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The School of Athens before *Fahrenheit 451:* All That Remains

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Abstract In *Fahrenheit 451* there is a scene in which the protagonist Montag recalls a childhood memory where he tries to fill a sieve with sand in order to get a dime from his cousin. An impossible feat. This task symbolizes Montag's efforts to find meaning in a world that works to erase it. As we all become mirror images of each other in a society that values uniformity and conformity, and numbers speak against the benefit of the humanities, I write this manuscript as a warning: we have reached the burning point. Hence, I intend to explore the contours of a skepticism about technology as mediating the status of the humanities through Bradbury's novel.

Keywords Bradbury; *Fahrenheit 451*; Mass Media; Plato; *The School of Athens*

Author **Alberto Castelli** is a writer of Italian origin and a well-established scholar at Hainan University. He holds various academic degrees, among them a master's in Latin American literature and a master's in Chinese philosophy. He obtained his PhD at La Sapienza University, Rome. He worked in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. At the moment, he lives in China. He is known for his extensive work on modernism, postmodern dynamics, and cross-cultural studies. He authored 14 academic books and some 60 manuscripts for academic outlets. Some of his most recent publications include *Love, Despair, and Modernism in Literature* and *Fyodor Dostoevsky When Beauty Saves the World,* both released by Routledge, and *The Ecstasy of Reproduction*, published by Anthem Press.

> *"The world in general, […] is riding a very fine tiger. Magnificent beast, superb claws, etc. But do we know how to dismount? You see this as a very unstable world and a very dangerous world"* — John von Neumann

Ray Bradbury's (1920- 2012) *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is a text that helps us to evaluate the present and sketch the future. Since at least the 1950s, science

fiction has often depicted the mass media as a controlling and numbing force, highlighting the audience's passivity in the era of spectacle and revealing the risks of authoritarian exploitation through mass television practices. *Fahrenheit 451* typifies the model. A dystopian novel that presents an Orwellian society (irrelevant is the American setting) in which stability (disguised in happiness) is the end achieved through conformity and endless entertainment. The novel follows the path of Guy Montag, a fireman who eventually becomes disenchanted and commits himself to the preservation of literary works.[1] The environment is made of surveillance, monitoring devices, and robotic beasts that seem to have developed a malevolent consciousness. Thoughts and books are outlawed while firemen, instead of policeman, burn those that are left as a guarantee of order.[2] Yet this is not another manuscript about science fiction as a genre per se.

Recently, Donald Watt read the novel as a "rich body of symbols emanating from fire to shed a variety of illuminations on future and contemporary man" (36). Indeed, besides the notorious burning of books, the novel also describes the warming campfires of the exiles, the flames of nuclear war, and the enlightening flame of Clarisse and altruistic individualism. David Seed (1995) and Kevin Hoskinson (1994) place Bradbury's work in its time and place, the Cold War, and illustrate a common American Studies approach. More provocative and relevant to contemporaneity is Susan Spencer's analysis. She explores the paradox arising from the novel. *Fahrenheit 451* is about books being destroyed, yet the fact that we read *Fahrenheit 451* is self-evident proof that books have not been destroyed. The dystopian future is not here and due to this absence, Bradbury's endeavor loses its warning impact. Here Spencer concludes that the text is about Bradbury making "a comment on the fact that textual knowledge is power, even—or perhaps especially—false knowledge" (332). Hence, the text assumes poststructuralist connotations, with Power becoming invincible when textual information is uniform and unchanging. Rather surprisingly, David N. Samuelson, a noted science fiction critic, dismissed it as "an incoherent polemic against book-burning" (77). While there is some evasiveness on Bradbury's part regarding the controversy that has brought to burning books ("You must understand that our civilization is so vast that

1 The book's literary roots were already in the short story "The Pedestrian" (1951). A man taking a walk at night through his neighborhood is stopped and apprehended by an overzealous police officer. In the world of "The Pedestrian," people are encouraged to watch television for leisure, the concept in which is grounded *Fahrenheit 451*.

2 Bradbury chose the title *Fahrenheit 451* since this is the temperature at which paper catches fire and starts to burn.

we can't have our minorities upset and stirred" (56)), *Fahrenheit 451* remains for many a haunting manifesto.

A warning against censorship is behind the book's motivation.[1] *Fahrenheit 451* was written during the Second Red Scare and the McCarthy era,[2] with in mind the book burning in Nazi Germany and the ideological repression in the Soviet Union by Stalin's Great Purge.[3] But it was also written in the decade following Nagasaki and Hiroshima, with the nuclear age ushering questions about the power, limit, and danger of technology. Hence, it is written in defense of humanity against computer-generated ideas, in defense of literature, the arts largely intended, against the dangers of an illiterate society infatuated with mass media. It is not Orwell's *1984.* It is less political, less about freedom and tyranny. It is a book about knowledge. The core message of *Fahrenheit* 451 is about the destruction of culture, the destruction of knowledge. A sadomasochistic attempt to torch human heritage. I am here not concerned with censorship or the individual's struggle for identity and freedom in a conformist world. Instead, I am interested in the role of knowledge in a society in which technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have become increasingly dominating if not paramount. Instead of burning texts, obliterating the

1 During a radio interview, in 1956, Bradbury said: "I wrote this book at a time when I was worried about the way things were going in this country [*America*] four years ago. Too many people were afraid of their shadows; there was a threat of book burning. Many of the books were being taken off the shelves at that time. […]. But at the time I wanted to do some sort of story where I could comment on what would happen to a country if we let ourselves go too far in this direction, where then all thinking stops, […] and we sort of vanish into a limbo and we destroy ourselves by this sort of action." *Biography in Sound. Narrated by Norman Rose. NBC Radio News. 27:10–27:57.*

2 Joseph Raymond McCarthy (1908-1957) was the American politician that during the Cold War contributed to widespread anti-communism campaign. McCarthyism, or the Second Red Scare, (being the first the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I), was a period of political re-pression and the targeting of left-wing individuals. Spanning from the late 1940s to the 1950s, it involved a widespread campaign that fueled fear about communism and Soviet influence on American institutions, as well as concerns over Soviet espionage in the United States.

3 Again in a radio interview, Bradbury talked about his intention in writing the book: "Well, we should learn from history about the destruction of books. When I was fifteen years old, Hitler burned books in the streets of Berlin. And it terrified me because I was a librarian and he was touching my life: all those great plays, all that great poetry, all those wonderful essays, all those great philosophers. So, it became very personal, didn't it? Then I found out about Russia burning the books behind the scenes. But they did it in such a way that people didn't know about it. They killed the authors behind the scenes. They burned the authors instead of the books. So I learned then how dangerously [sic] it all was."

text, AI attempts to minimize our own use of language, to disburden us from it by making our use of language in reading and writing superfluous. As a result, we are discharged from the Emersonian self-reliance we so desperately need to exercise our full humanity to acquire knowledge. The analogy cannot be lost. I consider *Fahrenheit 451* as something more than futuristic science fiction, and certainly more than a historical warning. *Fahrenheit 451* is a prophecy already fulfilled. Bradbury's text explores the consequences of a society disconnected from its humanity and cultural legacy. More modestly, I here attempt to sketch contemporaneity as a society that has already burnt all its books.

The School of Athens

Giorgio Vasari explains that with "The School of Athens" (1509-1511) Raphael (1483–1520) had intended to show "theologians reconciling philosophy and astrology with theology" (312).[1] In the *Stanza della Segnatura,* a room that functioned as the library for Pope Julius II, a celebration of all aspects of human knowledge takes place.[2] Raphael is here the bearer of the Renaissance commonplace that philosophy leads to theological understanding and a more general quest about knowledge as an endeavor of interdisciplinary learning. The painting is a colossus, standing over 4 meters high and almost 8 meters wide. It takes up one entire wall with 52 figures larger than life. Figures move purposefully in and out of the scene along the right and left edges, while others turn and progress across the vast space, seemingly advancing into the actual room or turning back to ascend the steps of the open-air hall. The activity of the young students on the right, and the absorbed older scholars on the left concur on creating an atmosphere of knowledge being discovered, accumulated, and shared. At the center of the painting an elderly Plato, holding one of his own books, the *Timaeus*, walks down the steps with Aristotle, holding his book, the *Ethics.* They advance in a fairly empty foreground, the ascent to knowledge. With the vanishing point located at their feet, Raphael is here summarizing the contrasting philosophical view. Plato points upward to indicate the

1 In 1550, Vasari wrote: "Having been greeted very affectionately by Pope Julius upon his arrival [in Rome] Raphael began a scene in the room of the Segnatura, depicting the theologians reconciling philosophy and astrology with theology, in which he portrayed all the wise men of the world presenting different arguments. There are some astrologers to the side who have drawn geomantic and astrological figures and characters in various forms on some tablets, and they send them by means of certain beautiful Angels to the Evangelists, who explain them" (312).

2 *The School of Athens* is one of four wall frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura. Each wall represents one of the four branches of knowledge during the Renaissance—theology, literature, justice, and philosophy.

world of pure forms. In contrast, Aristotle focuses his attention on the observable, the actual, the physical. Hence, his palm is down, as to suggest that knowledge comes from experience.

The philosophers on either side of Plato and Aristotle highlight the contrasting philosophies. On Plato's side, those philosophers focused on the concept of the ideal. First is Socrates reasoning with a few listeners, down below on the lower left is Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, drawing a formula on a slate. He is known for his discoveries in the laws of harmony, both in music and mathematics, representing the idea that a higher, transcendent reality exists beyond the observable world. Among cross-cultural moments, Raphael celebrates Michelangelo. Heraclitus, the philosopher who believed that all things were always in flux, is depicted quietly writing and contemplating on his own, in contrast to most other figures in the painting, who are engaged in conversations with others. He appears absorbed in his thoughts, writing on a block of marble. Interestingly, his features resemble those of Michelangelo, who was known for his solitary and introspective nature.

