy of the *War Plays*, *A Window*, *Chair*, *Dea*, and a long etc.

McBrien traces the origins of Necrocene after Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. This was the birth of the biosecurity state and the appropriation of a new techno-utopian ideology that would justify the contradictions of savage capitalism. The Promethean belief that humans could control nature is inexorably interconnected with catastrophism. Environmental disasters, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, the increased population and regimental governments encapsulate a deepening popular anxiety over the end of humanity through deformity and mutation: an "end" that is fundamentally tangled to the practice of modern life. The concept of the "Necrocene" emerges as a provocative term to describe an epoch in which human actions, particularly through environmental degradation and the ongoing climate crisis, lead to the collapse of ecosystems and the extinction of species. In his work, McBrien discusses the Necrocene as a potential successor to the Anthropocene, emphasizing that the Anthropocene—marked by human influence on the Earth's geology—may soon be recognized not just as a period of human-driven environmental change, but also as a period that culminates in the destruction

of life as we know it. In this sense, the Necrocene is an acknowledgment that the Anthropocene could culminate in the end of ecosystems, the death of species, and the potential collapse of civilization itself as the fabric of life unravels due to environmental devastation. This era evokes not just the demise of ecosystems but also the death of an entire way of life that was built on disregard for the natural world.

In a similar vein to McBrien, Elizabeth Kolbert acknowledged the concept of the "Sixth Extinction" in 2014 coined as the Necrocene's convergence through the actually existing processes of extinction and necrosis under capital (in McBrien 134). She documents the accelerating mass extinction event that is currently unfolding due to human activity. Kolbert explores the deep, often irreversible impacts that human civilization has on biodiversity, and highlights the possibility that we are living through a sixth mass extinction, driven largely by climate change, habitat destruction, and other anthropogenic factors. Together, McBrien and Kolbert offer an illuminating reflection on the destructive trajectory of humanity's environmental footprint, with the Necrocene as a dark lens through which we might view our future—one where life on Earth is irreversibly altered, and potentially erased, by the very forces we have unleashed. These works shed light on the irreversible damage that humans have inflicted on the planet, urging us to reconsider our relationship with nature and the trajectory we are on. Yet, McBrien concludes that there is hope for humans since "the human being can be decoupled from Capital. Capital is extinction. We are not" (135).

This recognition of the Necrocene brings with it both a warning and a call to action. If the Necrocene is to be avoided or mitigated, humanity must address the root causes of ecological decline: overconsumption, fossil fuel dependence, habitat destruction, and climate change. The possibility of the Necrocene serves as a distressing reminder that the time for action is now, as the planet moves ever closer to an irreversible tipping point where the loss of life may be permanent, and the Earth's ecosystems may never recover. The Necrocene, then, is not just a theoretical period of historical significance— it is a looming future that we have the power to either prevent or exacerbate, depending on the choices we make in the present.

However, within this bleak narrative emerges a crucial question: how can hope persist in the face of such overwhelming destruction? This question is deeply explored by Katie Stockdale (2021), who examines the concept of "hope under oppression" providing a philosophical and psychological lens through which we can understand human resilience amidst collapse. Stockdale's work delves into the possibility of hope not as a naive idealism, but as a critical means of survival and

resistance in oppressive or dire conditions, where even in the face of imminent destruction, individuals and communities can find ways to persevere, act, and seek transformation. In times of overwhelming crisis, whether personal, political, or ecological, hope is not simply a waiting for external change or a better future, but a conscious, self-determined act that sustains individuals and communities. This hope is not escapist but grounded in a profound understanding of the suffering and destruction surrounding us.

For Stockdale, hope under oppression becomes a survival mechanism, a means of engaging with and resisting the forces that seek to crush both human dignity and agency. In the face of extreme adversity, whether that be political repression, ecological collapse, or social injustice, Stockdale posits that hope enables individuals to continue to resist and create possibilities for change, even when the immediate circumstances seem insurmountable. Her perspective is shaped by the acknowledgment that, while oppressive systems may seem all-encompassing, they are not invincible. Hope becomes a way of maintaining human agency, a refusal to be fully defined or defeated by oppressive forces. Hope in oppressive environments, as Stockdale envisions it, also becomes a powerful tool for solidarity. In contexts of collective struggle— whether for environmental justice, social equity, or the fight against authoritarian regimes— hope fosters a sense of shared purpose and interconnection. Rather than simply being an individual pursuit, hope in such contexts is deeply communal, emerging through collective action, mutual support, and the creation of spaces where alternative futures can be imagined and acted upon. In the case of the Necrocene, hope may emerge from collaborative efforts to resist the forces driving ecological collapse, to protect vulnerable communities, and to rebuild systems that are more attuned to sustainability, justice, and intergenerational responsibility. In this sense, Stockdale presents hope not as a submissive force waiting for circumstances to change, but as an active, transformative power that emerges in response to and in defiance of oppression. This understanding of hope is vital not only for individual survival, but for collective action in addressing the environmental and social crises that threaten the future of both human society and the planet.

Edward Bond and Social Madness

Edward Bond is a British playwright and dramatist renowned for his provocative and often challenging works that explore the darker aspects of human nature, social injustice, and the consequences of violence. Born in 1934, Bond's plays gained significant recognition in the 1960s and 1970s for their resolute portrayals

of societal and personal breakdown. Bond's early works, such as *Saved* (1965), shocked audiences with their graphic depictions of brutality, while also offering a critical commentary on the disintegration of social values and the alienation of individuals in modern society. His plays are often marked by a brutal realism, addressing themes such as the abuse of power, the destructiveness of violence, and the collapse of moral and social structures.

Throughout his career, Bond's works have pushed the boundaries of theatre, challenging traditional theatrical conventions and provoking debate on the role of art in confronting societal issues. His writing is deeply influenced by his interest in political theory, ethics, and the human condition, making his plays not only a critique of contemporary society but also a call for social change. Beyond just portraying the violence and despair in society, Bond is concerned with offering a vision of hope and the potential for redemption, even in the face of extreme adversity.

One of Bond's most important contributions to theatre is his exploration of what he calls "social madness"— the idea that societies often function under a kind of collective madness driven by destructive systems of power, which contribute to the oppression and dehumanization of individuals. Bond uses his plays to demonstrate how oppressive systems of violence, inequality, and corruption shape individuals' lives and perceptions, ultimately making them complicit in the harm they suffer. His exploration of "social madness" provides a poignant critique of contemporary society's structures, revealing the destructive forces of social oppression and institutional failure. Bond argues that societal systems—dominated by violence, inequality, and systemic breakdown—create a state of "madness" where individuals, dehumanized by these forces, are driven to destructive and irrational behaviors. This concept, explored in his works, is accurately relevant to the discussions surrounding the Necrocene, as it underscores how ecological collapse and the resulting societal destabilization are often driven by deeply entrenched social and political structures that perpetuate exploitation and disregard for life. Bond's critique suggests that humanity, rather than responding with wisdom and care to the crises at hand, may continue to exacerbate the conditions leading to societal and ecological breakdown.

Bond, like Giorgio Agamben (1998), claims that social madness originated from the advent of democracy in ancient Greece and presents effects today in the Third Crisis of society. The concept of social madness dramatizes the psychological process of the modern man/woman to survive in the present environment. Bond contrasts clinical madness—an alternative reality/world that challenges the

legitimacy of what is regarded as real—to social madness- the result by which "people who seek the rational logic of society are mad since society itself, due to its structural injustice, becomes intrinsically mad" (Chen 89). Therefore, Bond attempts to reestablish man's bond with his self by criticizing the identity of society today, the Necrocene society. For him, only drama through radical experiences might demonstrate the present disassociation between mind and society and the consequent urgency of change. In Bond's 'Madhouse tragedies', the spectator delves into the psyche of traumatized characters struggling for hope and survival through dramatizations of death. In fact, Bond's plays grapple with the possibility of resistance and transformation, urging audiences to confront the ethical and moral implications of their actions within these systems.

Bond's later production delves into post-apocalyptic settings that reflect on the collapse of both human civilization and the environment. In these plays, Bond's characters often wrestle with the consequences of their actions, as well as the possibility of moral redemption in a world ravaged by ecological destruction and societal breakdown. His work remains deeply relevant, particularly as the world struggles with issues of climate change, political corruption, and social upheaval.

Chair and *Dea*: Hope in the Necrocene?

Chair was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 7 April 2000 and was staged at the Avignon Festival on 18 July 2006, directed by Alain Françon. Set in 2077, the play explores an austere theatricality of fear and horror, envisioning a haunting Orwellian dystopia in which security superimposes freedom. Bond fictionalizes a controlling system in which characters internalize the entire loss of sovereignty and the prohibition of all the actions activated by imagination. The unfolding plot suggests that only by confronting traumatizing structural anxiety can alternative political and ethical envisioning of freedom and justice be made possible (Chen 150). His portrayal of a fractured, morally bankrupt world aligns in many ways with the concept of the Necrocene—an era characterized by environmental decay and ecological destruction driven by human actions. Bond creates a dystopian world where the protagonists are caught in a cycle of moral and psychological degradation, emphasizing how oppressive systems of violence and exploitation erode human dignity, leading to the breakdown of social and individual consciousness.

The dark atmosphere significantly epitomizes the control of the army to the point of voluntary imprisonment. The beginning of the play shows Alice looking through the window while Billy draws pictures. Billy was abandoned and found by Alice, the mother figure of the play, who obsessively entraps him in a Bondian

"madhouse" as protection from society and its evils. Billy is always scared of being discovered by the state institutions so he cannot go out, living secluded in a permanent state of terror. No light, closed curtains and low voice appear as the natural setting of this inhuman future of perpetual alert. The interaction between the maternal figure and the adoptive son exhibits how the intersubjective relationship is conditioned by the external world of totalitarian control (Chen 143). Billy argues: "(*crying*) Why can't I go out? I want to play in the street. You never let me do anything" (Bond, *Plays:8* 114).

This suffocating scenario responds on the structural grounds producing a narrative of Necrocene where extinction and the end of civilizations become more than plausible. Following Bond's views, totalitarian control encapsulates a real possibility in which social madness flourishes by assuming that power decides fate and death in the life of the subject because biopower dominates the biopolitical environments (Agamben 1998). By building this prison-like condition around the idea of power, the playwright explores the instrumentalization of vulnerability under a politically induced condition. This narrative of oppression reconceptualizes the possibilities of resistance, survival and hope. As Stockdale reminds us: "Oppression can become internalized in the minds of the oppressed. So how might oppression shape what people hope for or diminish their hopes, preventing them from forming hopes for a better life and world?" (7)

In a turning point of the play, Alice abandons her safe/mad house and offers a chair to a soldier who was guarding a prisoner in the street. This unexpected act of compassion conveys a particular visibility out of the social prescriptions signifying an example of hope. The central metaphor in the play is embodied by this chair— a symbol of hope against the power structures that both oppress and dehumanize those subjected to them. The chair challenges the societal forces that force individuals to face the consequences of their own complicity in maintaining destructive systems. In the next section of the play, the Welfare Officer's investigation deciphers all the details of the chair incident in the atmosphere of authoritarian and repressed regimes. In addressing the cultural memory of historical events of the Holocaust, the empathy of the spectator and the process onstage is considered to explore the effect of totalitarian governments (Arendt). In this scene, the investigator never manages to be a human and acts in accordance with the authority. Bond here discusses the definition and understanding of pity: "It was the kindness that frightened her" (Bond, *Plays: 8* 136).

Bond's exploration of the destructive power of social systems ties directly into the concept of the Necrocene, where environmental collapse is inextricably linked

to the larger social, political, and economic systems that perpetuate harm. In this context, the destruction of nature is not a separate event from the destruction of social structures; rather, the two are deeply interconnected. Just as Bond's characters are entangled in the mechanisms of social oppression and violence, so too are we bound by the structures that drive climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.

Yet, Bond presumes that there exists the psychic potentiality that is not completely ideologically determined. Consequently, radical innocence designates the possibility of defying the established legitimate order. That is the example of Alice and Billy who aim to survive their biological moment through a new ontology of radical actions. Thus, I address the debate about what engages with the question that hope involves an explicit or implicit acknowledgment of the deficiency of one's own intervention in bringing about the hoped- for outcome. In other words, when we hope, we recognize our limitations as agents in our capacities to affect the world (Stockdale 10). While the world in *Chair* is bleak, Bond suggests that the characters still have the possibility of change, of confronting their complicity and moving toward transformation. This glimmer of hope amid despair resonates with the notion that, even in the face of the Necrocene, there is room for resistance, rebuilding, and a reimagining of how humanity might act differently to avert ecological and social collapse. The possibility of change is not presented as easy or guaranteed, but it is a call to action, urging individuals and societies to take responsibility for the world they have created and to work towards a more just and sustainable future. Bond's characters in *Chair* firmly *hope* that there exists a possibility of navigating the unjust and oppressed world in which they live although the end of the play will unfold uncertain *unhopeful* consequences such as Alice's suicide and Billy's assassination by the police.

Dea, the last production of Edward Bond alive, was premiered at Sutton Theatre in 2016 and should be acknowledged as one of the most extreme examples of violent theatre. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, *Dea* portrays a society that has been ravaged by environmental collapse and societal breakdown, much like the envisioned future of the Necrocene. In this world, the characters are forced to confront the dire consequences of human actions—violence, exploitation, and disregard for the natural world—that have led to widespread human collapse. Bond's characters, living in the aftermath of this destruction, cope with the haunting realities of survival, loss, and the profound moral dilemmas brought about by their complicity in the destruction of the environment. Through three acts, Bond construes a house, an asylum, a tent and a caravan as frameworks of war in the inside-outside

dynamics of a micro-cosmic madhouse. By revisiting the classical Medea, the play begins with Dea killing her twins before being raped by her husband Johnson. It then advances sixteen years after Dea's return from a mental asylum. She meets her son Oliver, product of her rape and will kill both her ex-husband and Oliver. Later, Act two takes place in a war zone similar to Iraq where now the completely insane Dea will experience innumerable violent events convinced that one of her dead twins is the lead of the regiment, John. Wars in *Dea* unfold the argument of the playwright that they portray the condition of both modern/mad man/woman and the insane society.

At the heart of the play is the character of Dea, a figure who symbolizes the potential for hope and redemption in a world that seems completely destroyed. In the aftermath of a deadly world, Dea's role as a potential *savior* offers a glimpse into the possibility of renewal, even amidst profound despair. Her evolution along the play suggests that, even in a world where ecosystems have been annihilated and human values are on the brink of collapse, the seeds of hope and renewal can still emerge. Dea is not merely a bleak depiction of a destroyed world; she mainly addresses the potential for transformation and the resilience of the human spirit. Her figure embodies the possibility of hope as an active, defiant force. Stockdale's understanding of hope—one that is forged in the crucible of oppression, not through passive optimism but as an active choice to resist and rebuild—is evident in the narrative portrayal of Dea. Despite the overwhelming events, the character of Dea suggests that hope is not lost, even in a world that seems to have reached its breaking point. In Stockdale's terms (2021), hope becomes a tool for survival, for finding meaning and purpose even when external conditions appear hopeless.

Inspired by an irrational hope, the protagonist keeps the head of his son until the end of the play imagining that it is alive. In this regard, the main conflict posits that desiring an outcome and believing that it is possible that the outcome will obtain is compatible with different degrees of hope, and even despair (Stockdale 14). As Peter Goldie examines, "When an emotion is directed toward its object, then this is a sort of feeling toward the object" (96); thus, hope is not just a cognitive state but also affective in character. Dea, then, seems to correlate her complex mental state with her feelings and emotions by validating analogously sense perception and mental discernment. The duality sanity/madness configures the social and philosophical background of the play. Bond points out that "theatre is the madhouse where the audience go to find their sanity, just as madmen go mad in reality to find theirs" (Bond, *The Hidden Plot* 95). Bond's description of the world as 'a bigger madhouse', a constant war inside and outside, dramatizes a connection

between the holocausts, the state authorized violence in the play and politics. Dea embodies a figure reduced to physical existence—a "homo sacer" in front of the soldiers wandering in a war zone just turned into a space where "materialization of the state of exception" is clearly dominant (Agamben 174).