In contrast, on the right, there is a group of astronomers. Ptolemy, for example, the one who theorized about the movements of the planets, holding the sphere of the earth, Zoroaster holding the celestial orb, and next to him is Raphael himself looking on at the viewer. On the lower right, mirroring Pythagoras' position, is Euclid, the father of geometry, the practical side of philosophy, focused on measurement and the tangible. He appears to be drawing a geometric diagram for a group of eager students. On the top left, in the niches, Raphael has placed classical sculpture. On the Platonic side, it is recognizable Apollo, the god of the sun, music, and poetry, again symbolizing ideals that align with Platonic thought. On the right, however, we find Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, who is associated with the more practical aspects of human affairs.

The scene that the most grasps my attention happens just behind Euclid: One figure is leaning against the wall, with his leg crossed over in a relaxed posture, while the other is hurrying, writing notes quickly. The first figure watches attentively, leaning over to observe the action. It could be the hallway of any college or university anywhere in the world, a moment in between courses, a note, an idea just formed and cannot be lost. It is a scene that recalls an academic intimacy.

With "The School of Athens," Raphael has responded to the Renaissance dictum, noted by Leon Battista Alberti, "leave more for the mind to discover than is actually apparent to the eyes" (77). The painting stands as a celebration of worldly knowledge (Greek) and spiritual (Christian) thinking, an exhortation toward

individual excellence, and a belief that philosophy, science, and theology concur toward the discovery of universal truth. And while Raphael was engaged with "The School of Athens," a few doors away Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel.

With his nightmarish plot, Bradbury has, symbolically, set "The School of Athens" on fire. Knowledge is being obliterated. Montag's marriage is less than ideal. Mildred, his wife, is obsessed with watching television on wall-sized screens. She is meant to symbolize the apathy and denial of the dystopian world in which Plato and Shakespeare are unknown. Sound, music, and images roaring from the TV-wall, broadcasting sentimental mush have made communication virtually impossible. Montag and Mildred cannot even remember the first time they met. As the plot unfolds, one has the feeling of moving backward in time to a preliterate society. With reason, Scott Bukatman argues that in the book burning of *Fahrenheit 451*, "the overthrow of the Word is presented as tantamount to the overthrow of Reason itself, leaving an infantilized— if not barbaric— citizenry poised passively before the pseudo- satisfactions of the spectacle, bereft of the ability to think, judge, and know" (29). On the way back home, Montag discovers his wife overdosed on happy pills, a fact she later denies or cannot remember, highlighting the pervasive escapism and denial that characterizes their society. The scene assumes expressionist features with a setting that closely recalls Edward Munch's art. Her face is pale as "snow-covered island" (11), she has glassy-coloured eyes and a faint breath. In contrast, Bradbury places Montag, alone, standing under a sky that seems screaming.

The pivotal moment is his encounter with the new neighbor, the seventeen-year-old Clarisse McClellan. She is young and irreverent, her diversity is rendered by her simplicity; she observes dew on the grass in the morning, sits knitting on the lawn, walks in the rain. As they walk together Montag senses "the faintest breath of fresh apricots and strawberries in the air, and he looked around and realized this was quite impossible, so late in the year" (4). This impossibility is symptomatic of Clarisse's role, brief but necessary: she is about to upset the order of his universe by stirring dissatisfaction with his role in society and the essence of society as a whole. The world is populated by uneducated simple-minded people who do not think instead they "walk on and leave" (21). Clarissa is considered insane because she does not comply: "I just sit and *think*" (20) she utters before observing the ultimate stage of humanity: "No one has time any more for anyone else" (21). It is a simple question, almost obvious, to break the scent of his ordinary life: "Are you happy?" (7) she asks before shutting the front door. Well into the night, Montag must recognize the horrible truth: "He was not happy" but there was no way back. At this altitude,

it is impossible for him to fall back into the Platonic cave of darkness. Clarissa had taken back the mask of conformity, "there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back" (9). Doubts creak in: "I don't know anything anymore" (15), he concludes.

His rebellion begins. A book comes his way, by mistake he reads a line: "Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine" (34) and suddenly he realizes the all extent of his life: "how do you get so empty" (41) he wonders. But the triggering incident is the burning of a woman who would not let go of her books. Slowly he turns against the system. He begins collecting books rather than burning them, yet any form of resistance strikes one as pointless: "Any man's insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us" (31) is Capitan Beatty's warning. Next, Montag reevaluates his job in society, "I can't do it, he thought. How can I go at this new assignment? How can I go on burning things? I can't go to this place?" (106). But this time the house to be burnt is his: "There was a crash like the falling parts of a dream" (108).

In a dramatic showdown, Montag chased by troopers must either kill Capitan Beatty or be killed. As he turns the flamethrower on Captain Beatty, Beatty in defiance of death recites Shakespeare: "There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats, for I am arm'd so strong in honesty that they pass by me as an idle wind" (113). Bradbury explicitly writes that "Beatty wanted to die" (116), a statement this one that literary criticism has already confirmed. The "honesty" Beatty is referring to is one of "confession and remorse" (Smolla 899). Meanwhile, Montag breaks free from the oppressive system he served. His escape is televised to captivate the city's inhabitants with a live manhunt. Implied is society's twisted craving for entertainment and the government's exploitation of technology to sustain power and divert attention from deeper, more meaningful aspects of human life. For example, the burning of books or death. Montag ultimately discovers comfort and hope among a community of intellectual outsiders, book-lovers exiles, former university professors, forgotten writers, led by a man named Granger. They all exist on the margins of society. These individuals, each having committed a portion of literature to memory to safeguard it through oral tradition, symbolize a quiet rebellion against the oppressive regime. Bradbury seems to suggest here that civilization can be saved through memory: "all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law, Byron, Tom Paine, Machiavelli, or Christ" (145). They stand as a testament to the enduring strength of human wisdom and culture, even amidst efforts to erase it. Granger's belief in the power of resistance is captured in his words: "We're remembering. That's where we'll win out in the long run" (157).

As the narrative plot ends, an attentive reader is left to wonder about its significance and conclusions. Is civilization truly in danger? Is knowledge at stake? What is the role of art? Do we still have art? Those are not mere academic questions, but the invisible stage on which we all play a part. It is to give the right name to contemporaneity that I, most humbly, write the pages that will follow.

Contemporaneity under Scrutiny

In the *Republic,* with the Cave Allegory, Plato has the philosopher, who has freed himself and enjoys happiness in the contemplation of pure Forms, returning to the cave to share his knowledge with the inmates and rule the ideal city. Here, however, a doubt rushes in, the prisoners might want to kill him. Implied is the idea that knowledge and belief are not the same and while belief comes with safety and comfort, knowledge is possibly threatening. Ignorance, therefore, becomes the norm when the condition of humanity is one of darkness and apathy. Knowledge, on the other hand, is possibly dangerous and so is the device that generates it, one for all art. In book ten of his ideal Republic, Plato, famously, expels the poets and decides that the guardians, the philosopher kings, should not read poetry save being *infected:*

> And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action-in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue (35).

Art (poetry) can possibly weaken the Republic by manufacturing images, spreading irrational thoughts, nourishing imitative behaviours. Plato wants an Apollonian republic, rational, and stable. He does not want Dionysian irrationality and ecstatic states. Poetry is contagious, it is madness, a form of possession that can be passed to the audience and therefore break the stability of the Republic. Likewise, Bradbury depicts a society in which books, and therefore knowledge, are a source of dissent. The ruling power believes that reading literature can stir conflicting ideas, ultimately causing disagreements among the citizens. Ergo, all forms of literature are banned in so much as it might potentially incite to question happiness and freedom to the detriment of the status quo. According to the sinister fire chief, Beatty, the main danger in books is that "none of those books agree with each other" (35). Very true, but if they are a threat, then a threat for whom? In his critical interpretation, Harold

Bloom indicates the answer: "if you cannot read Shakespeare and his peers, then you will forfeit memory, and if you cannot remember, then you will not be able to think" (2). Here I think is the core significance. The action of burning books is a vivid symbol of repression, more at large power's repression of thought: "It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed" (1). This reversal of roles underscores the twisted nature of a society, where instruments meant for preservation and enlightenment are instead used for annihilation and control. The burning reflects the deep corruption of a system that has distorted its values, turning what should protect and uplift humanity into mechanisms of oppression and ruin.

At this altitude, the objection is that we still have books. We should not confuse science fiction with reality. But for all that, to have books is not the same as having knowledge. *Fahrenheit 451* presents the image of books as a form of culture in clear antagonism to image culture. It is not the book itself to have significance but the book as a receptacle of knowledge. Faber, the retired English professor, illustrates the idea well: "It's not books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books" (78). What are those things? And how did it start? Beatty explains to Guy how the intellectual decline of the twentieth century gradually led to the eventual banning of books in future centuries: "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God" (55). In other words, Bradbury argues that it began with the people. Destruction is a condition that moves upward, and the Government went along.

I believe that this analysis is somewhat misleading. The fireman is the guardian of a Frankfurtian Cultural Industry, that is, new forms of mass media communication and the entertainment industry. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) believed that the rise of the culture industry has resulted in the standardization and rationalization of cultural forms, and that this in turn has weakened, atrophied, and destroyed the capacity of the individual to think and act in a critical and autonomous way. He argued that standardization emerges largely as a result of the capacity of those with power to control the production of cultural goods to employ positivistic methods in an attempt to formulate a scientific measurement of people's precise 'tastes' and expectations, and in doing so increase profitability. As the culture industry develops, this process has become more specialized, leading to the emergence of a very precisely targeted hierarchical range of goods aimed precisely to align with consumers' preconceived expectations of the product itself 'so none may escape.' In his aphoristic *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno put it most laconically: "Today

progress and barbarism are so intertwined as mass culture that only barbaric asceticism against this latter and against the progression of the means may again produce that which is unbarbaric" (30). In this sense, *Fahrenheit 451* is an extreme version of homogenized culture, "they all say the same things and nobody says anything different from anyone else" (28), where chemical treatments anaesthetize the masses into submission: "That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these" (56). I imagine the four wall TV screen described by Montag as a dull wasteland of advertisement and propaganda. Mind-numbing programs are designed with hypnotic effects, the same Adorno is concerned about.

The first victim in this *barbaric process* is education. Clarisse outlines the problems of the educational system pointing out that teachers are prevented from incorporating literature into their lesson plans. Instead they "run answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us just sitting for four more hours of film-teacher" (27). The dystopian teaching system pictured by Bradbury in 1953 has become our reality with teachers who use videos to fill lack of substance. Nowadays academic content is secured by a copy-and-paste process. The scholar's endeavor is reduced to copying material from online pages and pasting it back into a PowerPoint. Lectures have been reduced to a mere collective reading, while human intelligence is secretly replaced by artificial intelligence. Beatty describes how schools ceased to teach, focusing instead on stuffing students with factual information rather than providing a true education:

> School is shortened, discipline relaxed, […] spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, […]. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts? (53).

Prophetically, Bradbury seems to have foreseen the online teaching that humanity has developed after the Covid-19 pandemic. I am not here concerned about the relation between online coursework and student performance but about the invasive presence of AI within the net of knowledge. AI algorithms personalize learning experiences to suit the unique needs of each student, it delivers customized educational experiences. In contrast, the lack of personal connection comes with a lack of immediateness leading to feelings of isolation and less human engagement that has already produced numb 'firemen.' AI increases speed and precision for high level cognitive tasks. But it has also made simplicity more valuable than

reflective thought, immediate gratification has become the national sport. Indeed, we are not far from the nightmarish condition in which books are condensed, into "dictionary resume" (52). Softwares like ChatGPT have the ability to create academic manuscripts, more or less functional, yet the unethical consequences are self-evident: plagiarism, cheating, and stunted learning. Montag is nearly killed by a group of children and he wonders about the reason: "They would have killed me, […] For no reason in the world they would have killed me" (122). Random, average citizens are willing to kill for no specific reason, incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. But the real tragic loss is not morality. None of us is a masterwork of excellence, there is always a person before the ideal. The most consequential aspect is the irreparable loss of human critical judgment, loss of originality, and creativity. That is, foundational aspects of education such as critical thinking, evaluation, social interaction, emotional development, all of which are to vanish. Those are the "things" that, Faber warned, are no longer in books.

Bradbury further critiques the overwhelming influence of technology and its contribution to fostering a shallow and disconnected society. The parlor walls—massive screens that dominate homes and substitute authentic human interaction—serve as a metaphor for the numbing and isolating impact of excessive media consumption. Montag's wife is addicted to electronic waves: "in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind." (10). The scene is representative of the growing detachment of individuals from their own lives and from one another. But, of course, it also implies that the side effect of technology is to erode meaningful connections and self-awareness. The reckless progression of technology without moral or ethical boundaries recalls a Frankenstein's form of experiment. Here, I think, there is a lesson that we tend to ignore. Frankenstein's relationship to ethic and science suggests that society may not be capable of keeping pace with its own scientific advancements. By and large, Frankenstein is the picture of a finite and flawed god at war with, and eventually overcome by, his creation. This is the *dual end* of technology. Technology being invented for a benign purpose but abused for ends that reveal themselves malignant. As a hammer can be used to build homes or crush skulls, so nuclear power can be used for energy and mass destruction weapons. Innovators, creators, hide behind dual-use language to insulate them from responsibility. The consequences are then for the users to bear. Nearly every sector of society and even the fibers of our being, share a Promethean (dangerous) perspective. Our life is integrated with computational power; we fuse natural

processes, as reading, with updated techniques, as an iPad. The purpose is to offer benefits, but it is a benefit that questions human ingenuity. In a world of smart technology, virtual language assistants, do we still need to learn another language? Would it not be faster to teach history through video games?[1] In fact in a world of Smart technology why learning at all. Then, let us start by burning the books.

Do we need books? In a society that moves toward "solid entertainment" (58) where media "tells you what to think," and our "mind hasn't time to protest" (80), books, knowledge, art, become irrelevant as never before. I write these lines as a provocation of course, and as a statement. After all, in the past decade at least, I have not met anyone holding a book in the countless underground I sat in. And much of what museums of contemporary art have to offers are factory made products. The issue has more overstretching ramifications. Does art serve a useful function in society? As society is becoming more and more technological, do we (still) need art (books)?

With Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) "All art is quite useless."[2] Modernism will say that such an aesthetic position is ridiculous because everything is ideology. Postmodernism will say that not everything is ideology, but everything is relative. Yet, in *Fahrenheit 451* none of this complexity remains. A book remains useless, downgraded to a story about "nonexistent people, figments of imagination" (59). Montag has a Platonic doubt: "Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave" (70). Somewhere along the line, Faber emphasizes the significance of literature in

1 There is already a line of scholarship focusing on education and video games. As there are courses at university level as "History in Video Games." Martin Wainwright (2014) comes with an updated bibliography and a surprising conclusion: "video games are an effective tool for teaching complex historical concepts to undergraduates and introducing even non-History majors to advanced theoretical arguments" (603).

2 In 1890, after the release of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a curious young admirer named Bernulf Clegg reached out to the author, requesting an explanation for the now-iconic line from the novel's preface: "All art is quite useless." Surprisingly, Wilde responded: "Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility. If the contemplation of a work of art is followed by activity of any kind, the work is either of a very second-rate order, or the spectator has failed to realise the complete artistic impression. A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We gain a moment of joy by looking at it. That is all that is to be said about our relations to flowers. Of course man may sell the flower, and so make it useful to him, but this has nothing to do with the flower. It is not part of its essence. It is accidental. It is a misuse. All this is I fear very obscure. But the subject is a long one." https://janwriter.medium.com/oscar-wilde-on-art-75c05aeeb9b.

comprehending the human experience, stating, "The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us" (79). A book's function is then to offer significance by weaving the fragments of the universe into a cohesive tapestry. But there is an additional function, Faber suggests, and it is the one Plato feared the most: a text is capable of showing "the pores in the face of life" (79). Statement this one that echoes the belief that art must be negative.

A central tenet of Adorno's argument is the idea that art, under certain social conditions, must provide an alternate vision of reality. The culture industry has reduced, if not annihilated, art's ability to act as a vehicle for utopian visions, projecting real life instead; for Adorno and Horkheimer, that is a nightmare. They believe that the decay of great artistic works and the simultaneous mass production of high culture are elements of cultural stagnation and decline. Art, they claim, must remain negative—it is only through negativity that it escapes the naïve optimism of knowledge and the culture industry. "At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia" (2004 41). The role of art, therefore, is a reminder of a lack, that the present society lacks something and being aware of it is the precondition of social critique. The most that art can do for us is to aid us in our battle against total reification and to arouse a sort of nostalgia without content.[1] Understanding and striving for high art therefore becomes a necessity, a social demand comparable to reading. Following Adorno's lead, one must conclude that of course a book is dangerous, it has to be if it has to carry knowledge.

A Finale Without a Finale

Plato wants us to expel the poets, Bradbury complied and burnt the books. Montag is too intuitively horrified to rationally pose alternative objections. But we can. What if poetry was not an imitation of an imitation, but the artist was able to grasp, by intuition, the original form (idea)? Rather than stirring our irrational side, might poetry not purge our irrational side? And why cannot art work out as a catharsis of our irrational emotions, instinctual behaviour? Plato says that the poets are possessed. Very well, might not be then that the universe is trying to speak to us through them? In this sense art is a form of prophecy, it is a possession of sorts but it is a possession that takes us closer to the truth. Those are perhaps academic questions. Even so, between Plato and Adorno, some of us are compelled to ask where one stands today.

1 Indeed, the Frankfurt School's rejection of mass culture contains a strong component of nostalgia for the pre-capitalist world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This nostalgia also extended to the rejection of all mechanization and reproduction of art.