This haunting Necrocene suggests a future defined by human collapse and the erosion of the systems that sustain life, but it also challenges us to reconsider our relationship with the planet and each other. Bond's Dea offers a way forward—a vision that, while rooted in the harsh realities of collapse, still holds out the possibility of hope and awareness. The presence of hope in the military world of Dea serves as a reminder that even in the most oppressive conditions, individuals and communities can resist, transform, and rebuild. Through Dea, Bond suggests that humanity's potential to face its darkest hour is not defined solely by destruction, but by the willingness to engage with the world, to confront its flaws, and to forge new paths in the face of systemic failure.

Dea's physical spaces explore irrational/rational environments. Her true self emerges when she kills her babies, breaking her chains, in order to become a liberated subject woman (Kaya 79). Dea's ontological interior war disrupts Johnson's habitual military life. She does not reveal an ethical conviction of acting wrong. In fact, she commits the crime for the sake of saving humanity by killing her babies intentionally rejecting the idea of being clinically mad: "I thought I was mad till I was put in a madhouse. Now I know. I'm not mad" (Bond, *Plays: 10* 19). In her mind, the act of killing exhibits liberation since society (Johnson) labels people as mad minimising the specific reasons and circumstances behind. In light of the ubiquity of morality and the significance of hope to moral life, Bond questions how moral considerations affect the value of our hopes. Is it morally acceptable to base hope in the future through murdering? The audience is confronted here with the problematization of moral constraints on resistance over opposition. Not only are moral reasons decisive in overriding other considerations about what agents should do, but they are also decisive in determining the perception we hold about the characters and their actions. Hope is not a denial of the harsh realities of the present but an act of resistance against the forces that drive destruction. In *Dea*, the character's journey toward healing and transformation reflects the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for collective action, even when the larger systems seem beyond repair.

Parts Two and Three intentionally present a more ambiguous setting, where themes of totalitarianism, war zones, and military madness are explored. In this spectral Necrocene, dominated by Agambian concepts of wasted lives, the soldiers

are unable to maintain their humanity. The regiments follow institutional orders blindly, detached from reason or compassion, even when given the chance to act independently. In the play's tragic conclusion, Cliff, a soldier in the regiment, kills Dea, sealing her fate and exacerbating her trauma. The central moral of the play is encapsulated by Cliff's reworking of Hamlet's famous aphorism: "To be sane or not to be sane, that's the question. And if not, then be mad and all that follows" (Bond, *Plays: 10* 78). This line underscores the theme that in a world where reason and humanity are forsaken, sanity itself becomes questionable, and madness is an inevitable consequence of the system's inhumanity.

The "slow death[1]" of Dea challenges the legitimacy of what is regarded as real or moral. In physical and mental pain, the female character struggles to relieve her soul in an animalistic setting with constant references to child's experiences in war and sexual abuses. "Death's nothing for the mad!" (Bond, *Plays: 10* 85), she asserts, revealing the Bondian link between the state of the mind and the state of society. By connecting with voices of suffering, subjects can revise the norms that normatively prescribe both *who* can be mourned and *how* those others can be mourned (Butler; McIvor). Dea's character being a killer of babies directly transgresses the mournable subject for the spectator but Bond transcends the enclosed structure of madness and psychosis through the process of deconstructive self-dramatizing.

Conclusions

Chair (2006) and *Dea* (2018) propose apocalyptic realities revealing the destruction of globalization, further establishing a symbiosis between space and power in endless war scenarios. It is the claim of this paper that a new form of "madhouse" arises from the microcosm of the plays to a broader condition of the actual insane society. On the one hand, *Chair* presents a suffocating house atmosphere in which Alice entraps the mentally disabled Billy as an extreme example of overprotection. Along the play, Bond's imperative for freedom is posited in the acts of resilience and hope powerfully depicted by the characters. Bond's critique of systems of violence and oppression, along with his exploration of human suffering and potential redemption, serves as both a warning and a call to action in the face of environmental destruction. By highlighting the destructive consequences of our actions, *Chair* challenges us to confront our own complicity and to recognize that the future of the planet—and humanity itself—depends on our ability to break free from the cycles of exploitation and begin anew. On the other hand, *Dea* is initiated

1 I am alluding here to the concept of 'slow violence' developed by Richard Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Harvard UP.

with the slaughtering of her twins before being raped. Exploring the concept of war everywhere, this contemporary Medea will eventually undergo a process of madness in which extremity and spiral of death integrate the questions debated in the play.

Both texts encapsulate the concept of Necrocene in their reframing of the expansion of capitalism through the process of becoming extinction. The accumulative deaths in Bond's dramaturgy coexist with the potential imaginative of hope urging for transformative actions and mobilizing people. Therefore, my conclusions put forward that ethico-political and ambivalent features of hope might be identified in the literary texts explored.

These dramatic texts expose the extreme forms of resistance to oppression that fall under the binary survival or death and reveals the complex nature of hope. By triggering concepts such as social madness, the Necrocene and hope, I attempt to draw attention to the potential of Bondian drama as productive to reflect on the critique of contemporary society through narratological textualities that explore deeper insight about contesting, challenging or visualizing realities of the 21st century. It is my view that *Chair* and *Dea* enact narratives of death and war while offering glimpses of hope from a wider spectrum. The performance of 'madhouses' and the moral ambivalence of the characters contribute to creating a pervasive sense of alternative hope/despair. The dramatic genre, and particularly Bondian drama, is more prone to develop issues of acknowledgement around the prospective Necrocene while alternatively creating spaces for reflective hope.

Conclusively, McBrien's and Kolbert's research on the ongoing mass extinction, Stockdale's exploration of hope under oppression, and Bond's analysis of social madness provide a multifaceted perspective on our contemporary condition. They challenge us to think critically about how we navigate the future in the face of accelerating ecological crises, and whether hope can function as a transformative force even when the systems of power are failing. Bond's dramaturgy compels us to confront the destructive nature of the very systems that contribute to ecological and social collapse, raising the question of whether true hope can arise from breaking free from these systems and forging new paths of social justice and human values. His narrative illuminates a path forward in which, despite the Necrocene's pending shadow, hope remains a tool for both survival and transformative change in the fight against ecological and societal oppression.

Through his work, Edward Bond remains an influential and controversial figure in contemporary theatre, offering a challenging but ultimately hopeful vision of human potential in the face of oppression and crisis. *Chair* and *Dea* offer a powerful allegory for the challenges humanity faces in the Necrocene. The plays' portrayal

of moral decay and societal collapse provides a dark mirror for the ecological and social crises we confront today. His legacy continues to inspire discussions on the power of art to not only reflect but also shape the course of social and political change.

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Conscientization and Subaltern Resistance: A Freirean Reading of Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* and Jaladas's *Ramgolam*

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Abstract The scavengers referred to as Harijans or *Methars*—belong to that downtrodden subaltern class who are religiously exploited, socially humiliated, economically deprived, and politically unrepresented. Two notable works on scavengers—Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and Thakazhi Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (1975)—depicted the plights of this subaltern group from two different perspectives. In contrast to these two representations of the scavengers, Harishankar Jaladas's *Ramgolam* (2019) stands on a different paradigm. *Ramgolam*, in fact, stretching its focus from the inception of untouchability and casteism, lands in the present-day scenario of Bangladesh, where these subalterns became the worst victims of the modified recruitment policy of the scavengers by the city corporation authority. Taking Paulo Freire's conscientization as a theoretical framework, this paper analyzes Jaladas's *Ramgolam* to argue on the scavengers' capability to reflect on their concrete objective reality to develop their conscientization (critical consciousness) to resist all exploitation strongly. Furthermore, exploring the three novels on manual scavenging, it attempts to investigate how, without traditional education, these scavengers, through interrogation and reflection on their oppressed reality, can evolve through the four stages of development of conscientization (thematization, codification, decodification, and action) to challenge the authority for breaking the age-old shackles of oppression. Finally, inquiring into the above-mentioned points, it examines whether, with a developed conscientization, these scavengers are able to amass strength to raise their voice and form strong resistance, or they are still vulnerable to be violently silenced to speak or resist only "through dying" (Spivak, The Nation 1).

Keywords Manual scavenging; Scavenger's destitution; culture of silence; conscientization; resistance

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Introduction

Paulo Freire, a famous educationist and critical thinker, used *conscientização*, which translates into English as conscientization, to refer to a critical approach to reality which arouses emancipatory consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Freire emphatically differentiates between consciousness and conscientization to accentuate that becoming conscious is not sufficient to develop a critical stance; rather, an individual or community needs to engage in a dialectical relationship with the oppressive structure of the world around them to develop emancipatory consciousness. In fact, in the process of conscientization individuals mandatorily needs to learn "to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, *Pedagogy* 35) for entering into the emancipatory praxis. Enhancing the capability of critical reflection and building solidarity conscientization encourages individuals to recover their own agency and empower them to form resistance against all forms of repression. For the subaltern, conscientization is a process of liberation where the oppressed "must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, *Pedagogy* 65-66). Antonio Gramsci, in his ground-breaking work *Prison Notebooks*, coined the term subaltern to refer to "the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his agents" (Louai 5).

In Notebook 25 entitled "On the Ma*r*gins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)," Gramsci extends the term to include the "slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups" (Green 2). In congruence with Gramsci's inclusion of the deprived and the underprivileged as a subaltern social group, the *Methars*—also known as the Harijans or Dalit scavengers in a derogatory way—who are manually engaged in cleaning human feces and pisses from open lavatories and victims of extreme caste

and class oppression can also be considered as subaltern. Among all the subalterns, the scavengers are the most deprived and the most dejected ones. Being victims of caste oppression, subjugation, humiliation, and extreme poverty, this hapless scavenging community has no voice; therefore, they "cannot speak" (Spivak 104). Moreover, in literature, there is very little representation of this community.

Through Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Thakhaji Pillai's *Scavenger's Son*, published in 1935 and 1975 respectively, although the plights of the scavengers got some representation, apparently, in these two novels, no strong stance of scavengers' conscientization and resistance is exhibited. In comparison to these two earlier novels, Harishankar Jaladas's *Ramgolam* (2019) not only widens the canvas of the scavenger's historiography but also sheds light on the scavenger's conscientization, which, as a critical praxis, strengthens them to form all-out resistance against the age-old matrices of exploitation. Focusing on Jaladas's *Ramgolam*, this paper is a retrospective inquiry into the lives of the scavengers from Anand's narrative to Jaladas's, to explore whether, the passage of such a long time of more than seven decades (1935-2019), have brought any remarkable change in the lived experience of the scavengers or they are still entrapped in the pristine stratagem of caste oppression, poverty and illiteracy as depicted in the earlier novels. Furthermore, taking Paulo Freire's conscientization as a theoretical framework this paper will explore the scavengers' capability to reflect on their reality critically, and engage in a dialogue with their situation so that being critically aware of it they might develop their conscientization to "take possession of their reality and become engaged in the task of transforming it permanently" (Freire, Conscientização 1979). It will also investigate how, without traditional education, these scavengers—the most downtrodden of the subaltern—by interrogating into and reflecting on their oppressed reality can evolve through the four stages of development of conscientization (thematization, codification, decodification, and action) to challenge the authority to break the age-old shackles of oppression. Finally, inquiring into the above-mentioned points, it will also examine whether, with a developed conscientization, these scavengers can amass strength to raise their voice and form strong resistance against all injustices or whether they are still voiceless to speak or resist only "through dying" (Spivak, The Nation 1).

Literary Representation of Scavengers: Bakha to Ramgolam

Mulk Raj Anand, in *Untouchable*, henceforth *UT*, through Bakha's and Sohini's humiliation by the upper caste people, reveals the bleak side of untouchability and exposes the hypocrisy of the upper caste Hindu. Thakazhi Pillai's *Scavenger's Son*,

henceforth *SS*, on the other hand, depicts Chudalamuttu's struggle to erode his identity as a scavenger and his betrayal to his scavenging community. The research done on these two novels is focused only on the victimization of the untouchables under caste oppression and the hypocrisy of the upper caste to exploit this deprived community in the name of religion. No earlier work used Freire's conscientization theory to evaluate the resisting power of the Dalit scavengers. Harishankar Jaladas's Bengali novel *Ramgolam* (2012), henceforth *RG*, was translated into English by Quazi Mostain Billah in 2019. The only research work done on *Ramgolam* is a Bhabhaian reading of the text. Hence, the a*rg*umentation of this paper on the development of conscientization (critical consciousness) and the potency of resistance of the scavengers is an unexplored area that might provide novel insight into subaltern resistance.

Untouchable and *Scavenger's Son* do not depict any development of conscientization in the scavenging community of that time. The then scavengers had no access to education and no right to form any union. On many grounds, it can be a*rg*ued that neither Bakha nor Chudalamuttu, the protagonists of *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son*, respectively, were true representatives of the scavenging community. Bakha was the son of a Jomadar (overseer)—a superintendent of the scavengers. His father was well paid. Hence, Bakha's life was less troublesome than that of other scavengers. Bakha had a fascination with creating a new identity, imitating the British soldiers. Anand writes that observing the lifestyle of the British soldiers, Bakha "had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life…so he tried to copy them in everything" (*UT* 3). Bakha had no fellow feelings. He was self-centered and preoccupied with his personal struggles as a member of a lower caste. Chudalamuttu had no desire to uplift the position of his fellow scavengers. He was "determined that none of the generation that follows from him shall ever be a scavenger" (*SS* 30). To gain the favor of municipality president and secure a better future for himself, Chudalamuttu secretly exposed the union's confidential information to the municipality president, thereby thwarting all the rebellious actions of the scavengers' union. In fact, Chudalamuttu was used as a weapon "in the hands of the municipality to destroy his friends" (*SS* 114). With Chudalamuttu's betrayal of his community, the municipality continued to exploit the scavengers. Hence, Chudalamuttu is not representative of the scavengers either. On the other hand, both Gurucharan and Ramgolam, two prime characters in *Ramgolam*, embody the spirit of resistance and bear the true emblem of the scavenging community. Gurucharan, driven by his fellow feelings and commitment to his community, dedicated himself to a new subjectivity, working both to

ensure education for the children of scavengers and to demand the due rights for his class. Moreover, *Ramgolam*—a half-learned teenager—from his developed conscientization worked diligently to unite the scavenging community to form an all-out resistance against the oppressors for their survival.