Montag's transformation from a compliant enforcer of the status quo to an awakened rebel mirrors Bradbury's critique of societal apathy and underscores the necessity of personal awakening and defiance in the struggle against ignorance. His journey highlights the dangers of passive conformity and the vital role of critical thinking and resistance in preserving, essentially, knowledge. Yet the key figure is not Montag, clearly dramatic, but Beatty, a victim in disguise, a Grand Inquisitor of sorts.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1821) masterwork *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) contains in Book V the legend of the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor. Sometime during the sixteenth century, Jesus himself, is back to Earth in Seville, Spain, at the height of the Inquisition, and again arrested and sentenced to death. The night before the sentence is carried out, the Grand Inquisitor visits Jesus in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him. The Grand Inquisitor's argument is that Christ was wrong to have rejected the three temptations offered to him by Satan, namely, the physical temptation to turn stones into bread, the temptation to question God's love by casting himself from the Temple and be saved by the angels, and the temptation of power to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. On the contrary, the Grand Inquisitor claims, the world is ruled by the opposite principle: give one bread, give one miracles, and control one's conscience. Jesus' mistake was to have misjudged human nature, to have held man in high esteem, to have won free will for humanity. But while offering individual responsibility and free choice, man's security was taken away: "You demanded too much of him" (256). Humanity, the Grand Inquisitor goes on, cannot tolerate freedom: "nothing has ever been more insufferable for man and for human society than freedom" (252). Thus, the Grand Inquisitor, and his representatives in the Church, have relieved people of the terrible burden of freedom of conscience: "the most tormenting secrets of their conscience—all, all they will bring to us, and we will decide all things, and they will joyfully believe our decision, because it will deliver them from their care and their present terrible torments of personal and free decision" (259). Jesus does not reply but kisses the Inquisitor on his "bloodless, aged lips." He leaves, still in silence into "the dark square of the city" while Ivan concludes: "[t]he kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea" (262). In Dostoevsky's portrayal, the Grand Inquisitor becomes the quintessential of the Church whose mission is to provide a dogmatic belief, a structure of power to the detriment of one's sense of responsibility. Hence, the Grand Inquisitor represents Dostoevsky's critique, of any institution that aims at depriving individuals of their spiritual freedom, of those societies founded on the Hobbesian belief that people must surrender their freedom to achieve a peaceful and content commonwealth.

I am not here concerned with the message's political implication, but its significance in terms of human condition. The Grand Inquisitor's reference to the burden of freedom is meant to suggest that humans are frail creatures; if one is to find happiness or peace, then individual freedom must be surrendered to the control of a selected few who will determine one's fate. Argument this one that not only explains the totalitarian regimes that rose in the twentieth century, but also illustrates, from a more ground-level perspective, the human dimension of *Fahrenheit 451.* The reasoning explained by Faber goes on the line of 'if you want a man unhappy, give him choice:' "Better yet, give him none" (58). Instead, the individual has to be given "non-combustible data," brilliant information, facts that lead nowhere. By so doing one will receive "a sense of motion without moving" (58). In other words, the appearance of knowledge. In the era of mass media and digital economy, *Fahrenheit 451* becomes a commentary on how technology captured our personality through social media. Frankenstein is no longer a creature formed in the laboratory. Technology allows us to design our own bodies and identities. We make and un-make ourselves. We are the creator and the creature. A world without books is certainly a violent one, "Do you notice how people hurt each other nowadays?" (27). Clarisse notices that people wildly dance, shout, and kill without restraint. The prophecy has been fulfilled, technology has ushered in an alienated age of disillusionment and mental dullness.

Beatty's meting body, twisted "like a charred wax doll" (113), is the emblem of a society that destroys knowledge for the sake of an artificial stability. But it is also a reminder of a society based on irresponsibility. The novel reaches its climax when Montag meets his newfound allies. They embody the opposite of the fireman's world—a surviving fragment of a culture that cherishes literature, critical thinking, and dialogue: "We are all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law" (145). Together they observe the city being obliterated by atomic bombs:

unrecognizable, taller than it had ever hoped or strived to be, taller than man had built it, erected at last in gouts of shattered concrete and sparkles of torn metal into a mural hung like a reversed avalanche, a million colours, a million oddities, a door where a window should be, a top for a bottom, a side for a back, and then the city rolled over and fell down dead. (153)

The metaphor is easily explained: this is a civilization that moves toward self-destruction. In contrast, Montag seeks in books "something enduring in man's existence—history, heritage, culture […] in essence, a definition and a preservation of the identity of human kind" (Watt 200). He is the relic of a world that no longer exists, the resilience of human culture and the enduring value of intellectual

heritage. In this Faustian race for artificial forms of intelligence and unbridled progress, one must wonder without rhetoric whether we have lost humanity in the sense of our humanity. Of course, I recognize that while the run of unharnessed technology seems to be inevitable, to acknowledge its side effects sounds to be an exercise for a few intellectuals. And the intellectual is of course another relic.

However, I do not share Bradbury's optimism. Montag's final escape, and redemption, leave some doubts about its functionality. Beatty rebukes Montag: "Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his wings, he wonders why" (107). The allusion here is to the mythological Icarus who flew into the sky alongside his father Daedalus on wings made of wax. Yet he flew too near the sun, the wings melted, and he fell. In contrast, Bradbury wrote a different finale. Montag, although crippled, survives his bold actions. He narrowly escapes the destruction that Beatty intends for him; at the outskirts of society, together with a few other bookish outcasts, they will cultivate small tissues of truth that remain untouched. They are tasked with the responsibility of rebuilding society, holding onto the hope of a future where knowledge and freedom are valued. The character of Granger epitomizes this optimism: "some day, some year, the books can be written again, the people will be called in, one by one, to recite what they know" (146). Nor do I share Montag's sense of hope for rebirth and renewal. Montag, which means Monday in German, becomes the leader of a new beginning, ("Montag went ahead" (157)), and finally recalls a quote from the Book of *Revelation*: "And on either side of the river was there a tree of life […] and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (158). The reference to a new Jerusalem after the apocalypse is a call for enduring hope, final redemption, and healing even in the face of self-inflicted destruction. In sum, it is possible to kill a book but not its ideas. Such a conclusion, brought scholars, the likes of Mark R. Hillegas, to define *Fahrenheit 451* as "the archetypal anti-utopia of the new era in which we live" (158). For all that, this is an assessment that does not seem to match the book's finale which is utopian in its essence.

The haunting issue the text truly leaves open has not been resolved as yet: is it possible to save knowledge? To answer this question is to understand our role in society and the one of our civilizations. In book eleven of the *Republic*, Plato allows the poets to come back if they meet given conditions.[1] Truth is that they

1 Plato adds that poets can come back to the 'ideal republic' if someone can write in defense of poetry proving two shreds of evidence: on a moral ground that poetry is socially useful, and on a philosophical ground that poetry does not deceive but enhances our knowledge of the truth. All critical theory that will come after that is a rigorous answer to Plato in one way or another. To say "I like this book" is not enough because it is neither moral nor philosophical.

did not. In Granger's words, "we didn't use what we got out of them. We went right on insulting the dead" (156). In symbolic terms, 'burning' is simultaneously a constructive and a destructive action, paralleling humankind's nature, creative and destructive. I write aware that at this altitude we are riding for a fall. *The School of Athens*, the marriage of art, philosophy, and science has been burnt, lessened in best cases. Contemporaneity has shown a tendency toward repetition and reproduction (cfr. Fredric Jameson and Roland Barthes), not much of originally after all. Meanwhile, technology reshapes society's values having homologation as final destination: "We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other" (55). The body is a place of consumption: tattoos, piercings, drugs, those that control fertility and those that take users across altered state of consciousness. Sex is a recreational activity rather than a means of reproduction and sex knows no gender. Primary organs of education, family, school, Church are outdated, traditional bonds are obsolete, and any reference to them is subject to scrutiny. In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Freud reflects on the reason why societies place restrictions (taboos) on personal desires and argues that communal life cannot allow individual passions to dominate, as they pose a threat to the well-being of the collective. For the sake of an anonymous collective interest, we have abdicated individuality and surrendered to mass-produced gods and goods, both of which generate mass-produced emotions. The twenty-first century has begun by creating a new taboo: the individual. We have learned to live with the same expectations, wear the same clothes, speak and write in the same language if we want a chance to be heard, love with the same words, die the same death.

There is at work a hidden force more dangerous than evil. One that the theologian and philosopher Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed was responsible for the inhuman destruction during WWII. It spreads silently, it is immune to logic and its named stupidity. It is not an intellectual failure but a moral and social crisis.[1] Stupidity is a greater threat than evil for it is a slippery opponent. Evil carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction; it can be resisted, confronted, and defeated. On the contrary, stupidity is immune to good sense, blind to reason, and deaf to truth. Thus, it can be manipulated and used by evil. Stupidity does not engage, it does not question itself, it is impervious, and it is unconscious. That is, stupidity

1 Here Bonhoeffer has in mind Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century but one who pledged loyalty to Hitler and remained unrepented until the very last day of his earthly life. Based on Bonhoeffer's view in stupidity, Heidegger was intellectually capable and utterly, morally, stupid.

does not recognize itself but move forward. Stupidity thrives in conformity, it spreads within society, silently and invisibly, it infects individuals, groups, political systems. Stupidity is a weapon that enslaves the mind. How does it happen?

If we pose to reflect on human nature, people are not inherently evil. But people do stop thinking. Throughout history the individual more than once has surrendered intelligence to the power of one. This is the reason why mass stupidity has often brought about the rising of authoritarianism.[1] Stupidity is a transformation that infects the masses. It kills critical thinking and questioning while replacing it with oversimplification. We seem to have forgotten that truth is complex and it never has a single cause. Today we are filled with misinformation, ideological propaganda, herd mentality, and a narrative that discourage critical thought. Is liberation ever possible?

A call for intellectual and moral independence as solutions seems to me again a simplism. Humanities as a set of academic disciplines in the academic world no longer offer protection from the secular landscape.[2] Overwhelmed by the intoxicating appeal of digital and virtual realities, we walk past the physical and sensory moments and when they become physical they have no dignity. Genuine relationships have given way to fast cable connections, virtual dates, logograms, we have learned to live in a world of diminished sensation and 'consensual hallucinations.'[3] "We are all too rushed to smell the rose, savor the sunset, taste the rain, feel the cool of the grass" (Smolla 909). Rodney Smolla refers to Newton's Third Law of Motion in order to explain contemporaneity. The law states that for every action (force) in nature, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Hence, "For every forward movement in science and technology that improves the physical quality of human life, there is a potential backward movement in the spiritual quality of human life" (911). Has technology shortened or enlarged the distance between individuals? Will gene editing make society less accepting of people who are different? We split the atom and then built mass destruction weapons, high-tech

1 Bonhoeffer notes that stupidity goes side by side with power: "On closer inspection it would seem that any violent revolution, whether political or religious, produces an outburst of folly in a large part of mankind. Indeed, it would seem to be almost a law of psychology and sociology" (23).

2 Are the Humanities in crisis? While the numbers confirm a decline of humanities degrees, in contrast to my view, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argue, interestingly and surely more optimistically, that the humanities are and will remain a necessary feature of the social and academic landscape because the forces that shape the humanities are ever present. Wellmon writes: "the permanent crisis also prevents any particular crisis from becoming particularized and, thereby, rendered contingent and fleeting" (220).

3 This is William Gibson's definition of cyberspace.

medicine allows us to live longer, but what dignity is there in a man kept alive by tubes? One is allowed to conclude that as science enshrines greater truths about the universe, the increased knowledge is abused at the expense of life itself.[1]

A questing is haunting me. If Darwin meant humans had evolved directly from apes, and if it was possible to evolve into humans, it is also possible to degenerate into something more primitive. It is possible to regress from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. The firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* in this sense represent a more primitive and less developed version of humanity as we know it. Devolution is possible, life can evolve *backward* into more primitive forms when knowledge becomes the results of shortcuts. Books might not be burnt, but ideas are already scarce. Faber feels to be "one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the 'guilty'" (78). I write this manuscript because I want to speak so not to be guilty myself. We should fear degeneration and decadence in the human race. The process is on the move, and from where I observe, we can hardly escape from ourselves. What is so dramatic in losing the sound of a turning page over a morning coffee? Bradbury, I think, links it to a decline in humanity. Knowledge is the result of sacrifice and knowledge is the precondition of humanity. We deal instead with information made of bits and bytes, easily stored on ever-cheaper cloud computers, retrieved at will, and at a speed and scale that humans cannot possibly match. There is no sacrifice in a knowledge that is a click away. The day will come when the bookshelves are empty and the minds shut. Man's record of folly will have by then reached its burning point. This is why between books burning and the city bombing we are no Phenix, but a Saturn eating his children.

Post Scriptum

As I re-read this manuscript before submission, a few notes I took for one of my lectures came to my eyes. They were written a few years ago, yet they seem so utterly appropriate.

I would like to conclude with a last remark on the importance of Liberal Arts. Being postmodernity non-linear, fragmentary, ambiguous, non-self-revealing, blurring, and being culture an expression of history, I truly believe that we are living through an age that is shaking. If we look beyond the Voltairean little garden that we cultivate, there are clouds at the horizon line. No solution has been found to the dramatic condition of underdeveloped countries. The world is divided into 80%

1 I think here about environmental degradation. The construction sector, for example, contributes to 23% of global air pollution, 50% of climatic change, 40% of drinking water pollution, and 50% of landfill waste.

and 20%: 20% of the world population owns 80% of the world's GDP. And this is much better than before. When consumer society was born,160 years ago, 1% of the world population owned 99% of the world's GDP. The difference between today and yesterday is that now the 80% sees how the 20% lives. They see us. The first thought we must have when we read these numbers is that, because we do not choose where or when to be born, we have to remember how lucky we are to be born in that 20%. And because we are so lucky, some of us feel in need to seek forgiveness for it. We do charity sometimes, but the best way is to give it all to our work field, so to create new jobs, so to make changes. When history shakes, scholars must make it new by offering fire and knowledge, daringly as Prometheus did

Thus, Francis Bacon's essay *On Studies* suits the age. A true liberal arts education based on *studia humanitatis* and which emphasizes an understanding of and appreciation for the great classics, aims at the excellence of the individual. It offers critical thinking, which we need in our daily life, every time we select reality. Understanding a text, the hidden meaning behind the lines, is understanding better ourselves, discovering what we like (want) and what we do not. Literature offers the possibility to spy on the lives of others. Reading a great book, a poem, to analyse a painting is not a museum tour, instead, it is an exceptional entry into a reality we have not seen yet. Art at large is about how people live, love, and die, it is an insight into human possibilities. All in all, art is a training ground: here we can experience what we would like to experience, what we will experience and what hopefully we will never experience.

Bacon writes: "STUDIES serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability" (501). That is, texts must have potential, academic courses must have content, our readings must have a practical purpose, our knowledge must be perfected by experience, our intelligence accompanied by experience. All this is to say that knowledge is not an abstract principle but it has to promote individual excellence and collective consciousness. Otherwise, it is just vanity, little bits of trivia, a postmodern ornament. And this is why the value of Human Sciences is even more fundamental in the twenty-first century.

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Rebellious Spirits in the Poems of Hafiz Shirazi and Kazi Nazrul Islam: Exploring Unity in Variation

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Abstract This article attempts a comparative analysis of the selected poems of Hafiz Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Shirazi (1326-1390) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1999-1976) from the perspectives and approaches of comparative literature outlined by the new comparatists Shunqing Cao and Steven Totosy de Zepetnek. It demonstrates that Hafiz and Nazrul share striking unity in their poetic spirits though they are from two different ages, geographies, and languages. The analysis, however, focuses on both similarities and variations, arguing that the study of variations is what makes comparative literature remain an ever-evolving discipline. Some kind of comparison between Hafiz and Nazrul can be traced in scattered write-ups in Bengali and Persian mainly through the influence study; however, they have not been explored in a *lingua franca* (e. g., English) through new comparative study such as variation theory and in terms of their rebellious spirits. Since this study sheds light on an unexplored terrain of the vast world of Hafiz, exploring his rebellious spirits, it would contribute to the existing scholarship of Hafiz and his position in world literature. Furthermore, it uniquely explores the rebellious spirits of Hafiz and Nazrul as constructive forces that could challenge oppression, inequality, injustice, bigotry, and dogmas of all types and promote freedom, justice, equity, inclusiveness, and pluralism at all levels. The article concludes that both the poets have left an indelible impact on literature and culture globally through their contributions to literature, their voice for humanity, their rebellious spirits, and their influence on subsequent generations of poets.

Keywords comparative literature; Bangladeshi poetry; Persian ghazal; resistance poetry; variation theory

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Introduction

Hafiz Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Shirazi (1326–1390) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1999-1976) are regarded as two renowned poets of world literature originating from two different countries and contexts and belonging to two different eras. Nazrul was born in the greater Bengal, an occupied province of British India and used to write poetry in diverse forms mainly in Bengali, and Hafiz was born in Shiraz, a vibrant city of Persian Iran and used to scribble spiritual as well as revolutionary verses in Persian. The major themes of Nazrul's poetry are equality, justice, humanity, and resistance against invasion, occupation, and oppression. After the publication of his poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel) in 1922, his fame spread all over British India, and since then he began to be known as a "rebel poet" though he protested against such categorisation (*The Path of the Comet* 84). Nazrul first encountered Hafiz and a treasure house of Persian verses in 1917, when he was employed as a soldier in the 49th Bengal Regiment of the British Army (*Rubaiyat* 7). Although Hafiz is not primarily known as a rebel poet, in this study, we argue that his poetry displays a subtle form of rebellious spirit. In fact, both Hafiz and Nazrul celebrate self-awareness, self-realisation and, of course, rebellious spirits in their respective poems. Along with inspiring many generations by inscribing hope and aspirations in them, both the poets are known for expressing their boldness, challenging social ills, and raising their voices to fight for freedom and uphold justice.

Kazi Nazrul Islam has been nationally as well as globally recognised as the

national poet of Bangladesh. However, when he was active as a poet, writer and editor, he encountered all types of hostility, proscription and even imprisonment from the then colonial establishment of the British Raj. Hafiz was mainly a court poet and was more or less patronised by various rulers of Shiraz. As a poet, Hafiz is often compared with great Greek poets such as Horace. A. J. Arberry, one of the great English translators of Hafiz, observes, "Hafiz is as highly esteemed by his countrymen as Shakespeare by us, and deserves as serious consideration" (2). Hafiz mostly composed verses in the literary genre of *ghazal*,[1] which conveys the joy of divine stimulation in the ethereal form of love poems. The major themes in his ghazals include belief, love, and various faces of hypocrisy. On the other hand, Nazrul contributed to several literary genres such as poems, short stories, novels, songs, and essays but is best recognised for his poems, especially for pioneering new forms of Bengali ghazals. Besides, Nazrul translated all 75 *Rubaiyat* of Hafiz in the form of Bengali Rubaiyat (Nazrul, Rubaiyat). Through this poetic journey with Hafiz, quite naturally, Nazrul in his spiritual poems, especially ghazals, could feel the poor, the beggar, and the destitute and celebrate the rise and force of life in the same way as Hafiz had done long ago, putting humanism on top. In this article, we demonstrate that the poetic spirits of Hafiz and Nazrul carry the same message of universal love and revolution regardless of time, geography and language. Moreover, we argue that while the rebellious spirit encompasses the world of Nazrul, that of Hafiz requires enquiry and explication.