A Close Overview of Scavengers' Plights

The time setting of *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son* is the first half of the twentieth century. The sanitary system in India, at that time, was solely dependent on manual scavenging. All the scavengers were deployed to clean the human feces across India. The community had a dire need for the services of scavengers to maintain a healthy and clean living. Their job was valuable to society. Both *Untouchable* and *Scavenger's Son* depicted the scavengers who were engaged in manual scavenging. As Bakha worked as a sweeper, cleaning the toilets of the soldiers and the roadside latrines, Chudalamuttu and his fellow mates moved from house to house to haul human feces. At that time, only the scavengers were compelled to do the filthy work of scavenging. The filthiness of the job of scavenging is elaborately delineated in *Ramgolam*:

> As a rule, they [scavengers] were supposed to begin work before sunrise. The Chittagong Municipal Corporation had two types of trucks; one kind for hauling garbage and the other for hauling human feces. There were three jalopy trucks for hauling road-side garbage. Very early in the morning the Methars, collecting garbage from lanes and by lanes and carrying them to trolleys, deposited them on the sides of the main roads and then it was hauled on the trucks and dumped by the sea side in Halishahar and into the ditches of Bahaddarhut. (*RG* 14)

Due to the filthiness of this job, only the untouchables had been compelled to carry out this job for centuries. In fact, upper-caste people did not permit the scavengers to do any other job. As an unwritten law, the job of scavenging was reserved for the scavengers. They had a certain level of job security, unless they resisted the corporation's exploitation. They could continue scavenging as long as their bodies permitted, and later this task was passed on to their progeny. People of the upper caste abhorred both the job and the scavengers. E. M. Forster in the Preface to *Untouchable* wrote "they have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west" (Forster, Preface vi). Actually, enduring such dehumanizing treatment for thousands of years, the illiterate scavengers cannot think alternatively because their ideas and

perceptions are "the reflection of the thought and expression of the director society" (Freire, *Cultural Action* 1). History testifies that the exploited community always thinks in the manner they are made to think by their exploiters. Therefore, instead of trying to alter their present reality, they live "under the circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 187).

Advancement in Sanitation System and Question of Scavengers' Survival

The advent of the flash tank and sanitary latrine that had been mentioned in *Untouchable* as a possible solution for the decrease of hatred for the scavengers had reduced their need for manual scavenging. The filthiness associated with the job had also been reduced due to the implementation of modern sewerage and sanitation systems, as well as the adoption of specific measures for cleanliness by city dwellers. When sanitary toilets were introduced in most city houses, the demand for cleaning work increased. In most parts of the cities, the hauling of excreta had stopped. Hence, this once filthy and nasty job of scavenging attracted the people of other religions and upper caste Hindus who abhorred it earlier. As a result, "the pressure on the corporation bosses mounted" (*RG* 63). From every corner, it has been demanded that "the right to cleaning work could not be reserved exclusively for the Methars" (*RG* 63).

The crucial part of *Ramgolam* is that it sheds light on that historic moment when, in the face of the repeated demands of the upper caste Hindus and the people of other religions, "the policymakers of the Corporation decided that its garbage cleaning job would be opened to people of all faiths" (*RG* 63). Since the *Methars* (scavengers) are not allowed to do any job except scavenging, losing their only means of earning will ultimately lead to their extinction. If the works of scavenging are opened for all community people, the scavengers will:

> become beggars and will beg in the streets, lanes and bazaars-markets of the city. They will cry-Babu, have been starving for two days; give me a taka to buy bread. The women folk finding no source of survival will sell their bodies. They will become prostitutes in the gentlemen's locality. Waiting in the semidarkness of Tiger Pass, they will peddle themselves—Not much, just ten taka would be enough. (*RG* 119)

As these Dalit scavengers are outcasts with no access to any other job except scavenging, the implementation of this policy would threaten their very existence. The destitute condition of the scavengers is like the "Russian serf labour, American

slave labour, Irish agricultural labour, and the metropolitan labour in London trades" (Linebaugh 374). Having no job for survival, the next generation of these scavengers will have no other source of survival except begging from men and prostitution for women. In response to that black law, the *Methars* (scavengers) from all four *Methar* colonies unite to protest against it in a body. Their logic is straight "our ancestors were brought to this country for this work. They lived all their life scavenging shit and piss. No locals, then, wanted this work. Putting up with hatred and nursing pain in our heart we plodded in our duties" (*RG* 63). They achieved nothing except humiliation and inhuman treatment for their service. In fact, the snatching of their job opportunity will result in their extinction.

It is documented in history that whenever scavengers protested for their rights and raised their voices against injustice, they were brutally subdued and treated inhumanely by the authorities. In fact, in the face of such dehumanizing treatment, the community of the scavengers could never understand their true sense of identity as humans. For thousands of years, these scavengers had been inhumanely exploited in the name of class and caste. Basak writes "[i]n its nearly six thousand years of origin and evolution, Varnasharam\ casteism has shown little loosening of grip" (Basak 63)." Caste is "a disgrace on Hinduism" (qtd. in Agrawal 130), says Mahatma Gandhi. Critiquing the inequality inherent in casteism, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar treated caste as a graded inequality. However, addressing the derivational caste system unique to Indian culture, "most Indian specialists have overlooked the ability of the caste system to change drastically in its form, content, and meaning despite historic changes which take place in the modes of production in South Asia" (Bahl 369-370).

Scavengers' Agency and Conscientization

Jaladas's characterization of Gurucharan and Ramgolam engenders a rebellious spirit in the new generation scavengers. Unlike Bakha and Chudalamuttu, Gurucharan, raised his voice against all economic exploitation of the authority of the corporation. As a *Sardar* (leader), Gurucharan always stood by the side of the scavengers. He fought for their rights against the corporation. To raise his voice, he had to tolerate enough physical torture and humiliation. However, Gurucharan never wavered in his support for the scavengers' sons. For Gurucharan's valor, the scavengers had unequivocal respect for him. He was always "ready to lay down his life for the rights of the *Harijans* (children of god; a term coined by Gandhi to designate the untouchables)" (*RG* 7). Gurucharan valiantly protested the corporation's decision to limit the learning opportunity for the scavengers' son by

opening admission to the Firingibazar Sevak Colony Government Primary School, which had been reserved specifically for the children of scavengers. His protest against this act was handled with violence. Due to the protest, Gurucharan was brutally beaten by the corporation's agents and thrown into the street to die. Even his complaint to the education officer resulted in more humiliation. Gurucharan and his followers were even threatened with being sacked from their jobs. Thus, the resistance of the scavengers was silenced. Although Gurucharan was courageous, he had no education. Gurucharan's growing age, betrayal by his community members, and the cruelty of the corporation officers made the scavengers more vulnerable to the corporation's conspiracies.

Ramgolam brings forth the critical moment when the head of the city corporation, Abdus Salam, asserted his arrogance in opening the job of scavenging to the people of all classes and creeds. At this crucial time, Ramgolam—a half-educated teenager—kindled new hope among the illiterate scavengers. Ramgolam, throughout his school life, endured untold humiliation and went through severe mental suffering at school before he accomplished his secondary education. More than learning from books, he learned from the dehumanizing conditions of his community. Theoretically, in conscientization, "learning must be closely linked to a liberating praxis based on action and reflection" (Cortina and Winter 11). However, for the deprived and dejected, such as Ramgolam, the bitter experiences of their everyday lives are the source of learning the harsh reality they are exposed to. In fact, the scavenging community doesn't need to be literate in the traditional sense; instead, "they [need to] learn to read situations of injustice to become agents of change [to] insert themselves in the world as capable of subverting a reality that is not favorable to them" (Cortina and Winter 10).

Discovering the Socio-religious Hypocrisies of Caste

Maritza Montero in "Problematization" explains that the process of conscientization begins with "the de-habituation, de-naturalization, and problematization of habits and knowledge that so far were neither questioned, nor even thought about, because they were considered as the way certain things are" (296). Since childhood, Ramgolam was inquisitive. He had weird feelings about his name, which made him inquire his grandfather to know the reason behind his unusual naming Ramgolam—a combination of both a Hindu (Ram) and a Muslim (Golam) name. In reply, his grandfather discloses how, centuries after centuries, the scavengers have endured inhuman treatment as beasts and less than human by the Hindus and the Muslims alike. To keep him safe from the hatred and outrage of the Hindus and the Muslims,

he was named so. The hatred of the Hindus and the Muslims instigated Ramgolam to discover the causes of the destitution of his community. While his study after secondary school (10th grade) was discouraged by his grandfather (Gurucharan), Ramgolam learns that it has been made a rule that "the son of a *Methar* was born to be a *Methar*. The son or the grandson would have to take up the work his forefathers did. There was no respite from the shackles" (*RG* 68). Whatever higher qualification Ramgolam or any scavenger's child acquires, they must "haul the Corporation piss and shit, clean the drain or sweep the streets" (*RG* 68) that is fixed for him. From the day Ramgolam was told that the scavengers are "low-born, like doormats, we are born to live with our head bowed, our life is for being kicked around" (*RG* 68) a spirit was ignited inside him to discover the causes behind their inescapable suffering.

According to Foucault, a true sense of identity is "not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are … to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (216). To unearth the underlying causes of the plights of the scavengers, Ramgolam explores the four *Methar* colonies to engage in dialogue with the aging generation of his community. His objective was to learn the answer of: who are the *Methar*, where they came from, what their position was in a Bengali society, why they had to clean human waste, why they do not get any job after having education, why people regarded them as untouchable, why their school had been snatched away from them and why the corporation wants to give their job to the people of other community. In the course of these queries, Ramgolam enters the first stage of conscientization, namely thematization. In thematization, an individual, through reflection on social, economic, and political structures, gains awareness of the objective reality that produces social, economic, political, and religious oppression. As evident in Gurucharn's utterance regarding the social oppression of the scavengers:

> We are a very unfortunate race. To the Hindus we are untouchable. We are an unholy race. Not just our touch, even if a Hindu or a Brahmin steps on our shadow, he gets polluted. It is a heinous sin for them. They would be sent to terrifying Hell Rourab, if after threading on our shadows they don't recite Gayatri mantra (also known as the Savitri mantra dedicated to the Sun deity) for one hundred thousand times and fast for a whole day. Whenever we go, we hear 'Off, off, shoo, shoo'. For us they nurse shit load of hatred. Following them, the Muslims also hate us; don't treat us as humans. They treat us as

> beasts….they allow dogs near them, but loathe us, shoo us and swear at us all the time. (*RG* 11)

From the elder members of his community, Ramgolam learns about his ancestry and the religious duplicity of the creation of the *Methars* (scavengers) by the Lord Brahma—who could create the universe but could not cross the human feces lying on the ground without creating the *Methars* (scavengers). In many Hindu scriptures, it is asserted that Brahma, within him, had possessed an ardent desire "quivered to give birth to the untouchable child destined to haul human excreta. Therefore, he created the dirty child from dirt" (*RG* 30) and allowed others to treat them inhumanely.

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* says, "[w]ithout a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle" (178). Therefore, the rediscovery of their identity as humans involves the development of critical awareness among the scavengers, who, with conscientization, might be encouraged to resist. In his quest to discover himself as a human, Ramgolam unearths the facts that the Brahmins:

> …are the manufacturers of this tale. This class is expert in creating division within people; they take delight in endless degradation of mankind. They have great powers in their hands in framing laws. Using the name of religion, they strangulate human reason. The theological rules have such authority that at one stage the society and its members begin to trust the false messages of the priests. Falsehood passing for incontrovertible truth strikes roots in human minds. In order to engage a particular class in dirty work, the priests used religious injunctions as weapons and were successful. The bad logic of religious principles has pushed the Methars down to the bottom of Hindu racial hierarchy. (*RG* 30)

From the speech of Ratan Chakrabarty—an erudite Brahmin scholar and Professor of English—the scavengers came to know that there is no discrimination at the core of the Hindu religion. He points out that all the discriminatory and caste hierarchies are the creation of the Brahmins. Citing examples from *shastra* (religious manual) and *puran* (myths, legends) in a congregational speech, he proved that, regardless of professional differences, all men are equal. From an ethical and religious point of view, Ratan Chakrabarty accentuates his claim, saying:

> man is above everything, and there is nothing beyond. As I am a human, so are

> you. As a Brahmin, if I am real then as Harijan you are real too. I should tell you one more thing—the division of Brahmin, Khatrio, Shudra is the creation of opportunist humans. I hate and spit at the division into caste. (*RG* 173)

The acquired knowledge of the duplicity of the upper-caste Brahmins and the man-made reasons behind their depravity made Ramgolam cautious and more polemical in a*r*guing for their rights more vehemently. Ramgolam understood that, holistically, there is no need for the superior-inferior dynamics to move the society forward. Hence, he felt the desperate drive inside him to arouse the critical consciousness of the scavengers to resist the authority for their rights and raise their voice against violence perpetrated on them both physically and psychologically.

A Dire Need of Reclaiming Identity for Emancipation

The political language used against the scavengers is the language of violence. This knowledge takes Ramgolam to the codification stage of conscientization, where individuals can critically examine the symbols and language of the oppression. Ramgolam's dialogue with the elder scavengers and the reading of his ancestral history mark the beginning of his conscientization. Montero in "Problematization" writes:

> dialogue is problematization's main resource; it is a questioning dialogue, not contentious, but posing questions until there is silence; a silence conducive to the construction of new knowledge, liberated of received but nonexplained responses, revealing contradictions and hidden interests. This leads to a critical consciousness and liberation from unfair and oppressive situations. (891)

Ramgolam's dialogue with the senior members of the community takes him back to the history of the first half of the twentieth century. From them, he learns that before and after India's independence, the scavengers often revolted and called for a strike to demand an increase in their minimum salary. However, the corporation never bowed to their demands and quelled the striking scavengers with iron fists. On August 26, 1940, when the sweepers called for another strike, the corporation adopted a harsh policy of oppression and suppression. The spine of the strike was broken by mass arrest and brutal police torture. The strikes prompted the corporation to adopt more rigorous policies to nullify the demands of the scavengers. After every failed attempt, the corporation adopted more regressive policies to maintain its stronghold on the scavengers. Every attempt of the scavengers to assert their

voice has been silenced by mass arrest, shooting, and aggression.

Ramgolam gets disappointed by this checkered history of the strike of the *Methars* (scavengers), but what surprised him most was "the tale of the broken promises of Jatindramohan and Subash Bose" (*RG* 70). Ramgolam comes to know that the most popular and influential political leaders of that time also turned a deaf ear to the woes and agonies of the scavengers. Chittaranjan Das, although he raised his voice for the rights of Indians against British oppression, was never amicable to the scavengers. Despite numerous pleas and requests, he denied the demand for a two-rupee increase in the salaries of the scavengers. Lacking political support and sympathy from upper-caste people, the scavengers returned empty-handed after every strike. And then

> …it was as it had been before. Once again traversing paths breathlessly carrying feces-bins on the head in the mornings, living huddled in one room with members from three generations, kicks and slaps of the bhadrolok and their swearing and cursing. Drinking gallons and gallons of spirit to fo*r*get the miseries of life! Then death; then rebirth, followed by death! (*RG* 71)

All this knowledge of his ancestral history and past makes Ramgolam well-versed about the life of the scavengers. Within Ramgolam crystallized deep sympathy for his deprived community. He felt a deep hatred for the dehumanizing caste system.

Conscientization and Challenge to Dominant Power Structure

Freire's conviction is that "every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or subme*r*ged in the 'culture of silence' he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others" (*Pedagogy* 32). Ramgolam realized that these scavengers must develop a critical consciousness, even when ma*r*ginalized: "they can reject the powerful's definition of their reality—that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances" (hooks 92). The scavenger community has been "destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things" (Freire, *Pedagogy* 68). Freire suggests, in order to "regain their humanity, they must cease to be things and fight as men and women. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings" (*Pedagogy* 68).