Thus, by comparing the contexts, themes, and styles of the selected poems of Hafiz and Nazrul, the paper mainly focuses on the elements that express their rebellious spirits as constructive forces. The study also analyses some poems of Hafiz to show how he manifests his rebellious attitudes through different figures of speech and poetic devices. It aims to find out the reasons why Hafiz can also be considered a rebel. In our comparative analysis of the poems of Hafiz and Nazrul, we not only trace similarities but also variations and differences, especially in their diverse modes of rebellion. We draw on theoretical grounds from the "resistance literature" and the spirits of Sufi antinomianism, situating Nazrul and Hafiz in historical, cultural and political contexts. During our textual analysis, we would adopt the methods and strategies of comparative literature introduced by Shunqing Cao and Steven Totosy de Zepetnek in their ground-breaking books *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature and Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, respectively.

1 In Middle Eastern and Indian literature and music, ghazal is a lyric poem with a fixed number of verses and a repeated rhyme, typically on the theme of love, and normally set to music.

Locating Hafiz and Nazrul in Existing Scholarship of Comparative Literature

Let us first review existing scholarship on Nazrul and Hafiz to identify how their rebellious spirits have been explored and to clarify the need for a systematic comparison. This will help focus our study on addressing the research gap concerning their expressions of resistance within their literary legacies.

Most studies on Nazrul and Hafiz have mainly been conducted discretely in Bengali and Persian. However, Kamal Uddin has recently published a book *Nazrul o Hafizer Kobita: Shilpo o Baishista* (Poetry of Nazrul and Hafiz: Art and Characteristics) in Bengali on Nazrul and Hafiz in which he studies the stylistic and artistic characteristics of their poems. In a comparative tone, the book explores parallelism between Nazrul and Hafiz despite their significant geographical and temporal disparities. It highlights how their poetry transcends boundaries of time, space, and language, resonating with similar expressions of human emotions. It argues that both Nazrul's songs and Hafiz's ghazals connect deeply with audiences and reflect a shared language of the heart. In general, the book analyses the parallels and distinctions between these two poets, exploring how their thoughts and consciousness converge and diverge in their poems. However, Uddin has not compared the poets in terms of the rebellious spirit they articulate in their poems. He shows how Nazrul himself was inspired by Hafiz's ghazals while translating them. Above all, this comparative study seems to have adopted "influence study" largely as a comparative method.

There are other works that point out how Nazrul was influenced by Hafiz. For example, in his essay "Nazrul o Hafiz" (Nazrul and Hafiz), Ahmed Kabir shows Nazrul as a bearer of Hafiz's poetic style and philosophy. He evaluates the originality of Nazrul's translation in the following manner—

> Nazrul's translation of Hafiz, which is tinged with the texture and flavour of Bengali language, is as original as Hafiz's original Persian verses. (58)

Nazrul is considered a unique translator of Hafiz by many as Pijush Kumar Bhattacharjee has mentioned in his book titled *Ananya Anubadak Nazrul* (Nazrul: An Unique Translator). On the other hand, some studies in English can be found that compare Nazrul with English and American poets such as Keats, Shelley, Byron, Yeats, Whitman, and so forth (Hasan 84). In those studies, an orientalist or Eurocentric approach and influence study as a comparative method are followed (for details, see Hasan 84-85). However, in his study, S M Hasan compares and

contrasts Nazrul and the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, focusing on the themes of root, resistance, and revolution. His study shows how both the poets articulate their resisting voices powerfully "in their poetry in the context of colonial occupation and oppression" (81). As a whole, Hasan analyses the resistance poetry of Nazrul and Césaire through applying the methods of the "new comparative literature".

However, since no comparative study on the works of Nazrul and Hafiz has been done so far regarding their rebellious spirits, a noticeable research gap persists in this area. Though both poets espouse themes of defiance and resistance in their respective works, no comprehensive study has yet systematically examined the extent and nature of their rebelliousness. Therefore, this comparative study aims to address this gap by elucidating Nazrul and Hafiz as rebels within their respective literary traditions, shedding light on their shared as well as divergent ethos of dissent and subversion in varied contexts and dimensions.

Theoretical and Methodological Ground

Comparative study serves as an important tool for literary exploration. Comparative literature as a methodology analyses literary texts from different cultures, languages, and periods to identify similarities, differences, and influences. Comparative literature often examines themes, motifs, narrative structures, and cultural contexts of two or more literary texts to understand how literature transcends national boundaries and interacts with other works irrespective of geographical or territorial locale. In that sense, comparative literature is transnational as well as transcultural. It compares and connects across geographies, cultures, and civilisations and shows that the world is interconnected. It also combines elements of literary theory, cultural studies, translation studies, and linguistics to explore the connections and contrasts between diverse literary traditions. Thus, comparative literature not only studies texts across territorial boundaries but also incorporates theories and concepts across disciplines. According to Susan Bassnett, "comparative literature involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literature across both time and space" (1). Shunqing Cao observes,

> In the field of Comparative Literature, cross-culture, cross-nation, cross-discipline, and cross-language have always been considered the basic ideas and methods of the conduct of comparison. (226)

On the other hand, influence study is considered a method in traditional comparative

literature, especially in the French School of comparative literature. It is one of the Eurocentric or Orientalist approaches to interpreting literatures in which the influence of a superior or European author or text on a non-European or inferior author or text is studied. Bassnett points out that this method "has always occupied an important place in comparative literature." (13). However, in our study of Hafiz and Nazrul, we have not considered one superior to the other. What we attempt to conceptualise as our method of comparison has been adapted from Cao's "variation theory", which is regarded as a significant breakthrough in comparative literature. In "The Crisis of Comparative Literature", Rene Wellek argues that comparative literature "has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" or theory though it is widely considered an academic discipline (162). Wellek describes this state of comparative literature as the "most serious sign of the precarious state" (ibid). In this context, variation theory, according to Cao, proposes to "solve the problem that there is no definite scope and objectives of Comparative Literature" (xxvii). Cao has outlined five aspects of variation theory. The first one is about "the Variation of literary phenomena across different nations." The "Variation of literary phenomena across different languages" is the focus of the second aspect. The third aspect outlines "the Variation on the level of literary texts" while the fourth aspect focuses on "the Variation on the level of culture." The last aspect of variation theory deals with "the Variation on the level of civilization" (xxxiv). In short, variation theory focuses mainly on differences, heterogeneity and variation among literary texts. It "not only highlights the differences among various civilizations but also promotes the dialogues and exchanges of civilizations, giving rise to a new era of human history of literature" (Cao xxxvi). In fact, this dialogue and exchange is what we would like to concentrate on while studying the poems of Hafiz and Nazrul comparatively.

Moreover, in this study, we consider some principles of comparative literature outlined by Zepetnek in his book. First of all, we focus more on "how" rather than "what." Secondly, our discussion and analysis would foster dialogues and exchanges across languages, literatures, and cultures on an equal basis. Then, we would maintain an inclusive approach regarding methodological, theoretical, and political aspects. Fourthly, we situate literary texts in cultural and political contexts to achieve a more nuanced understanding. Lastly, while conducting comparative study of the respective poets and their poems, we use English as a lingua franca or global language of communication and are aware that "the use of English should not represent any form of colonialism" (Zepetnek 16-17).

As for mapping a theoretical underpinning, let us conceptualise the "rebellious

spirit". A typical dictionary meaning of "rebellious" does not convey what we mean by the "rebellious spirit" in this paper. For example, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines "rebellious" in the following way.

> Unwilling to obey rules or follow generally accepted standards of behaviour, dress, etc."; "opposed to the government of a country; opposed to those in authority within an organization (Hornby 1243)

According to *Collins English Dictionary*, "rebellious" means—

> If you think someone behaves in an unacceptable way and does not do what they are told, you can say they are rebellious." ("Rebellious")

However, by the "rebellious spirit" we do not just mean being "unwilling to obey rules or follow generally accepted standards of behaviour" or behaving in "an unacceptable way" or "opposing to the government or authority." When we refer to Nazrul's or Hafiz's rebellious spirit, we mean a spirit of their poetic persona that goes beyond the spirit of the so-called rebellious teen or rebellious movement by any political organisation or agency against a government or authority. It is not just violating rules and norms and being eccentric and weird. We would rather conceptualise the "rebellious spirit" as an all-encompassing and all-pervasive defiance and revolt against any discriminatory and exploitative system or authority, especially a colonial, imperialist, or neo-colonial entity beyond time, space and national or geographical boundaries. The spirit denotes not only destruction but also creation. This rebellious spirit is discursively and aesthetically formulated in the poetic aura of poets such as John Milton, Walt Whitman, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Aimé Césaire, and, of course, Hafiz Shirazi, among others. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's Satan declares this spirit—

> All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate,
> And courage never to submit or yield: (8)

Whitman defiantly states this spirit—

> My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
> He going with me must go well arm'd,

("Song of the Open Road", 14")

Or, Nazrul proclaims this spirit in his "Bidrohi" (The Rebel).

Oh, I am raving mad; I am the whirlwind!
I am the plague, the terror of this world,
The dread of rulers, their slayer, ever-restless!
[...]
I am creation, I am destruction;
I am human habitation and cremation ghat.
I am death, I am dawn.
(*Selections 1* 38, Translation: Kaiser Haq)

Césaire celebrates this spirit in the following manner.

make me into a man for the termination
make me into a man for the initiation
make me into a man of meditation
but also make me into a man of germination
make me into the executor or these lofty works (41)

And Hafiz transcends all worldly norms, beliefs and dimensions, and exults in this spirit.

The Truth has shared so much of Itself
With me
That I can no longer call myself
A man, a woman, an angel
[. . .]
And freed
Me
Of every concept and image
My mind has ever known.
(*The Gift* 42-43, Translation: Daniel Ladinsky)

Ralph Waldo Emerson justly evaluates the rebellious spirit of Hafiz when he declares,

> Nothing stops him [Hafiz]; he makes the dare-God and dare-devil experiment; he is not to be scared by a name or a religion; he fears nothing, he sees too far, and sees throughout. (417)

Thus, the transcendental spirit of Hafiz conveyed in the above lines is connected to the rebellious spirit of a group of Sufis who reject conventional religious rituals as well as socially established morality. Those Sufis display tenets of antinomianism, discarding established laws or religious precepts and transgressing moral, religious and social conventions and norms. Sufi antinomianism refers to radical and mystical trends within Sufism that challenge conventional Islamic laws and social norms, suggesting that direct spiritual experience with God transcends legal requirements. Some followers of antinomianism even disregard outer rituals, embrace extreme asceticism, and claim direct communication with the divine.

Some of the fourteenth-century Sufi poets who used to practise antinomianism are known as "Qalandar type." Qalandar is an antinomian sect of Sufism known for their eccentric behaviour and critique of religious hypocrisy. They live in solitude and seek spiritual freedom, denouncing worldly life and immersing in spiritual ecstasy and devotion. The themes of Hafiz's poetry are significantly inspired by Qalandar thought; however, he is not formally considered a Qalandar. *Qalandariyat* is a type of poem on "wine-drinking, gambling, profane love, and rejection of religion" (Karamustafa 33). In his book God's Unruly Friends, Ahmet T. Karamustafa mentions, "it was during a later phase of Persian Sufi poetry, beginning with 'Attar (d. after 618/1221-22) continuing through 'Iraqi (d. 688/ 1289) and Sa'di (d. 691/1291-92), and culminating with Hafiz (d. 792/1389-90), that the Qalandar type developed into a true literary topos" (ibid.). He further argues that ghazals was also developed from the Qalandar theme. One of the main features of the literary Qalandar is described as "deliberate and open disregard for social convention in the cause of 'true' religious love [...] in the imagery of the Qalandartopos: visiting the kharabat (tavern, gambling house, brothel), winedrinking, gambling, and irreligion" (ibid.). We will explore how Hafiz's ghazals reflect themes of *Qalandariyat* and antinomianism.

On the other hand, in the twentieth century, a particular type of literature, especially poetry, was produced on part of the liberation and independence movements of the colonised peoples, addressing neo-colonial control and cultural imperialism of Western Europe and North America. Barbara Harlow terms this literature "resistance literature" since it reflects the resistance and national liberation

movements. In her words,

> a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, […] may be called resistance literature. (vii)

Thus, what we may call "resistance poem" is a particular body of poems written by poets from third-world countries such as Africa, Central and South America, South Asia, and the Arab Middle East (Harlow 38). Harlow, however, observes that through their creative works as well as activism, resistance poets involve themselves in resistance movements and undergo struggles and sufferings. They are even imprisoned by the colonial or oppressive governments for their revolting voices. For instance, Nazrul was imprisoned by the British Raj for his anticolonial writings and activism. Besides, "Dennis Brutus of South Africa, or Mahmud Darwish from Palestine, have suffered long periods of detention and torture in the prisons of the colonizer" (Harlow 39). Thus, resistance poetry is a politically committed form of literature, conveying political message. Nazrul is renowned for his anticolonial stance against the British Raj through his resistance poetry. For the first time in Bengali literature, he took up poetry as a performative mode of resistance not only to confront the colonial force but also to build national culture and consciousness. His revolutionary verses that serve as powerful tools to decolonise the subjugated minds of Bengalis[1] can be identified with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concepts of "decolonising the minds". Moreover, Nazrul demanded decolonisation of British India in the true sense; he was even critical of the Swaraj (the local self-government in British India) since he realised that it would act as a neo-colonial force. Hence, it is stated that "Nazrul was a postcolonial before the postcolonial theory came into being" (Hasan, "Poetics of Resistance" 299).

In the next section, we explore how the rebellious spirits of Hafiz and Nazrul interact with and intervene in the trends and traditions of Sufi antinomianism and resistance poetry, and how their modes of rebellion diverge. In our analysis, we apply the methods and approaches of comparative literature that we have outlined here. As textual references, we have used English translation of Hafiz's and Nazrul's poems by various translators.

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1 For details, see Hasan, "Poetics of Resistance and Revolution: Reading Nazrul in the Era of Neo-colonialism," *Nazrul Journal*, vol. 1, 2020, pp. 287-300.

Rebellious Spirits in the Poetry of Hafiz and Nazrul

Hafiz lived in fourteenth-century Iran, during a period of political unrest and cultural vibrancy under the Timurid dynasty. Sufi love and mysticism are the prominent themes of his poetry in which spiritual rebellion against societal conventions is subtly blended. Through metaphors of love, wine, and intoxication, Hafiz's poems express a passionate relationship with the divine. Hafiz critiques hypocritical clerics, upholding esoteric faith and spiritual freedom. Nazrul's works emerged in early twentieth-century Bengal when colonial oppression and social injustice were prevalent. His rebellious spirits always target the colonial persecution, established social norms, and religious dogmas. Nazrul's poetry indicates his deep-rooted revolt against hypocrisy, injustice, suppression, cruelty, and colonialism. However, Nazrul has not achieved his due place in world literature since his outstanding works have not been translated as abundantly and aesthetically as those of Omar Khayyam, Hafiz Shirazi or Rabindranath Tagore. On the other hand, Hafiz is considered a world poet and discussed along with poets like Horace and Shakespeare.

Love is one of the central themes and a driving force of the poems of both Hafiz and Nazrul. Their poetic world is vibrant with love of God, love of humans, and love of nature. Nazrul sings the songs of youth; Hafiz also sings the songs of vigour, vitality, and, of course, life. In their verses, both the poets manifest a blend of sadness, pain, laughter, and tears hidden in the curves of life. However, as a mystic, Hafiz is adept at unveiling the secrets of human life. His *Divan-e-Hafiz* has fascinated readers of all ages since its publication. The following lines from *The Divan* embody deep and divine love that leads the speaker to abandon every worldly thing in pursuit of his ultimate union with the divine.

> Arise, oh Cup-bearer, rise! and bring
> To lips that are thirsting the bowl they praise,
> For it seemed that love was an easy thing,
> But my feet have fallen on difficult ways.
> [...]
> "If at last thou attain the desire of thy life,
> Cast the world aside, yea, abandon it!"
> (*Poems from Divan* 67-68, Translation: Gertrude Bell)

Readers across cultures and civilisations travel through *The Divan* in search of spiritual bliss in order to quench the thirst of their hearts, but the thirst is intensified

further. Nazrul also first discovered Hafiz through his *Divan* (*Rubaiyat* 7). It is quite identical that Nazrul's songs express this insatiable thirst for ethereal love and divine satisfaction. His poem "Khodar Premer Sharab Piye" (The Wine of God's Love) is a typical example. Both Hafiz and Nazrul often reflect on themes of spiritual rebellion against religious orthodoxy by using vibrant figures of speech such as metaphors, paradoxes, and powerful images. Let us analyse some of their poems.

Nazrul believes that the Creator is present in His creations. In his poem "Ishwar" (God), he states,

> Who are you, my friend,
> searching for God in heaven
> and the underworld?
> Who are you—searching
> through the wilderness
> and mountain peaks?
> [...]
> The whole creation looks at you
> while your own eyes are shut.
> You search for the Creator
> instead of searching for your self.
> (*Poetry* 255, Translation: Sajed Kamal)

The above extract from Nazrul's *Samyabadi* is a classic example of self-realisation in which a universal quest for God is shown. It questions the traditional and ritualistic practices of religion. Everyone searches for God everywhere such as in the deep forest or in the mountains, but they do not search within themselves because they do not believe in themselves. Nazrul suggests that true spiritual enlightenment cannot be achieved through external rituals or actions, but through inner reflection and self-awareness. To God, every human has equal worth as God does not discriminate; people make the discrimination for their own interests. The imagery, such as "searching for God in heaven and the underworld", implies that everyone searches for God everywhere, but the irony is that his "own eyes are shut" during the search. That is to say, without searching within his or her self, one blindly follows the conventional religious practice. Nazrul attempts to awaken people by stating that if they search consciously, they can find spiritual as well as socio-political freedom because God, as an inspiration or impulse, lives within them. This poem emphasises the concept of self-realisation or self-awareness as

an essential aspect of the quest for freedom that everyone aspires to. This excerpt reflects Nazrul's inner philosophical engagement with themes of spirituality and self-meditation, transcending the conventional ways of observing religious precepts and searching for God. It also points out that despite people's outward actions, they hardly recognise the true essence of spirituality and thus fail to gain spiritual freedom. Thus, the essence of Sufi antinomianism is evident in Nazrul's verses as well. The following lines from "Khodar Premer Sharab Piye" (The Wine of God's Love) illustrate how the themes of Sufi antinomianism are assimilated into his verses.

> Drunk with tile wine of divine love
> I am oblivious of all.
> Abandoning the mosque my leader comes this way
> I hear him call.
> At the end of worldliness
> For my prayers and fasting
> I seek not of God
> Heaven's blessings.
> (*Poetry* 536, Translation: Kabir Chowdhury)

Through the Sufi metaphor of "wine", the speaker immerses himself in an ecstatic experience of divine love and union with God. He becomes "oblivious" of worldly concerns or conventional religious practices. The phrase "Abandoning the mosque" suggests the speaker's spiritual devotion that disregards the boundary of religious institutions such as "the mosque". "At the end of worldliness" denotes a goodbye to this materialistic world and an absolute commitment of the devotee to dissolve in the divine.