With the fear of losing their jobs and habitat, the scavengers never enraged the corporate authority. And thus, avoided troubles with the corporation authority, which could make their lives more hellish by sacking them from the only means

of their survival. Moreover, it is a frustrating thing that the unity of the Harijans was very fragile. As most male members of the *Methar* (scavengers) colony had alcoholism, they could easily be sold out for drinks. Hence, their opponents often break their unity by tempting them with alcohol or offering a little cash. They may also be betrayers, who, for money, disclose all the secrets of the community. These turncoats always spoil the spirit of resistance. Ramgolam came to realize that their ignorance, credulity, and letha*r*gy were

> the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination—and of the paternalism—of which they were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept subme*r*ged in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. (Shaull 30)

In the third stage of conscientization, named decodification, individuals deconstruct their own assumptions and critically unveil the world of lies, challenging the dominant narrative and questioning authority to understand the underlying power dynamics. William A. Smith in "Conscientizacao: An Operational Definition" writes:

> Consciousness is more than a better understanding of who we are or how we act; it is a process through which individuals who have been exploited and hindered from self-affirmation come to see how they are exploited, how they collude with the exploiters, and how, through critical interaction with the world, they can liberate themselves. (2)

For the scavengers, it is an unavoidable reality that the people in power had always exploited the credulity of the illiterate scavengers. Abdus Salam's trick of decorating the temple's wall with tiles divided the scavengers. Being divided by that tricky proposal—given using religious sentiment—the scavengers ignored Ramgolam's plea not to allow the corporation head to build the slaughterhouse near the colony of the scavengers. The construction of the slaughterhouse beside the scavengers' abode made their life hellish. The blood that had dried up in the drain caused a hellish foul smell, and "[b]ecause of the stink from the blood and innards of the animals, the air of the Harijan colonies became toxic. The normal life of the Harijan colony of Firingibazar became unquiet, intolerable and distressful" (*RG* 175). Abdus Salam earlier assured that the slaughterhouse would not affect the scavengers' living

conditions in their colony. However, discovering the lie and vindictive nature of Abdus Salam, the scavengers all together entrusted their faith in Ramgolam to save their ancestral job from being snatched by the corporation.

In "Cultural Action and Conscientization," Freire writes "[t]here can be no conscientization without denunciation of unjust structures" (471). At this crisis, for their survival, under Ramgolam's leadership, the scavengers vowed to stay united and resist the authority to protect their job. They get committed to stopping the appointment of people of other religions to the job of scavenging. They declared in a body that "we won't let that happen. We won't share our work with anyone" (*RG* 63). Their resistance became inevitable to ensure the survival of their generation.

Breaking the Culture of Silence

Freire writes that the oppressed "attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement" (*Pedagogy* 69). With Ramgolam's instigation among the scavengers aroused "a new awareness of selfhood and [they] begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation" (Shaull 29). It is the action stage of conscientization where the oppressed, using their newly developed critical consciousness, take action to change the structures of oppression that dehumanize them. It is a collective action for liberation because people cannot "liberate themselves alone, because people liberate themselves in communion, mediated by reality which they must transform" (Davis 62). Hence, with solidarity, people challenged the oppressive structure and endeavored to create a more just and equitable society. Ramgolam's conscientization as a catalyst, thus, gave him the impetus to recreate his identity with a distinct sense of "self-image." Breaking the "culture of silence," Ramgolam entrusted in the potential of the oppressed because:

> [t]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, *Pedagogy* 32)

To look from a humanist ground, the resistance of the scavengers is justified because at a certain level of oppression, "[t]he rebellious reaction of the working class … half conscious or conscious—at recovering their status as human beings" (Engels 39- 40) becomes inevitable for survival. Failing to convince Abdus Salam to stop recruiting people of other religions for scavenging work led to a hard line being drawn, with a call for a strike. It continued for four days. Abdus Salam decided not to bow down before the demands of the scavengers. His personal spirit of revenge and ego was assimilated to execute the decision of opening the job of scavenging for all community people. Men and women indiscriminately gathered from every *Methar* colony around the corporation office to resist the recruitment process. It is the day of their life and death. If they fail to stop the recruitment, it will be the total annihilation of their community. They will have no other work to do except begging.

In fact, the betrayal of many scavengers who sold their souls to the powerful class for money never allowed the scavengers to unite and form a strong resistance. Therefore, almost all the resistances of the scavengers were quelled sternly by the people in power. In *Ramgolam*, Jogesh's betrayal broke the backbone of the scavengers' resistance. Sharing the secret plan of the scavengers, Jogesh strengthened Abdus Salam, who having known all the plans of Ramgolam, could plot to weaken that resistance. With the sight of the traitor Jogesh, who had been undercover for a long time, the scavengers became agitated and sought to teach him a lesson. Aspirant candidates from upper castes who came to attend the interview for the job of scavenging engaged in a face-to-face conflict with the agitated scavengers. In this chaos, Jogesh's was killed mysteriously. From the point of situational benefit, it can be assumed that Jogesh was murdered by any of Abdus Salam's hired men, who took the benefit of the chaos to kill Jogesh without any eyewitnesses. Although the real murderer remained unknown, Abdus Salam, with the help of the police, framed Ramgolam and Kartik in the murder case of Jogesh to spoil the scavengers' resistance.

After their arrest, the scavengers were able to continue the strike for another four days. However, the cruelty of Abdus Salam compelled the scavengers to resume their job. The absence of Ramgolam and Kartik wrecked the spirit of the scavengers. Sending Ramgolam and Kartik to jail, Abdus Salam initiated the recruitment of people from other castes for scavenging work. Hence, the lives of the scavengers got jeopardized because,

> within a month of Jogesh's killing, Abdus Salam appointed sweepers from other communities. Selecting a few from the Harijans, he dismissed them for the crime of agitating. Giving a few Harijan families a hard beating, he had them evicted from the colonies. He also made a law that in the future no one from the Harijans could ever become a Jamader. Moreover, from that point on, Bangladeshis from any community were eligible for a sweeper's job. (*RG* 190)

Thus, the resistance of Ramgolam and his community was crashed in the face of violence. In court, Ramgolam was punished with fourteen years imprisonment, and Kartik was sentenced to death. Thus, through Kartik's death, another subaltern resistance was silenced in the face of the violence of the people in power.

Jaladas's Ramgolam depicts that even the arousal of the scavengers' conscientization could not defeat the conspiracy of the corporation. Kartik, through his death, as claimed by Gayatri Spivak, "subaltern speaks through dying" (The Nation 1) became a voice to inspire the next generation. After the end of his fourteen-year imprisonment, when Ramgolam was released from jail, in every nook and corner of *Methar* colony, he kept searching for another Kartik from the new generation of scavengers. Because, without a Kartik, he will not be able to form another resistance for the scavengers' emancipation. Thakazhi Pillai in *Scavenger's Son*, although paid full attention to Chudalamuttu's struggle and his betrayal to his community, at the end he beckons a glimmer of revolutionary spirit among the new generation of workers. Pillai did not develop the character of Mohan, Pichandi's son and Sundiran's son, who became rebels, to exhibit the anger and strength of the poor. This novel exhibited a revolutionary response from the right-consciousness scavengers. However, it sheds no light on how these scavengers became aware of their rights. Pillai contrasts two generations of scavengers of Alleppey. As he writes,

> [t]oday's scavenger knows how much he earns; he has also learnt to get changes for his money without getting cheated. He even has the nerve to want more wages. In Alleppey the new generation scavengers have learnt to speak with united voice. (*SS* 135)

They maintain a well-o*r*ganized union and dream of an exploitation-free society. From his childhood memories, as he recalled the deception of the overseers and the corporation chief, in youth Mohan became "living sum total of the power of vengeance of his ancestors that was believed to be suppressed" (*SS* 137). Setting fire on the new building belonging to the municipal president Mohan takes his

private revenge. At the end of the novel, there is a mention of a huge workers' demonstration where, despite confronting the armed army, the deprived and dejected "half naked and half starving as they were, frightened not just the town, but the whole state" (*SS* 140). It was the demonstration of the strength of poor men, who, inspired by communist values, were depicted as occupying the streets with a revolutionary spirit, crying out loud, "Long live revolution" (*SS* 142). With the flag of revolution in hand, "the crowd, unarmed and possessing only spiritual strength, moved forward under the leadership of the scavenger's son. His face bore the serious and resolute expression befitting a leader" (*SS* 142). By police firing, "comrades had been shot down at three places. Nevertheless, the shot did not succeed in dispersing it. Without a single space and with the line unbroken, the procession moved on" (*SS* 143) until the last man standing, only to speak "through dying" (Spivak, The Nation 1). The sacrifice and fearlessness of the scavengers engender optimism in readers. However, like the other subaltern resistance, these workers were stopped by bullets.

Conclusion

Every such resistance of the scavengers, as depicted in both *Scavenger's Son* and *Ramgolam*, although silenced by force, kindles a dim hope of optimism that, in the coming days, an o*rg*anized development of conscientization might empower the scavenger community to create a more just and equitable society for their next generation. Moreover, it should be noted that without a positive change in society and government policy, the arousal of conscientization among scavengers and other working classes wouldn't ensure their emancipation. A report published in 2014 by Human Rights Watch titled "Cleaning Human Waste: Manual Scavenging, Caste and Discrimination in India" mentions that the Indian Supreme Court marked the existence of 9.6 million dry latrines, which are still being cleaned manually by the Dalits of the Scheduled Castes. Although the number of manual scavengers is not specific, their destitution and deprivation are evident from the discussion in light of *Scavenger's Son* and *Ramgolam*. To make a society free from exploitation, apart from the oppressed subaltern group, the responsible people from every walk of society must raise their voice together to ensure their rehabilitation and make a society free from caste, class, and economic oppression.

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Fractured Borders and Diasporic Memory in Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*

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Abstract This paper examines the convergence of diasporic identity and postcolonial memory in Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*. This poetry collection navigates the emotional and linguistic dislocation of Sudanese identity in transnational contexts. Elhillo interrogates the legacies of colonial rule and forced migration through poetic strategies that foreground the instability of language, the fluidity of belonging, and the persistent search for a sense of home. Drawing on postcolonial and memory studies, the analysis highlights how the poet disrupts dominant cultural narratives through fragmented voices, multilingual expression, and autobiographical elements. Linguistic alienation emerges as both symptom and resistance, reflecting the poet's negotiation of Arabic and English as sites of identity formation and erasure. The paper argues that Elhillo's work constructs a poetics of fractured belonging that challenges fixed notions of self, nation, and history. Her verse becomes a space where memory is neither linear nor complete, but iterative and haunted by loss. By foregrounding affective dissonance and cultural hybridity, *The January Children* expands the discourse on diasporic memory, offering critical insights into the politics of voice, language, and exile.

Keywords Diaspora; postcolonial memory; linguistic alienation; fractured belonging; Sudanese poetry

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Introduction

Sudan's colonial and postcolonial history is marked by a complex entanglement of conquest, cultural disruption, and fragmented national identity. Being a former Anglo-Egyptian colony, Sudan was shaped by a dual imperial project that not only created administrative divisions but also left enduring mental and linguistic scars (Toprak Sakiz 32). Intricately linked to its colonial past, the country's postcolonial trajectory has been troubled with internal conflict, border disputes, and civil war that repeatedly displace people and disrupt the fabric of national belonging (Elmukashfi 14). During these disruptions, language has been central in forming and excluding identity. In a postcolonial context where Arabic serves as a unifying medium while English bears the spectral imprint of colonial modernity, language has also operated as a tool of Arabisation, marginalising non-Arab ethnicities. These dynamics have fragmented subsequent identity formations, as the violence of colonial rule and the exclusivist politics of postcolonial nationalism have produced a cultural landscape in which belonging is often contested and conditional (Mbembe 145).

Diasporic trauma, therefore, arises both from the physical act of migration as well as that of the psychic dislocation that follows it (Anake et al 3). Diasporic trauma includes the psychological and emotional effects of forced or voluntary displacement from a homeland, as the experience of having to create a solid identity in unfamiliar terrain exacerbates it (Sahakian 23). For diasporic subjects, home is

often an imagined or unattainable space, reimagined through memory, nostalgia, and language (Baubock, Rainer & Thomas Faist 20). Cultural exile, a state in which people are alienated from both their place and the cultural, linguistic, and affective frameworks that once held them together, compounds this dislocation (Claassen 88). Cultural exile, however, interrupts the continuity of self and community, and the processes of identity formation are always contradictory and always marked by loss. They are shared in literature through fragmented narratives, altered linguistic registries, and a mood that pervades the narrative, one of wanting to return to a place now absent from memory (Onwuka, Uba & Fortress 13).

The January Children by Safia Elhillo is located on the exact anthemic crux of historical rupture and diasporic longing. As a Sudanese American poet, Elhillo writes from a place of cultural displacement and its poetics, which question both national and diasporic essentialism. Her poetry navigates the registers of Arabic and English, as well as the realms of memory and forgetting, presence and absence. It provokes a conversation on how linguistic alienation and postcolonial memory shape the contours of experiences of identity and belonging for all those who live at the nation's margins. Through reclaiming poetic voice as a form of cultural resistance and historical testimony, Elhillo creates a poetic work of art that critically assesses history. Her work decommunalizes a previously assumed understanding of 'belonging' in a postcolonial and transnational world for those who are not easily defined by static definitions of geographical and linguistic borders.

From the dual lenses of diaspora theory and trauma studies, *The January Children* can be thought of as an intersection of diasporic identity and postcolonial memory. Paul Gilroy's idea of the Black Atlantic is an excellent model for thinking about diaspora, not as a lack of geographical rootedness. Palmer (28) has defined diaspora as a cultural and political formation based upon histories of slavery, colonialism and migrations forced by masters. Rootedness does not define it, but rather movement, hybridity, and alternative affiliations that transcend borders (Ilogho et al 32). Diasporic identity, in this view, is not a settled, origin-based identity, but rather an ongoing narrative of living with memory and cultural inheritance, as well as lived dislocation. Elhillo's poetry conveys a sense of transnational belonging that is devoid of a stable narrative of homeland. Whereas her work works between linguistic, geographical, and emotional spaces to produce a voice as concatenated as it is connected.

In contrast, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory provides an understanding of how diasporic memory works with rupture and belatedness. Trauma, according to Trigg, is not a story about past suffering, but an unclaimed experience which returns in

fragments, sometimes in the form of repetition, sometimes as disorientation (87). However, traumatic memory resists a linear time and logical coherence; it comes at us in its psychic disruption. Elhillo's poetry enacts this belated return through the use of silence, temporal shifts, and elliptical language. Beyond the individual trauma that she explores, she also stresses the collective traumatic aspects of this condition of diasporic severance from home, land, language and cultural certainty. The fragmented syntax and unrelinquished narratives in the poet's poems effectively embody the very nature of diasporic trauma, which inherently resists the representation of histories that remain unspoken and unresolved.

Given the central role that language plays in postcolonial identity formation, an understanding of Elhillo's work is irreducible from that of the aesthetic and political stakes of language. Tondi and Fredericks regard colonial languages as instrumental to cultural domination, determined through consciousness conditioning and dislodging indigenous peoples from their own epistemologies (20). The call for decolonisation of language is important in highlighting the role of linguistics in postcolonial literature. This tension is embodied by Elhillo, who writes in English while employing code-switching and transliteration to incorporate Arabic. Between the colonial language of English and the culturally inherited, but politically fraught language of Arabic, her poetry navigates. As such, this linguistic duality is not unique to her personal history but rather illustrates the dilemma faced by postcolonial subjects in delineating their identity through the languages of oppression and heritage.

This line of discussion draws on Gayatri Spivak's foundational argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she shows how colonial and postcolonial systems restrict the capacity of marginalised subjects to be heard within dominant discourses. Building on Spivak's framework, Zecchini examines how these constraints continue to operate in Dalit literatures and broader postcolonial contexts, noting how power structures shape who is recognised as a speaking subject (65). In this study, Spivak provides the primary theoretical basis for understanding silencing. At the same time, Zecchini's work serves as a secondary commentary that helps extend Spivak's insights to broader debates on voice and representation. Elhillo's poetry reflects this struggle for recognition, as the speaker attempts to articulate a diasporic voice that transcends both Arabic and English linguistic worlds (69).

Against this background, this study asks two central questions that guide the analysis. First, how does *The January Children* construct a poetics of fractured belonging that differs from established readings of diaspora poetry built on return, coherence, or cultural restoration? Second, to what extent does Elhillo's use of

codeswitching, transliteration, and fragmentary form operate as a distinctive mode of diasporic archival practice that preserves memory through disruption rather than synthesis? These questions help sharpen the argument that Elhillo does more than represent displacement. She offers a model of diasporic memory that emphasises fragmentation, partial recall, and linguistic tension as generative rather than defective. The paper, therefore, positions *The January Children* as an important intervention in current discussions of diaspora, language, and memory by shifting attention from idealised return to the work of assembling an archive from scattered cultural traces. This framing highlights the article's contribution to debates on postcolonial identity by demonstrating how Elhillo reimagines belonging through aesthetic strategies that foreground the value of incompleteness in the construction of diasporic history.

Language, Codeswitching and the Poetics of Fracture

Linguistic dislocation is staged as a form of poetics and a living manifestation of diasporic trauma in *The January Children*. The collection presents a speaking voice that moves between Arabic and English, creating a style shaped by this dual positioning. The poems convey a sense of being suspended between linguistic worlds, which parallels the psychological and cultural uncertainty that often accompanies diasporic identity. This tension is bilingual, not an embellishment of style: it is a deliberate fracturing of belonging. At once a source of intimacy and estrangement, Arabic, traditionally the language of family, heritage, and spiritual memory, shifts into a location of transgression. This is a distinctly modern limitation of language in accounting for the vocabulary of diasporic existence, in the gaps left by the loss of the mother tongue and the anglicisation of the diaspora. Although it can articulate extremely complex emotional and political experiences, English is burdened by the imposition of colonialism and cultural displacement. Neither of these linguistic terrains is a complete home for the speaker to navigate.

Safia Elhillo's *The January Children* presents language as a volatile space in which selfhood is constantly shaped, unsettled, and rebuilt. In "*Self Portrait with No Flag*," the visual field of the poem is part of its meaning. The lines descend in short units, creating a falling movement on the page, and the consistent use of lowercase removes the authority usually attached to personal or national identifiers. Her choice of irregular spacing produces pauses that interrupt the reader's flow, mirroring the speaker's uneasy relationship with inherited vocabulary. When the speaker says, "i do not know the Arabic for / diaspora / or / safe space / or / depression" (Elhillo, 12) Elhillo turns poetic form into a method for reclaiming language as a space),

the fractured lineation makes each term appear isolated, like items in a list of emotional experiences that cannot be carried into her ancestral tongue. The spacing carves visual gaps that echo the linguistic gaps she confronts. This structure enacts fragmentation rather than simply describing it.

Elhillo's use of Arabic within Latin script intensifies this experience. The Arabic phrases appear inside English stanzas in ways that disrupt the rhythm of the poem. These intrusions are not decorative bilingual gestures. They break the sound pattern, interrupt the reader's expectations, and force a shift in attention. Because they carry sonic textures that English cannot reproduce, their appearance unsettles the poem's tone. They remind the reader that the speaker's voice is never entirely at home in either language. The shifts between Arabic phrases and English expressions produce a kind of stutter in the poem's rhythm, reflecting a self that speaks through multiple cultural memories but cannot merge them into a smooth discourse.

This tension becomes even more pronounced when examined through the lens of linguistic consciousness. Phyak's idea that language holds culture and consciousness helps illuminate why the absence of equivalents for "diaspora" or "depression" is not a minor lexical inconvenience (327). These missing words indicate the absence of cultural frameworks that shape the speaker's emotional life. Arabic here carries memory and ancestry, yet it cannot encompass the psychological vocabulary required for a diasporic experience. English provides a vocabulary of modern identity, mental health, and migration, but cannot reproduce the cultural resonance of the speaker's origins. The poem, therefore, stages a situation where neither language is sufficient. Identity becomes an ongoing negotiation, shaped by conflicts that are linguistic, historical, and emotional in nature.

This dynamic continues across *The January Children*. Elhillo turns codeswitching into a poetic strategy that enacts the instability of diasporic life. Her shifts between Arabic and English rarely feel seamless. Instead, they produce tension. The reader moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and from clarity to opacity, in quick succession. This movement replicates the speaker's inner condition, where memories tied to one language collide with lived realities expressed in another. The transliterated Arabic phrases stand at the border of comprehension for many readers, creating a sensation of partial understanding. That sensation is vital because it mirrors the speaker's own partial belonging. The poems show that the hybrid speaker does not simply celebrate linguistic mixture. She experiences it as a space where meanings remain unsettled, and where identity is both restored and fractured.

The silence between lines also carries meaning. Many of Elhillo's poems use

short lines, wide spacing, or isolated words. These choices mirror the way traumatic memory emerges in pieces rather than in a smooth narrative. The poems resist linear progression. Instead, they move through images, sounds, and fragments of language that return and vanish in irregular patterns. This structure echoes the experience of displacement, where one's sense of home, body, and language is continually interrupted. The poems provide no clear resolutions. Their power lies in their refusal of closure. Through this form, Elhillo renders trauma as a lived condition that shapes voice, rhythm, and memory.

In *"Self Portrait with No Flag*", this refusal reaches a powerful expression. The poem's voice rejects the stabilising symbol of a national flag. However, the rejection is not declared in abstract terms. It is performed through the poem's texture. The repeated use of "I" without capitalisation weakens the conventional authority of the speaking self. It positions the speaker as someone who cannot anchor identity in the usual markers of nationality. Pronouns shift in subtle ways, creating distance between the self that speaks and the self being described. The address turns inward and outward in alternating movements, further destabilising the sense of a fixed identity. The poem enacts statelessness by shaping the page in ways that resist unity.

By refusing to conform to the expectation of linguistic coherence, Elhillo asserts the legitimacy of a voice that holds multiple histories simultaneously. This voice is built through tension, conflict, and stylistic fragmentation. Rather than smoothing over these fractures, the poems highlight them as the conditions through which new possibilities for identity can be formed. The fragments, silences, and bilingual shifts shape a record of selfhood that remains faithful to the ruptures of diasporic experience. Her refusal of linguistic coherence becomes part of her aesthetic approach. The poems speak in a voice that carries multiple histories simultaneously, a voice shaped by tension, conflict, and stylistic fracture. Instead of smoothing over these breaks, the poems treat them as openings where new forms of identity can take shape.

This fractured position becomes a creative site rather than a limitation. Elhillo does not attempt to ease the tension between English and Arabic. She heightens it. Her work pushes the two languages into collision, and that collision generates new poetic possibilities. The insertion of untranslated Arabic within mainly English poems introduces semantic uncertainty and a sound pattern unfamiliar to readers not fluent in Arabic. These moments unsettle the dominance of English and interrupt the poem's fluency. Each shift requires readers to confront linguistic differences directly. This is a purposeful refusal of assimilation, a deliberate choice that utilises code-switching as a form of resistance. The poems make visible the presence of a cultural

world that cannot be absorbed into English without loss.

This friction between languages echoes what Bhabha describes as a third space, a site where meanings are revised, transformed, or rearticulated through cultural encounter. Elhillo's bilingual poetics create such a space (12). The tension is not treated as a source of confusion. It becomes a generative condition. Her poems do not obey the expectation that the speaker must choose one language over the other, or one identity at the expense of another. They move within the liminal space in between. The poetic voice that emerges is both fractured and complete, rooted in heritage yet unmoored in geography, searching and steady at the same time. Through this voice, Elhillo demonstrates that the instability of language can become a form of agency, a way of shaping identity in the midst of displacement.

Furthermore, whilst Elhillo's code-switching needs to be understood as an aesthetic technique or linguistic novelty, it cannot be. At a broader level, it fits into a framework of memory work and cultural reclamation. Her presence permeates the entire collection, particularly in her recurring references to Abdelhalim Hafez. Introducing Hafez as a cultural touchstone, Elhillo does not present him as a distant celebrity but as an intimate presence carried in the emotional memory of the speaker. This relationship becomes most evident in a poem like "Asmarani," where Hafez's influence is directly apparent in the poem's structure. The name "Hafez" recurs throughout the poem, often placed at the end of a line or isolated within a brief phrase. This repeated invocation operates like a refrain in a song. Each return of his name calls back the mood of his music, creating an echo that shapes the rhythm of the poem. The line "ya asmar ya asmarani," borrowed from the popular love song associated with Hafez, appears and reappears with small shifts. It works the way a chorus does, grounding the poem in a sonic memory that predates the speaker's displacement.

The poem also borrows the looping cadence of a song. Lines repeat with slight variations in tone or emphasis, imitating the way musical phrases cycle back with emotional intensification. This musical repetition enables the poem to convey conflicting feelings simultaneously: a desire for home, the weight of nostalgia, and the ache of distance. The structure creates a rhythm that sways between presence and absence, much like the emotional register of Hafez's performances. These musical elements serve a deeper purpose. They create a space where the speaker can enter into an imagined conversation with Hafez. The voice sometimes slips into direct address, speaking to him as if he were a confidant rather than a historical figure. This moment of address softens the boundary between past and present, as well as between private memory and collective cultural heritage. Hafez becomes

a bridge to a linguistic and emotional world the speaker feels cut off from. His presence in the poem offers a kind of surrogate intimacy, a way to touch the cultural ground that displacement has rendered distant.

In Elhillo's case, the engagement with Arabic and English is not only representative of the reality of her diasporic experience, but it is also an act of anti-hegemonic reclamation of linguistic agency. By disrupting the reader's expectations and resisting linguistic transparency, she asserts the legitimacy of a hybrid identity that refuses to conform to the logic of monolingual nationalism or colonial linguistic hierarchies. Although Elhillo writes primarily in English, she decolonises her poetic practice through rhythm, phonetic variation, and the unapologetic presence of Arabic. Her refusal to translate some of these words into English also validates the importance of these words within their original cultural context, asking the reader to resist the process of 'eating without chewing' as they engage with something different.

Elhillo's poems turn linguistic hybridity into a reclamation act in their poetry. Code-switching is now a conscious, culturally charged aesthetic, rather than a symptom of cultural fragmentation. It allows her to create a voice which speaks of loss without giving up on silence. Elhillo's poetics of cultural resilience comprises bilingual layering, intertextual reference, and formal innovation. Her work explores the truth of the lives of many diasporic people who are caught between languages and cannot fully inhabit either one. However, instead of conceiving of this space as a void, Elhillo gives it sound, memory, and meaning. In this way, she asserts that fragmented language can still convey wholeness and that poetic hybridity may provide a strong platform for healing and historical continuity.

Nostalgia, Mourning and the Unreachable Homeland

In *The January Children*, Safia Elhillo constructs Sudan not as a fixed geographic reality but as a shifting emotional and mythic space, shaped by memory, longing, and displacement. Rather than offering a concrete portrayal of the homeland, her poetry foregrounds a Sudan that exists primarily in fragments, constructed from ancestral stories, family photographs, popular culture, and inherited sorrow. The homeland emerges not as a site of return but as a conceptual terrain that remains just out of reach. In the poem "*The January Children*," the speaker says, "when I say home / I mean a country that / no longer exists" (Elhillo, 19). The three-line structure is deliberately broken into short, pared-down units that slow the reader's movement and create a sense of hesitation. Each line carries only a fragment of the thought, and the pause produced by the phrase break holds the weight of loss in the

space between lines. The poem returns to the word "home," but the minimalism surrounding it strips the term of certainty. Its placement at the beginning of the line isolates it visually and suggests both longing and distance. The sparse layout reinforces the idea that home is no longer a stable point. It is not only unreachable in a geographical sense but also unsettled in time and emotion, shaped by historical shifts that have erased the country the speaker remembers. Through these choices, the poem enacts the impossibility of return and turns the page itself into a field of disappearance.

This treatment of homeland aligns with the theorisation of diaspora as a space of cultural recombination, not of origin. For Topraz Sakiz (23), diasporic identities are not defined by essential ties to a homeland but by the continuous negotiation of cultural memory, movement, and transformation. Elhillo's Sudan is not the nationalist construct celebrated in textbooks or maps. It is a place shaped by what remains and by what has been lost. Her poetry rejects nostalgic idealisation and instead portrays longing as a complicated, often painful engagement with partial memory and cultural alienation. The speaker does not merely mourn an unreachable place. She mourns the inability to fully know that place, to enter it without the distortions of time, distance, and trauma.

Through the poet's intertextual and archival references to Abdelhalim Hafez and other cultural icons whose legacies span Sudanese and Arab diasporans of various generations, the poet reinforces this ambivalence. The speaker can therefore connect with an idea of Sudan beyond the present, and these figures are used as emotional anchors for that. These references themselves remind the speaker, however, of what has been changed or has disappeared. Memories of the homeland become a collage of incomplete memories, cultural echoes and imaginative reconstruction. Formally, the poems enact a collage-like movement, looping between images and themes with slight shifts each time. This repetition does not settle the speaker's feelings. It reinforces a sense of uncertainty and recurrence. A clear example appears in the poem "Passport," where the speaker repeats variations of the phrase "I carry my country" across several lines. The line reappears with different qualifiers, including "I carry my country in my name," "I carry my country in my mouth," and "I carry my country in my papers." Each return shifts the focus from identity documents to voice and then to the intimate space of the body. These repeated images of the passport, the name, and the mouth create a cycle in which identity is neither fully claimed nor fully released. Instead, the images circle back, refusing closure.

This looping pattern mirrors the movement of trauma, as Banhazi (35)

notes, traumatic memory does not move in a straight line. It recurs in uneven and involuntary ways, resurfacing as disruption. Elhillo's lines capture this process. The repeated references to borders, papers, and the body echo like a refrain that keeps returning even when the speaker tries to speak beyond it. The memory of homeland appears through these rhythmic repetitions, not as a stable recollection but as a repeated disturbance. The poem does not organise these moments into a resolved narrative. It lets them return in fragments, echoing the unpredictable ways displacement shapes consciousness.

Thus, the loss Elhillo articulates is both spatial and temporal, as well as narrative. There is no way to retrieve the past, just as there is no way to retrieve one's homeland. It is this: the conceptual instability that makes her poetry affective. Instead of inhabited, the homeland is imagined; instead of being reclaimed, it is mourned. Still, this imagined Sudan remains important. It opens as a space for the poet to think diasporic dislocation, assert cultural memory, and refuse forgetting. In *The January Children*, nostalgia is not destiny, and one need not hunker into a perfect past. Exile is a mode of poetic engagement that underscores the emotional and historical complexity of the exile experience.

An unrequited grief for a cohesive self, fragmented by migration, lost language, and cultural dislocation, constitutes the emotional and structural centre of Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*. This gives the speaker a subjectivity fractured by dissonance between cultural expectations and personal experience lived. Instead of telling a unified or redemptive narrative of identity, Elhillo builds a lyrical space that not only acknowledges loss but performs such loss aesthetically. Her work is not merely a mourning of lost people or places. However, it also extends to more abstract forms of absence, such as the loss of linguistic fluency, national belonging, and stable identity categories. The question for feminism is one of how these losses are not simply emotions but epistemology. The impossibility of reconciling multiple, often contradictory, affiliations within the categories of a coherent self-concept is reflected.

In the poem "Application for Asylum," the speaker reflects, "the homeland / named me / refugee / before I could pronounce it" (Elhillo, 27). This line captures the early imposition of political identity, where the speaker is inscribed into a discourse of displacement before she has the linguistic capacity to name it. The term "refugee" arrives not through personal reflection but as a label assigned by national and institutional frameworks. This preemptive categorisation reveals a traumatic condition in which the subject is denied the opportunity to define herself. She mourns a self that might have been formed through continuity and cultural

rootedness, but that is instead constructed within the fractures of exile. The sense of loss Elhillo explores is therefore both anticipatory and retrospective. It is the mourning of a self that never had the chance to become whole.

The form of Elhillo's poetry mirrors the speaker's internal fragmentation, and this is especially visible in a poem like "asmarani," where spacing becomes part of the emotional logic of the text. The lines drift across the page in uneven stretches, leaving wide pockets of white space. These blank areas work like withheld speech. They slow the reader's rhythm and create the sense that the poem is thinking its way through memory rather than presenting a finished account. In one sequence, a single word sits alone on the far right side of the page while the rest of the line remains empty. That distance gives the word an isolated presence, as if it stands apart from the rest of the speaker's linguistic world. The spacing marks a hesitation that feels almost physical, a pause shaped by emotion rather than grammar.

This arrangement does more than ornament the poem. It recreates the experience of a fractured identity. The absence of punctuation allows thoughts to spill out in uneven breath patterns, and the abrupt line breaks sever ideas before they can settle. Solinski (2022) explains that trauma communicates through fragments and delays rather than clear recollection. Elhillo's form demonstrates this principle. The speaker's voice appears in scattered pieces, stretched across silences, with meaning emerging in the gaps as much as in the printed words. The spacing turns the page into a field of broken memory, where the movement between lines reflects a consciousness interrupted by history, displacement, and the strain of what cannot be spoken directly.

Zhang provides a helpful framework to understand the emotional texture of Elhillo's verse (132). He differentiates mourning, which permits subjects to work through trauma and progress toward reintegration, from melancholia, a pathological attachment to loss that prevents recovery.' Elhillo's poetry resides somewhere between two places. Her poems do not try to close a wound. They do not work out the tension between past and present, self and other, home and exile. Instead, they carry these tensions in suspension, giving one the space to speak to the pain of being dislocated without being pacified. In this sense, the poetry does not tell the story of the cure, but instead is a lyrical account of irredeemable loss. Her polyphonic poetic voice further deepens the complexity of her speaker. The poems consistently shift between allusions to collective memory and historical references, to intertextual dialogue, and to personal pronouns. The multiplicity destabilises the supposition of a singular, stable self. Instead, their influence and absences meld to create the speaker. Sometimes she speaks as a displaced individual herself. At

other times, however, her voice becomes interwoven with other diasporic subjects, popular cultural figures or examples of colonisation and migration. This suggests that identity in *The January Children* is not possessed; rather, it is inhabited. It is mediated through inherited trauma, cultural silence, and the necessity of continuous reconstruction.

The speaker is both the subject and the object of mourning. She is the one who mourns, but also the one who is mourned. The self she evokes is not static or cohesive, but one that must be remembered and reassembled through language. The poetic act becomes one of invocation, where each poem functions like a ritual for recalling fragments of a self that remains elusive. These acts of mourning do not signify narrative failure. Instead, they assert the poet's refusal to conform to fixed models of identity, whether national, diasporic, or gendered. Elhillo resists the pressure to synthesise her identity into a digestible form. Her poetry insists on the validity of contradiction, silence, and fragmentation as modes of existence. In foregrounding mourning as a central affective and structural element, Elhillo positions poetry as a space of both witness and resistance. Her work does not aim to offer comfort or resolution. Instead, it gives form to the emotional and psychological contours of life shaped by exile and unbelonging. By embracing fragmentation, she challenges dominant narratives that equate coherence with authenticity or stability with truth. In *The January Children*, the fragmented self is not a deficit; rather, it is a means of coping. It is a truthful representation of what it means to live across cultural, linguistic, and historical divides. Through mourning, Elhillo does not seek to recover what has been lost. She seeks to name it, honour it, and allow it to live again in the broken beauty of her verse.

Poetic Form as Transnational Archive

Elhillo's form of poetry also serves as a mnemonic and reconstructive device, extending beyond vocabulary and grammar. Memory, especially among diasporas, is not linear or cohesive. It is broken up, embodied, and made of presence and absence. This instability of memory is reflected in Elhillo's poems. Often, there is little punctuation, disjointed syntax and silence as a meaningful structural component. Formal choices replicate the rhythms of memory, particularly memory that navigates the waters of trauma. A poem like "Application for Asylum" demonstrates how Elhillo utilises silence and disordered syntax as structural tools that shape emotional meaning. The lines move forward with almost no punctuation, which causes thoughts to spill into each other without clear boundaries. This absence of stops creates a breathless tone, as if the speaker is attempting to narrate

a memory that keeps slipping out of grasp. The disjointed syntax reinforces this sensation. Clauses begin but do not complete themselves. Verbs appear without clear subjects. Some phrases are separated from the rest of the line by wide spaces that produce visible gaps in the text. These gaps serve as moments of quiet, where the speaker's voice recedes. The silence is not empty. It holds tension, signalling the pressure of unspoken fears and the difficulty of articulating displacement.

Within these pauses, recurring motifs such as "country," "mother tongue," and "passport" recur in altered forms. Each return carries a slightly different emotional weight. When "passport" surfaces early in the poem, it functions as a simple marker of identity. When it resurfaces later, isolated on its own line, it becomes an emblem of uncertainty, a reminder that documentation cannot secure belonging. The motif of "mother tongue" moves similarly, shifting from a reference to heritage to a site of loss when the speaker notes its fading presence. These repetitions create an echo across the poem, a loop that reflects unresolved emotional states. Instead of building toward clarity, the echoes deepen the sense of fragmentation. The poem revisits the same images from new angles, building a network of memory that resists closure.

The use of form by the poet, furthermore, performs the act of recollection and reconstructs identity. The poetry becomes an archive of belonging through the repetition of names, cultural symbols, and ancestral references. She recovers both English and Arabic as sites of cultural memory by manipulating English and invoking Arabic. The power of Elhillo's poetry to (re)construct language and form to tell its stories communicates that healing is not about achieving resolution, but about articulation. Pain is not rubbed out. It is acknowledged, structured and transformed into something legible instead. The poet does not pretend that her word is restoring what has been lost. Instead, she characterises language as a space where cultural and emotional fragments can be worked into a new pattern without distorting or destroying the complexity and contradictions.

The January Children by Safia Elhillo is more than a collection of poems. It serves as a transnational archive of fragments of Sudanese cultural identity within the broader discourse on displacement, exile, and postcolonial belonging. However, her poetry is about preserving cultural memory, but it concretises that memory in order to understand it through a diasporic experience. Lost languages, forgotten figures, and erased histories are gathered in the poems as they are put together, not as static artefacts of an irretrievable past, but as living testimony to emotional, linguistic, and political survival. Elhillo builds a literary space of the mergers of Exile's residue and Home's echo through this archival poetics.

The act of archiving in Elhillo's work is both aesthetic and ideological. Her

verse serves as a record of personal and collective histories that are often excluded from national narratives. In the absence of institutional platforms for remembering Sudanese diasporic experiences, her poetry serves as a repository of stories, emotions, and images that resist erasure. In poems like "Arabic," the poet mourns the loss of fluency in the mother tongue but also inscribes the emotional reality of this loss into the poem itself. "My parents / tell me I used to speak Arabic / as a baby" (Elhillo, 24) is both a recollection and an archival trace. The poem bears witness to what has been lost while transforming it into a cultural presence through verse.

Rather than seeking to restore a mythic homeland, diasporic texts often create new modes of cultural preservation that acknowledge displacement and hybridity. Elhillo's poetry does not seek purity or origin. It documents disruption and survival. Her references to Abdelhalim Hafez, Sudanese geography, Arabized syntax, and untranslated phrases collectively form a dynamic record of a life lived across borders. The poet archives not a fixed identity but the process of becoming, shaped by memory, loss, and resilience. In this context, Elhillo's work exemplifies a mode of postcolonial cosmopolitanism grounded in mobility, plurality, and ethical responsiveness rather than elite detachment. Her poems do not attempt to fashion a single, fixed identity. Instead, they trace a self shaped by multiple cultural pressures that never entirely settle. This cosmopolitan stance is enacted not only through themes but also through close formal choices, especially the shifting pronoun work that appears repeatedly in poems such as "Self Portrait with No Flag." The poem often begins in a confessional "I," but the voice slides into "you" without warning, transforming the address into a layered conversation. At times, the "you" seems directed at the self. In other moments, it seems to speak to an imagined listener, to a homeland, or even to a version of the self that exists elsewhere. The pronoun movement confuses the boundary between speaker and addressee, reflecting a cosmopolitan identity that is relational rather than contained.

These shifts continue throughout the poem, as the occasional "we" emerges. This "we" forms briefly, never fully defined, before dissolving back into the solitary "I." The effect creates a kind of flicker in the voice. For a moment, the poem imagines a collective belonging, then retreats into the uncertainty of individual displacement. This movement embodies the lived tension of diasporic cosmopolitanism, where identity stretches across multiple communities without fully anchoring in any single one. The transitions between "i," "you," and "we" create a layered voice that speaks from several positions at once. Instead of adopting a single cultural register, the poem employs overlapping ones that interweave and

then drift apart.

The looseness of grammar and the refusal to establish a stable address intensify this multiplicity. Lines often begin mid-thought, as if the voice enters from different angles. The shifting layers of address turn the poem into a meeting ground of selves rather than a monologic statement. This openness allows the work to accommodate multiple audiences, yet it resists complete assimilation into any linguistic or cultural centre. English becomes a site of subversion rather than straightforward communication, shaped by the influence of Arabic rhythm and memory. The result is a poetic cosmopolitanism rooted in relation, responsibility, and memory rather than rootlessness.

Elhillo's engagement with cultural references, ancestral languages, and diasporic emotion strengthens her role as a poetic archivist. Her poems gather fragments of collective history and return to them across temporal and spatial distances. These returns do not reproduce history as a static record. They reveal how the past continues to whisper through the present, insisting on recognition. This archival work is especially vital for communities whose histories have been distorted or erased through colonial and postcolonial violence. In giving form to these overlapping memories through shifting pronouns, layered voices, and multilingual textures, Elhillo shapes a cosmopolitanism that is not abstract. It is lived, affective, and grounded in the ongoing labour of remembering.

The archive is not static in *The January Children*. It breathes and grieves and remembers. Elhillo's poetry proves that to archive in diaspora is to save, in its fractured form, things that previously had meaning, arranging them in a way that might not create the original, but give meaning to the lost. Her work is about creating a space within which culture survives, not wholly, but as an echo, where identity is not confirmed through stability, but instead because it is continuously being reconstructed. Elhillo employs this transnational archive to affirm the power of poetry to lay resistance to erasure and to imagine modes of belonging yet to come, rooted in memory, multiplicity and voice.

Conclusion

Safia Elhillo's *The January Children* is a profound meditation on the psychic and cultural afterlives of colonialism, displacement, and fractured belonging. Through poetic form, linguistic experimentation, and narrative fragmentation, Elhillo articulates the complexities of diasporic identity as lived, felt, and remembered across generations. Her work explores poetry's capacity to contain inherited trauma while resisting easy resolutions to modern alienation. Oscillating between Arabic

and English, silence and invocation, presence and erasure, the collection reckons with histories that defy conventional archives and national borders. For instance, in "Self Portrait with no flag," irregular spacing and line breaks create visual pauses that disrupt the flow, mirroring linguistic gaps and the speaker's fractured self, as seen in isolated terms like "diaspora" or "depression" that lack Arabic equivalents. Similarly, in "asmarani," wide white spaces and uneven line stretches evoke withheld speech, using absence to enact emotional hesitation and traumatic delay. Elhillo's verse thus enacts trauma's return not merely through content, but through textual mechanics, reclaiming disjointed memories and inhabiting the ambivalences of selfhood.

Rather than positioning the poetry as straightforwardly therapeutic. Elhillo's work is better understood as an act of witnessing, naming, and archiving irredeemable loss. It resides in the space of melancholia, as articulated in Zhang's framework, where attachments to absence persist without progression toward reintegration, holding tensions in suspension as a lyrical account of unresolved grief. What might be termed "healing" here is not restorative but ethical: the deliberate articulation of fragmentation and the remembrance of cultural erasures, allowing fragmented voices to resonate without forced coherence. By affirming contemporary diasporic poetry's role in theorising postcolonial subjectivity, documenting silenced histories, and offering aesthetic strategies for enduring dislocation, *The January Children* complicates notions of homeland, blood, family, and language, ultimately refusing redemption in favour of truthful, ongoing negotiation.

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Everyday Lives, Epochal Histories: Humayun Ahmed's *Moddhannya* Through New Historicism

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Abstract This study examines *Moddhannya [মধ্যাহ্ন , The Noon]*, a two-part historical novel by Humayun Ahmed, often considered the most popular Bengali writer of his time, through the lens of New Historicism. Rather than foregrounding monumental events or nationalist figures, Ahmed centers the everyday lives of maids, mendicants, musicians, and marginalized communities amid the upheavals between the 1905 Partition of Bengal and the 1947 Partition of India. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's and Louis Montrose's concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, the paper explores how the novel negotiates cultural memory, ideological discourse, and the circulation of power. The study offers a qualitative, interpretive reading that traces recurring motifs across both volumes and relates them to relevant historical and biographical contexts. *Moddhannya* resists linear historiography, embedding historical transformation in rituals, relationships, and shifting norms of gender, class, and belief. Ahmed's narrative, while deceptively simple in tone, enacts a complex historiographical intervention that both reflects and reimagines early twentieth-century Bengal. This reading not only positions *Moddhannya* as a significant contribution to Bangla literature but also argues for the inclusion of vernacular popular and historical fiction within broader conversations about literary historiography, postcolonial memory, translation politics, and subaltern voices in world literature.

Keywords Vernacular Historical Fiction; Circulation of Power; Postcolonial Historiography; Gender and Communal Identity in Bengal.

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Introduction

Among contemporary South Asian writers, few matched the narrative authority and popular reach of Humayun Ahmed (1955-2012), a writer, dramatist, screenwriter, filmmaker, songwriter, and university professor. Author of more than 200 works spanning genres from romance and suspense to historical fiction and science fantasy, Ahmed has long been regarded as the most widely read and influential literary figure in post-independence Bangladesh (*Dhaka Tribune*). His literary emergence in 1970 with *Nondito Noroke* [*In Blissful Hell*] marked the arrival of a voice capable of transforming everyday life into mythic storytelling. As Imdadul Haq Milon observes, "What Rabindranath Tagore in his famous short stories did by entwining nature and humans in the same canvas for a perfect portrayal of life, Humayun Ahmed did the same in his *Nondito Noroke*, written at the age of twenty or twenty-two" (Milon). From that point forward, Ahmed's literary output reflected not just creative virtuosity but an acute attunement to the cultural rhythms of Bengali society. Md. Shamim Mondol notes that "He has mastered a language of his own and chosen diction comprehensible to all" (Mondol 80), a formulation that encapsulates Ahmed's ability to merge colloquial ease with lyrical resonance.

Ahmed's legacy has not gone unnoticed by literary giants and intellectuals across the Bengali-speaking world. Sunil Gangopadhyay, a canonical figure in Indian Bengali letters, noted that "Ahmed was even more popular than Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay" (*The Independent*). Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus went further, claiming that "Humayun's works are the most profound and most fruitful that literature has experienced since the time of Tagore and Nazrul" (Bari). Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay offered the striking admission: "Humayun Ahmed was one of the best writers in the Indian subcontinent. He was a much better writer than us" (Haque). Despite this regional acclaim, Ahmed remains conspicuously underrepresented in global literary scholarship. Only a handful of his works have been translated, *Gouripur Junction* being the most widely circulated, and academic engagement with his texts outside Bangladesh remains minimal.

This discrepancy between regional ubiquity and global invisibility raises

significant questions about the construction of literary canons, the cultural politics of translation, and the criteria by which historical fiction is judged as "serious literature." While critics such as Syed Shamsul Haq have illuminated the philosophical depth of Ahmed's writing, suggesting that "I can see three lights in the depth of Humayun Ahmed's writings: truth, purity, and beauty… But it is true that his readers remain busy with discovering entertainment through simplicity instead of that light" (Haq 382), such insights have yet to be fully pursued in sustained critical discourse. As Mondol et al. have argued, the existing studies on Ahmed "focus on his overall achievements […] and almost all the leading critics and litterateurs of Bangladesh have their observations about him, but very few venture into close thematic, ideological, or historiographical analysis" (Mondol 116).

This paper attempts to fill that lacuna by focusing on *Moddhannya*[1], Ahmed's two-part historical novel published in 2007 and 2008. Set against the backdrop of the 1905 Partition of Bengal and culminating with the 1947 Partition of India, *Moddhannya* offers a densely layered narrative that foregrounds rural life, minoritized voices, and communal transformations. In the preface to the novel, Ahmed makes a characteristically self-effacing comment:

> I write for my own pleasure. Whether topics like society, politics, time, or grand ideas (!) have appeared in my writing or not, I've never bothered […] Whatever I try to write, I feel compelled to capture the time period. That's what happened in *Moddhannya* as well. I began the story in 1905 and tried to carry it through. But readers, please note—I'm not writing a history book. I'm simply telling a story as a storyteller. And yet... [2]

This disclaimer, while charming (Ahmed, *Moddhannya*), belies the sophistication of *Moddhannya* as a historical narrative. Scholar Binayak Sen offers a contrasting assessment, stating, "I feel he has started this project on history very consciously"

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1 *Moddhannya* is the transliterated form of the original Bengali title মধ্যাহ্ন, which translates to *The Noon* in English. The transliteration is retained throughout this paper to preserve cultural authenticity and maintain clarity for an international readership.

2 This quote, originally written in Bangla, was translated by the researcher:

আমি লিখি নিজের খুশিতে। আমার লেখায় সমাজ, রাজনীতি, কাল, মহান বোধ (!) এইসব অতি প্রয়োজনীয় (?) বিষয়গুলি এসেছে কি আসে নি তা নিয়ে কখনো মাথা ঘামাইনি। [...] যে-কোনো লেখায় হাত দিলেই মনে হয়—চেষ্টা করে দেখি সময়টাকে ধরা যায় কিনা। মধ্যাহ্নেও এটাই হয়েছে। ১৯০৫ সাল থেকে কাহিনি শুরু করে আগানোর চেষ্টা করেছি। পাঠকেরা চমকে উঠবেন না। আমি ইতিহাসের বই লিখছি না। গল্পকার হিসেবে গল্পই বলছি। তারপরেও..."

(Sen 151). The novel's depiction of shifting communal identities, gendered rituals, and local cosmologies signals an awareness of history not merely as backdrop, but as active substance—negotiated, remembered, and imagined. To engage with this duality, the simplicity of tone and complexity of vision—this study adopts a New Historicist framework. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's and Louis Montrose's formulations, this paper treats *Moddhannya* not merely as a narrative of past events but as a cultural artifact embedded in the ideological and epistemic structures of its time. Greenblatt's model, introduced in his seminal work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), emphasizes the reciprocal shaping of text and context, effectively dismantling the rigid boundary between literature and history and allowing fiction to be read as a form of historical discourse (Greenblatt; Barry 167). Montrose, expanding on this approach in his influential essay "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," articulates New Historicism through the dual concepts of the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history." The former emphasizes that literary texts are products of their historical and cultural milieus, while the latter underscores the constructed, narrative nature of historical knowledge itself (Montrose 18). As Nasrullah Mambrol further explains, history, like language is shaped by "the vested interests of dominant societal groups or institutions," making it less a neutral record of facts than a contested and ideologically infused discourse (Mambrol). Thus, New Historicism invites a reading of *Moddhannya* as both shaped by and shaping the socio-political forces it evokes. The thematic scope of this study is organized around several critical vectors: the narrative structure and progression of *Moddhannya*; the ideological configurations of its characters; the degree to which the novel aligns with or reimagines historical records; and the portrayal of power—particularly in relation to gender, class, and communal identity. To examine these, the study engages in comparative textual analysis, placing *Moddhannya* in dialogue with archival documents, secondary histories, and existing literary accounts of the same period. While the novel is fictional, its imaginative reconstruction of events, persons, and social shifts reflects a historical consciousness that merits scholarly attention.

Methodologically, this research is a qualitative, interpretive study that draws on thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying recurrent motifs and ideological threads in the novel. In this study, thematic analysis is employed in a literary-critical, interpretive sense, and it operates alongside a qualitative New Historicist reading attentive to the circulation of power, discourse, and cultural memory. The corpus for this analysis consists of the two volumes of *Moddhannya*, supported by historical, archival, and biographical materials,

including Willem van Schendel's *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), which offers a comprehensive synthesis of Bengal's political and social transformations and provides essential comparative grounding for the novel's reconstructed world. The themes are then situated within the larger frame of New Historicism to reveal how Ahmed's storytelling mediates historical discourse. While traditional historicism treats history as a sequence of objectively verifiable events, New Historicism regards historical knowledge as partial, constructed, and inflected by power relations. As Lois Tyson explains, "From this perspective, there is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation… reliable interpretations are, for a number of reasons, difficult to produce" (Tyson 283). *Moddhannya*, in this light, does not offer an authoritative account of early twentieth-century Bengal; rather, it stages a cultural memory which is partial, plural, and deeply local.

While New Historicism provides a productive interpretive lens for this paper, critics such as Aijaz Ahmad and several Marxist historians have argued that the approach can drift toward textualism or culturalism, underemphasizing material structures such as economy and labor. This study negotiates that limitation by attending not only to discourse and ideology but also to the novel's representations of famine, land relations, class mobility, and material exchanges, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in both cultural and socioeconomic histories. This methodological positioning aligns with the novel's own narrative strategy, which highlights the material and experiential textures of everyday life rather than monumental historical accounts. Indeed, the strength of Ahmed's novel lies precisely in its resistance to monumental history. Rather than centering nationalist heroes or official narratives, *Moddhannya* foregrounds the lives of maids, mendicants, women, religious minorities, and everyday rural people. These are not simply narrative ornaments but active agents in a historically volatile period. As Gao notes, understanding historical fiction requires an awareness of the author's psychological, social, and ideological positioning: "historical events are interpreted by writers with their personal experiences and opinions… It is necessary to examine writers' psychological background, the social sphere, and the books and theories that may have influenced them" (Gao 1765). To this end, this study also considers Ahmed's biographical context—his upbringing, education, and post-Liberation War worldview—as formative to his vision of history.

In centering *Moddhannya* as a case study in vernacular historiography, this paper aligns itself with broader scholarly efforts to revalue South Asian popular fiction as a site of cultural memory and intellectual labor. As Tyson reminds us, even "popular" texts—those written in accessible language, with emotional clarity

and wide readership—can function as complex engagements with history, ideology, and identity (Tyson 298). Ahmed's *Moddhannya* deserves recognition not only as a literary achievement but as a methodological intervention: a reminder that fiction, too, can be a form of historical thinking.

The Historicity of the Text: Ahmed and His Magnum Opus

In *Moddhannya*, the novel's intricately interwoven characters and plots do not exist in isolation but rather serve as conduits for understanding the lived realities of early twentieth-century Bengal. The villagers of Bandhobpur, though fictional, embody the historical consciousness of a society in flux. Their lives reflect a historically plausible experience, filtered through Ahmed's own understanding of the past and his surroundings. Ahmed's intimate connection to the geographical and cultural setting of his novel further strengthens the text's historicity. Born on 13 November 1948, just a year after the end of the timeline depicted in *Moddhannya*, Ahmed grew up in Kutubpur village, located in the Mymensingh region, strikingly similar to the fictional Bandhobpur. This setting lends authenticity and texture to the novel's landscape. A particularly illustrative moment appears when the narrative references Kendua[1]:

> That year, our Julekha was relocated to the infamous red-light district of Kendua, locally known as 'Rongila Notibari' [The Colorful Courtesan's House].
>
> In an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Kendua was mentioned. It was written there: 'Kendua, a place for dancing girls.' A joyous gathering of delightful performers.[2] (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 76)

Here, Ahmed interweaves regional lore with textual citation, referencing an old edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* to anchor the fictional world in archival memory. The use of English within the Bangla text, "Kendua a place for dancing girls"—underscores the permeability between official historiography and local

1 Kendua is the administrative sub-district under which Kutubpur, the birthplace of Humayun Ahmed, falls. This geographical proximity further grounds the fictional Bandhobpur in Ahmed's personal landscape.

2 This quote, originally written in Bangla, was translated by the researcher.
আমাদের জুলেখার সেই বৎসর স্থান হলো কেন্দুয়ার বিখ্যাত নিষিদ্ধ পল্লীতে। স্থানীয় ভাষায় যার নাম 'রঙ্গিলা নটিবাড়ি'।

Encyclopedia Britannica'র প্রাচীন সংস্করণে কেন্দুয়ার উল্লেখ ছিল। সেখানে লেখা ছিল 'Kendua a place for dancing girls'। আনন্দদায়িনী নর্তকীদের মিলনমেলা।

storytelling. This moment typifies New Historicist attention to the circulation of cultural discourses across genres, languages, and institutions. In another instance, Ahmed drew from his maternal lineage to craft the character of Thakur Ambika Bhattacharya, a figure he identifies as a distant kin of his mother, Ayesha Foyez (née Khatun). The character's narrative—particularly his conversion to Islam following the accidental consumption of beef—reflects Ahmed's deep-rooted connection with family lore.

> One branch of Humayun Ahmed's maternal lineage traces back to Thakur Ambika Bhattacharya. Although the current generation has abandoned Hindu customs, they have retained the Thakur title. One of novelist Humayun Ahmed's maternal grandfathers was named Anisur Rahman Thakur. He was a devoutly religious man whose nights were spent in prayer and worship.[1] (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 115).

These moments exemplify a deliberate act of narrative intrusion**,** wherein the author steps into the fictional frame through a sudden shift to the first person. Such metaleptic gestures not only blur the boundary between author and narrator but also draw attention to the narrative's constructedness. In doing so, Ahmed aligns his storytelling with New Historicist concerns by embedding his personal memory within the fictional fabric, thereby illuminating the dynamic interplay between individual experience and cultural discourse. This transmutation of inherited narrative into literary motif exemplifies what Stephen Greenblatt might call the "circulation of social energy" through the text.

Moreover, Ahmed's family history also undergirds much of the emotional and ideological architecture of the novel. His father, Foyzur Rahman Ahmed, was a sub-divisional police officer who was killed during the 1971 Liberation War. This traumatic loss at a formative age endowed Ahmed with a profound awareness of political violence and familial grief, both of which echo throughout *Moddhannya*. His writing frequently meditates on the costs of war, the complications of faith, and the fragility of communal harmony, all themes that converge in the novel's depiction of events such as the Swadeshi movement and the Quit India movement. Ahmed's appeal, as noted by Anisuzzaman, lies in his capacity to render the ordinary

1 This quote was translated by the researchers. The original statement is হুমায়ুন আহমেদের মাতুল বংশের একটা শাখার পূর্বপুরুষ ঠাকুর অম্বিকা ভট্টাচার্য। বর্তমান পুরুষেরা হিন্দুয়ানির সব ছেড়েছেন, ঠাকুর পদবি ছাড়েন নি। উপন্যাসিক হুমায়ুন আহমেদের এক নানার নাম আনিসুর রহমান ঠাকুর। তিনি কঠিন ধার্মিক মানুষ ছিলেন। তাঁর রাত কাটতো এবাদত বন্দেগি করে।

extraordinary. "Ahmed mirrors the urban middle class just as he's observed them" (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 13). His depiction of the rhythms, rituals, and emotional cadences of middle-class life—punctuated by the trauma of losing his father and the burdens his mother bore—formed the emotional substratum of many of his works. Characters such as Horichoron Shaha in *Moddhannya*, whose kindness toward a Muslim child leads to ostracization, reflect this dynamic. Ahmed, too, was estranged from segments of society during his later life, owing to his second marriage to Meher Afroz Shaon. Though the particulars differ, the emotional texture of exclusion and quiet endurance recurs.

Music and food, two seemingly peripheral motifs, become significant in understanding Ahmed's sensorial aesthetics. While his literary and cinematic accomplishments often dominate public discourse, his passions for music and culinary detail infuse his work with a deep sensory appeal. Rayhan and *The Independent* both note his love for Tagore's songs and folk music, especially that of Lalon. In *Moddhannya*, characters like Julekha embody this devotion: drawn to melodies from a young age, she evolves into a renowned singer. The novel revives forms like *Maljora Gan* (a question-answer lyrical genre), and portrays real-life singer Ukil Munshi with affectionate nuance. Music here becomes not just an aesthetic but an ethical force—bridging religious and cultural divides. Food, likewise, operates as a cultural and emotional register. Imdadul Haque Milon describes Ahmed as someone who "was not a heavy eater, but delighted in the presence of diverse dishes." The novel reflects this affection through its richly detailed culinary scenes, where characters' preferences mirror Ahmed's own fondness for dishes like fresh *Rita* (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 100) fish. These gastronomic interludes provide not just local color but embodied links to cultural identity and sensory memory.

Ahmed also draws freely from the supernatural, another recurrent obsession of his. His literary corpus often resists empirical realism in favor of what might be called Bengali magical realism. The line from *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth"—recurs in his rhetoric and fiction, signaling a metaphysical openness. In *Moddhannya*, this manifests in characters like Horichoron, a healer whose powers attract villagers from afar, and Labus (Jahir), whose prophecies include accurate forecasts of monumental events. Labus's death in the Hiroshima bombing—despite being nowhere near Japan—functions not as a historical absurdity but as a metaphor for the universal reach of suffering and violence. Similarly, the ghost of Shiuly, Horichoron's daughter, adds a spectral layer to the story, reinforcing the porous boundaries between past and present, living and

dead. What is compelling is that Ahmed's inclusion of these elements does not feel incongruous. Instead, they beautifully harmonize with the cultural tapestry of Bengal, which has, for centuries, intertwined the everyday with tales of the supernatural. And, in a touch of life imitating art, Ahmed's own haven, Nuhash Polli[1], is enveloped in legends of its own, with many whispering tales of hauntings and otherworldly occurrences. By integrating the ethereal with the earthly, Humayun Ahmed does not merely tell a story; he beckons readers to contemplate the infinite possibilities of existence, reminding them that the universe is much grander and more mysterious than it might first appear. The coexistence of folklore, mysticism, and historical realism reflects what Louis Montrose calls "the textuality of history"—its susceptibility to myth, memory, and ideology.

Ahmed's literary inspirations span a wide spectrum, from Rabindranath Tagore and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay to Kazi Nazrul Islam and Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay. His narratives often reference these figures affectionately, integrating them as cultural presences rather than central actors. *Moddhannya* thus functions as both historical fiction and homage to the Bengali literary tradition. His relationship with Sunil Gangopadhyay was particularly formative. Gangopadhyay's praise of *Nondito Noroke* in 1972 marked the beginning of a lifelong literary dialogue. Within the broader tradition of Bangla historical fiction, *Moddhannya* can be read alongside works such as Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* [*Those Days*], *Prothom Alo* [*First Light*], and *Purbo Poshchim* [*East-West*], as well as the historical-romantic novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. However, unlike Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* (*Those Days*) or other historical texts, which center the monumental figures of the Bengal Renaissance within the urban matrix, Ahmed's Moddhannya deliberately displaces the narrative locus to the rural periphery of Netrakona. Where Gangopadhyay memorializes the intellectual struggles of the bhadralok [bourgeoisie] elite, Ahmed privileges the 'everyday' consciousness of the village subaltern—figures like Harichoron and Dhonu Sheikh—who experience history not as a set of ideological debates, but as a series of material and communal disruptions. This shift marks a distinct departure from the 'Great Man' theory of historical fiction that has long dominated the Bengali canon. His fiction shifts attention toward the anonymous multitudes: cooks, clerks, priests, widows, mendicants, small traders, and domestic workers become the primary agents through whom history is imagined and felt. This focus on the everyday subverts conventional historiography and aligns with New Historicist efforts to

1 Nuhas polli is a charming & beautiful place situated in Gazipur which is created by famous writer Humayan Ahmed.

recuperate subaltern voices. *Moddhannya*, in particular, demonstrates how fiction can reconstruct history without being didactic. Written during the mid-2000s, a time marked by religious extremism, political unrest, and socioeconomic disparity in Bangladesh, the novel refracts contemporary anxieties through the lens of the past. By embedding modern concerns within a historical setting, Ahmed creates a temporal palimpsest where struggles for justice, dignity, and meaning transcend any one era.

Ahmed's stated disinterest in writing "a historical book" aligns paradoxically with New Historicist theory. As Tyson clarifies, traditional historicism treats history as an empirical sequence—event A causes event B, which causes event C—whereas New Historicism posits that history is discursively constructed and ideologically fraught (283). Ahmed's refusal to offer a linear, factual account of history corresponds to Greenblatt's call to view literature as a cultural product implicated in the negotiation of power, memory, and truth. By focusing on villagers, maids, musicians, and ghosts, Ahmed stages what Gao calls "the historicity of texts"—their embeddedness in ideological and psychological contexts (Gao 1765). In turn, the novel's creative anachronisms, mystical elements, and subjective perspectives illustrate "the textuality of history"—the idea that historical knowledge is itself a kind of storytelling.

In this sense, *Moddhannya* is neither a chronicle nor a fantasy, but something more intricate: a vernacular historiography that amplifies the lives history tends to forget. Ahmed's achievement lies in reminding us that history is not merely what happened—it is also what is remembered, imagined, mourned, and re-enchanted.

The Textuality of History

In Humayun Ahmed's *Moddhannya*, the notion of history as a fixed sequence of events is actively challenged. Instead, the novel presents history as an unfolding process embedded in daily life, social exchanges, and competing ideologies. While the previous chapter explored the historicity of the text—its rootedness in Ahmed's own life and cultural memory—this section engages with the textuality of history. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power and discourse (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*) as well as key insights from New Historicism, it argues that *Moddhannya* maps a complex circulation of power within the rural Bengal society it portrays. The novel resists linear, event-based historicism and instead stages multiple narratives and shifting ideological centers, revealing how history itself is produced, contested, and inhabited.

Michel Foucault's theory that power is not a centralized force but one that

circulates through social exchanges informs the reading of Bandhobpur's village life. Power is shown to be exchanged through material goods, people, and ideas (Tyson 285)—three axes that shape the narrative trajectory of *Moddhannya*.

The first axis—the exchange of material goods—is exemplified with particular clarity in Dhonu Sheikh's trajectory in *Moddhannya*. Initially, Dhonu occupies a low position in Bandhobpur's social hierarchy, working as a ticket seller at the Launch Ghat. His outspoken sympathy for Horichoron Shaha, who had been socially ostracized, leads to his dismissal. As a financially vulnerable Muslim in a Hindu-majority village, Dhonu finds himself stripped of livelihood and security. A decisive turning point occurs when Horichoron, the wealthy merchant he once defended, provides him money to purchase a launch. This transaction, seemingly an act of charity, becomes the catalyst for Dhonu's rise to power. With new economic leverage, he establishes himself as a figure of influence, using material resources to shape religious alliances and incite communal tensions. His attempts to convert Hindus and manipulate local politics show how wealth can become an instrument of ideological power. After Horichoron's death, Dhonu further exploits material advantage by trying to seize the inheritance clearly designated for Labus (Jahir), demonstrating how patronage and opportunism can blur ethical boundaries. The novel underscores this cyclical transformation: the once-impoverished Dhonu replicates the same elite dominance he originally contested. A similar shift is seen in the case of the zamindars. Shoshangko Pall, the hereditary landlord of Bandhobpur, falls into destitution due to moral failings and economic mismanagement. Horichoron, once socially ostracized, acquires the Zamindari rights from Shoshangko. In a telling moment, Shoshangko attempts to sell his silver plates to Horichoron.

> He is Shoshanko Pal, the former zamindar of this region. Now he is destitute. The Kashmiri shawl on his body is the only valuable item left. Beneath it, two silver plates of value. He has come to Harichoron to sell those two plates in exchange for some money. Not much—just fifty silver coins. Harichoron didn't keep the plates, but he gave him the money. *(Ahmed, Moddhannya* 94*)*[1]

These exchanges of wealth are not merely economic but symbolic—they mark shifts in influence, status, and agency.

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1 Original Text: তাঁর নাম শশাঙ্ক পাল। এই অঞ্চলর প্রাক্তন জমিদার। আজ তাঁর হতদরিদ্র দশা। গায়ের কাশ্মীরি শালটা অবশিষ্ট দামি। শালের নিচে রূপার থালা দু'টো দামি। তিনি এসেছেন থালা দু'টা হরিচরণকে দিয়ে কিছু টাকা নিতে। খুব বেশি না, পঞ্চাশটা রূপার টাকা। হরিচরণ থালা রাখেন নি, তবে পঞ্চাশ টাকা দিয়েছেন।

The second axis—the exchange of people—illustrates how marriage, divorce, and sexual exploitation function as mechanisms of social control and transformation. The lives of Julekha, Sharifa, and Jamuna illuminate the gendered dynamics of power in early twentieth-century Bengal. Julekha is initially abandoned by her husband, Sulaiman, and eventually finds herself married to the ailing Maolana Idris, only to end up in the brothel Rongila Notibari. Paradoxically, the brothel becomes a space of empowerment, where Julekha reclaims her identity as a celebrated singer. "Being part of Rongila Notibari feels like a divine plan." (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 160)[1] Likewise, another character Sharifa is passed between husbands as a pawn in male-driven decisions, ultimately raped and forced into prostitution. Yet, even she returns to her first husband Imam Karim with renewed self-possession. Ironically, it's in the brothel, a place many might view as a space of exploitation, where Sharifa and Julekha discover their agency and voice. Another notable character Jamuna, after a traumatic sexual assault, is relocated to Calcutta by her lover Suren and is reinvented as a modern, urban woman. These narratives embody Foucault's assertion that power is always relational and contingent—the same institutions that oppress can also serve as sites of agency and reinvention.

The third axis—the notion of exchanging ideas, as Michel Foucault reminds us, lies in the intersections of discourses that emerge from and shape specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. Lois Tyson similarly observes that discourse is "a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place," a medium through which interpretations of human experience are both reflected and enforced (Tyson 285). The early twentieth century—especially the years around the Partition of Bengal in 1905—was marked by precisely such discursive ferment. As Willem van Schendel details, the British division of Bengal into "Bengal" and "Eastern Bengal and Assam" not only provoked elite anxieties over commerce, law, and media, but also galvanized a broader nationalist movement that experimented with new forms of protest. Moderate tools such as petitions and conferences gave way to the Swadeshi movement of boycott and self-reliance, and eventually to revolutionary violence, celebrated in figures such as Khudiram Bose and Surya Sen (Schendel 79-84). Yet the partition also exposed fissures within anti-colonial solidarity: "After 1905 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' became clear-cut political categories, and these categories have figured very prominently in Bengal political life ever since" (Schendel 80). It is within this milieu that Humayun Ahmed situates *Moddhannya*. Although the village of Bandhobpur is distant from Calcutta's political centers, it is not immune to the circulation of new ideas. The arrival

1 আমার মনে হয় আমার অনেক ভাগ্য যে রঙ্গিলা বাড়িতে আমার স্থান হয়েছে।

of Shashi Bhattacharya (alias Kiron Ghoswami) and later Mofiz (alias Jibonlal Chatterjee) exemplifies how the Swadeshi ethos reached rural Bengal. Ordinary young men become radicalized into revolutionaries through the ideological currents of the time, illustrating Foucault's insight that discourse not only "transmits and produces power" but also "undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault 100-01).

Yet Ahmed also foregrounds the contradictions embedded in these discourses. Comrade Mozaffar Ahmed, in his memoir *Āmār Jīban o Bhāratīya Communist Party*, noted that Bankimchandra's *Ānandamaṭh* and the hymn *"Vande Mātaram"* inspired revolutionaries but alienated Muslims by sacralizing the motherland as a Hindu goddess. As translated by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, the hymn proclaims:

> *"Thine the strength that nerves the arm, / Thine the beauty, thine the charm. / Every image made divine / In our temples is but thine."*[1] For Comrade, such verses demonstrated how nationalist discourse privileged Hindu devotional imagery, rendering it inaccessible to Muslims committed to *tawḥīd*. He concludes: "How would the monotheistic Muslims pronounce such chants? No Hindu Congress leader ever understood that" (Ahmed*, Moddhannya* 47).

As Schendel observes, while this religious flavor strengthened the nationalist movement among Hindus, it simultaneously antagonized non-Hindus (Schendel 82).

The dynamics of *Moddhannya* reveal how power, as discourse, circulated unevenly across communities. Just as revolutionary ideology inspired Jibonlal, communal tensions gave rise to alternative alignments. Dhonu Sheikh, for instance, betrays Jibonlal to the British in return for the promise of a Khan Bahadur title (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 171). Ahmed does not portray him as a villain but as an ordinary man navigating competing discourses of loyalty, communal interest, and personal gain. This ambivalence underscores Tyson's reminder that no discourse is monolithic or permanent; discourses "are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another … stimulating opposition to that power" (Tyson 285).

This polyphony extends to Ahmed's treatment of marginalized voices. In contrast to conventional historical fiction that centers elites, *Moddhannya* offers

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1 Original Text:
বাহুতে তুমি মা শক্তি
হৃদয়ে তুমি মা ভক্তি
তোমারই প্রতিমা গড়ি মন্দিরে মন্দিরে।
ত্বংহি দুর্গা দশপ্রহরণ ধরিণী [...]

a plurality of perspectives. There are no singular protagonists or antagonists. Harichoron, the benevolent merchant; Maolana Idris, the devout yet conflicted cleric; Julekha, the fallen and risen woman; Imam Karim, the pious man turned vengeful; Labus, the mystic child; and Dhonu Sheikh, the power-hungry opportunist—each represents a facet of Bandhobpur's social fabric. Moreover, characters like Naresh, Lakshmi, and Ekkori Shaha foreground the structural violence of famine and class. Lakshmi's longing for rice during the 1943 Bengal famine—a man-made crisis exacerbated by hoarding and war profiteering—contrasts starkly with Ekkori Shaha's strategic stockpiling of grain for economic gain (Schendel 74). Ahmed even integrates historical figures like Zainul Abedin, whose famine sketches preserved the visual memory of that catastrophe (Schendel 76). By incorporating these disparate voices, Ahmed resists the master narrative and instead constructs a historical collage. Tyson notes that "a plurality of voices [...] helps ensure that a master narrative [...] will no longer control our historical understanding" (Tyson 287).

Finally, the novel interrogates the very notion of normalcy. As Foucault argues, definitions of insanity, crime, or sexual deviance are social constructs used by dominant groups to maintain power (Tyson 286). Ahmed reproduces this critique by depicting normalized patriarchy and sexual exploitation. For instance, the practice of slave wives and the differential inheritance rights of their children is presented as a common feature of Muslim society in the novel's timeline—"Easy-peasy" (Ahmed, *Moddhannya* 2 83). Women had no say in divorce, remarriage, or education, echoing historical conditions described by Quayum regarding the early 20th century (Quayum 152). Perhaps the most provocative instance is the portrayal of 'Ghetu Putro'—young boys dressed as girls to dance for elite patrons, often used for sexual gratification. The discomfort with such practices is not moralized in the text but presented as culturally normalized in the historical setting. Ahmed juxtaposes this with Komla's shocked inquiry, not about the boy's abuse but about the possibility of a man marrying a man—a reflection on shifting taboos and normalized deviance across eras. As New Historicists argue, understanding a culture's normative framework is crucial for understanding its literature and ideology.

Moddhannya is not merely a historical novel. It is a historical intervention. Through its layered narrative, multiplicity of voices, and depiction of power as fluid and ubiquitous, Ahmed offers a radical rethinking of both history and fiction. He does not ask us to admire heroes or condemn villains. He invites us instead to witness the ordinary people who carry the burdens of extraordinary times and to see in their struggles, our own histories, reimagined.

This intervention, however, is not only significant within the fictional world it constructs but also within the broader field of literary circulation. Stepping back from the close reading of *Moddhannya*, it is also important to consider how Ahmed's novel is positioned within broader circuits of world literature. The relative absence of his work from Anglophone scholarship is not merely an accidental gap but a symptom of structural biases in translation, publishing, and academic canon formation, which tend to privilege metropolitan, formally experimental, or already globalized South Asian writing in English (often equated with difficult, experimental, or explicitly political texts such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*) over vernacular popular and historical fiction. South Asian authors who write in English frequently attain international visibility, prize recognition, and curricular presence, while Bangla-language writers such as Ahmed remain largely confined to regional readerships despite comparable cultural influence at home. In this context, *Moddhannya* complicates dominant expectations of what "serious" historical fiction should look like: written in an accessible register, centered on rural, subaltern lives, and interweaving humor, the supernatural, and domestic detail, it nonetheless sustains a complex engagement with historiography, power, and cultural memory. Recognizing the historiographical labor performed by such texts requires a rethinking of the criteria through which South Asian literature is canonized and a more sustained attention to the ways in which translation economies and institutional selections shape what counts as world literature.

Conclusion

As Lois Tyson reminds us, for the New Historicist, literature is not a passive reflection of history but an active participant in the discursive formations of its time: "the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced" (Tyson 295). This study has examined *Moddhannya* as a literary intervention that both absorbs and reconfigures the historical energies of early twentieth-century Bengal. Through the lens of New Historicism, Humayun Ahmed's novel emerges not merely as a narrative about the past but as a site where competing ideologies—religious, national, gendered, and class-based—are enacted, contested, and transformed.

At the heart of this inquiry is an acknowledgment that neither history nor literature exists in isolation. Ahmed's novel, like all cultural texts, is the product of a particular moment, shaped by personal memory, ideological perspective, and the sociopolitical tensions of both its setting and its time of writing. By foregrounding rural voices, domestic rituals, and everyday negotiations of power, *Moddhannya*

complicates the conventional boundaries between the historical and the fictional, offering instead a textured map of the past seen through the eyes of the marginalized and the ordinary. This research, too, is embedded within its own historical and intellectual contexts. Its interpretive choices are shaped by current critical concerns, linguistic translation, and the limitations of disciplinary focus. While the present study has concentrated on *Moddhannya*, Ahmed's broader corpus of historical fiction—such as *Josna o Jononir Golpo* [*Story of Moonlight and Mother*], *Badshah Namdar* [*The Titled King*], and *Deyal* [*The Wall*]—offers fertile ground for future inquiry. Each of these texts engages with distinct historical periods and political configurations, inviting further readings that trace the dialogic interplay between fiction and historiography.

Finally, the continued relevance of Ahmed's work, and of Bangla literature more broadly, depends upon its sustained engagement across languages, disciplines, and borders. Translators, scholars, and educators play a crucial role in bringing these narratives into global circulation. Through critical translation and scholarly recontextualization, works like *Moddhannya* can enter new conversations, challenging dominant historical paradigms and enriching our collective understanding of how literature remembers, revises, and reimagines the past. In doing so, Ahmed's voice—rooted in the vernacular yet resonant with universal questions—continues to shape and be shaped by the ever-evolving discourses of culture and history.

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