Throughout his poems, Hafiz celebrates individuality and conveys the message of spiritual freedom, discarding rigid forms of religious rituals. He believes that every individual has the potential to gain freedom through spiritual wisdom, not through the set-rules of religion. A person who is free from his own dilemma can rule in the divine world. Hafiz encourages readers to search for "truth" and embrace their inner strength; by this truth, they can find the strength to raise their voices against any authority or establishment that commits oppression and injustice. In his poetry, Hafiz emphasises the inner freedom and dignity of every human soul. He, in fact, attempts to revolutionise people's thinking, awakening their rebellious spirits by challenging their thoughts and beliefs. He announces—

Let me be slave to that man's will
Who 'neath high heaven's turquoise bowl
Hath won and winneth freedom still
From all entanglement of soul;
(*Fifty Poems* 89, Translation: Arthur J. Arberry)

In this poem, Hafiz shows the power of inner reflection and self-awareness. Through this power, one can get his spiritual and social freedom. He suggests that all individuals have the power to achieve both inner and outward freedom. Everyone has this freedom to nurture rebellious spirits within themselves. Hafiz's poetry frequently explores themes of spiritual enlightenment and the unity of all beings in the divine. The above lines also suggest that true freedom lies within one's inner self. Thus, true freedom is not merely external but involves a profound transformation of the soul. The lines—"Hath won and winneth freedom still" and "From all entanglement of soul"—suggest spiritual liberation that can make a man free from the burden of narrow thoughts. Hafiz shows that self-awareness and self-realisation are the main steps towards spiritual freedom.

Nazrul's verses are uniquely renowned for inspiring readers to awaken their rebellious spirits. His poetry reflects his vision of an inclusive society where people from all colours, creeds, castes, and religions could live peacefully. His revolutionary verses advocate social justice, equality, and human dignity. Upholding the empowerment of the oppressed and the marginalised, Nazrul's poetry often challenges established norms, which subtly or apparently promote inequality and injustice. His poem "Manush" (Human) conveys such message in the following way.

Of equality I sing—
There is nothing greater than a human being, nothing nobler!
Wipe all distinctions based on country, time and person,
Let all religions and countries be one.
In all nations, ages, and homes, let God be your companion.
(*Selections 1* 61; Translation Fakrul Alam)

The poem begins with a bold declaration of the central theme—the theme of equality. The phrase "Of equality I sing" suggests a poetic celebration of this theme. The poem emphasises the idea of unity and solidarity among people from diverse

nations, classes, and beliefs. It rejects disunity and promotes inclusivity. The poem goes on—

> And what if the one you hated as a peasant so
> Was King Janaka or Lord Balarama incognito?
> Prophets were once shepherds, once they were farmers,
> But they brought us news of eternity—which will forever be.
> (*Selections 1* 63-64; Translation Fakrul Alam)

Nazrul addresses the societal tendency to look down upon individuals based on their occupation. He invokes the Hindu deity Balarama, who is often depicted as a farmer or a cultivator. Suggesting that Balarama could be in the disguise of a farmer, Nazrul challenges derogatory perceptions prevailing in society regarding farming and farmers and implies that even revered figures might choose such a profession since farming has remained one of the noblest professions from the dawn of human civilisation. Moreover, Nazrul draws a parallel between shepherds/farmers and Prophets. He suggests that many Prophets and spiritual leaders throughout history had been engaged in manual labour or occupations associated with farming and rural life; nevertheless, they had delivered profound and enduring messages of wisdom and guidance. Nazrul underscores the value and dignity of all types of work and challenges social hierarchies, juxtaposing the efforts of the shepherds and those of the Prophets. Above all, these lines reflect Nazrul's broader themes of social justice, equality, and human dignity.

In the following lines, Hafiz sings the song of defiance boldly, addressing himself[1] not to be enslaved or overly devoted to someone who is beautiful or fair.

> But to the fair no longer be a slave;
> Drink, Hafez! Revel, all your cares unbend,
> And boldly scorn the mean dissembling knave
> Who makes religion every vice defend!
> (*Fifty Poems* 88, Translation: J. Richardson)

This can be interpreted metaphorically, suggesting not to be captivated solely by outer appearances or superficial qualities. Hafiz himself encourages indulgence and celebration ("drink" and "revel") as a means of letting go of worries and unwind. He bravely defies and scorns those who are deceitful or hypocritical ("mean

1 In Sufi ghazals, the poet addresses himself to engage in introspection.

dissembling knave"). This extract implies general admonishment against those who use religion as a cover for their immoral actions. Hafiz criticises individuals who twist or misuse religion to justify their vices or immoral behaviour. The excerpt also refers to hypocrites who outwardly profess religious piety while being engaged in unethical or dishonest practices. Thus, Hafiz promotes rebellious spirits, condemning hypocrisy and manipulation, particularly when done under the guise of religion.

Both Hafiz and Nazrul uphold the spiritual philosophy of Islamic tradition. They were vocal against ideological and religious bigotry and intolerance; however, they encountered severe opposition and intimidation from the ascetics and fanatics of their times. During his lifetime, Hafiz was accused of having heretical beliefs (Samali 2). Nazrul was frowned upon and even declared a "kafir" (an infidel) and "heathen" by both Muslim and Hindu religious leaders because he got married to a Hindu woman, wrote songs addressing the Hindu goddess Kali, and spoke against religious hypocrites. In the following lines, Nazrul himself describes such situations.

> Now the Hindus come after me—calling me a heathen.
> [...]
> The greedy maulvis and mullahs are up-in-arms.
> "The scoundrel utters the names of [Hindu] gods and goddesses—
> let's excommunicate him!
> We declare: 'Kazi is a kafir"
> (*Poetry*, "Amar Kaifiyat" 377, Translation: Sajed Kamal)

Nevertheless, both Hafiz and Nazrul continue to celebrate the rebellious spirit of youth, inspiring them to stay plumb in order to fight for upholding truth and justice. They would be ready to sacrifice their lives for safeguarding their motherland, their roots, and their ancestry. For example, in his poem "Kamal Pasha," Nazrul states boldly,

> Death they have conquered, why then weep on?
> Ab-Jam-Jam they brought, drinking from the pitcher of poison.
> Who died? Why you weep and fuss?
> Well they have done.
> To save the country they gave their lives precious.
> So they are true martyrs!
> The true heroes have sacrificed themselves in blood-attires.

They are true martyrs!
(*Poetry* 63, Translation: Mohammad Nurul Huda)

In the above lines, Nazrul upholds the concept of martyrdom and sacrifice made by those who die for their country. He uses the imagery of "Ab-Jam-Jam"[1] to illustrate the courage and fearlessness of the martyrs, who face death bravely like those who drink from the pitcher of poison. Nazrul unequivocally declares the martyrs as true heroes, praising their selflessness and courage in sacrificing their lives for their country. The repetition of the line—"They are true martyrs"—emphasises the poet's reverence for their sacrifice.

In his 53rd Rubaiyat, Hafiz retells an incident from Islamic history in which Ali ibn Abi Talib (R), the fourth Caliph of Islam and the first cousin and close companion of the Prophet (SM), displayed immense strength and courage during the Battle of Khaybar. Hafiz advises readers to seek strength from someone like Ali, who had valiantly encountered great challenges and emerged victorious.

Ask strength of him who plucked at Khaibar's door
The gift of giving from his slave implores.
O Hafiz, if for grace of God thou yearn,
Ask of the fount for wine of Kowsar's store;
(*The Rubaiyat of Hafiz* 52, Translation: L Cranmer-Byng)

The above lines convey a profound spiritual yearning, urging readers to seek strength, generosity, and divine grace through a sincere desire for divine favour. The wine mentioned in this poem is not a worldly one; rather, it indicates the water flowing from "Al Kowsar," the heavenly river or fount mentioned in the holy Quran. Its water or wine symbolises divine sustenance, spiritual knowledge, and eternal bliss. In Sufi tradition, wine is used as a metaphor that brings the devotee closer to the divine world in the quest for knowledge of God.

Nazrul's use of Persian words in his poetry reflects his deep appreciation for Persian literature, which also serves to visualise the themes of rebellion, love, and passion. Inspired by the great Persian poets such as Omar Khayyam, Rumi, and Hafiz, Nazrul incorporated a considerable amount of Persian words and phrases into his poetry, adding richness and diversity to the Bengali language and literature

1 It refers to the blessed water from the miraculous Zamzam Well in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims drink it for blessings and cure, believing that it has healing and spiritual properties.

and strengthening rebellious spirits. For instance, in his poem "Shat-el-Arab"[1], he instils a lot of Arabic-Persian words such as "shahid" (martyr), "lahu" (blood), "khun" (blood), "azad" (freedom), "dazla" (river), "azam" (great), "sahara" (desert), "dushman" (enemy), "zulfiqar" (the legendary sword of Ali (R)), "khanjar"(dagger), and so on to create a global unity of races, colours and nations who would fight and sacrifice together for demolishing oppression and establishing justice.

> For ever glorious, for ever holy,
> Your sacred beaches, Shat-el-Arab,
> Are bathed in gore, the blood of fighters
> Of many races, and diverse colours.
> Strewn on these sands lie the bones of Arab,
> Egyptian and Turk and Greek and Bedouin,
> Also of women, bold and daring,
> (Nazrul 85, Translation: Syed Sajjad Husain)

However, Nazrul was severely criticised by the then Hindu writers and critics for his unique blend of Persian-Arabic words in Bengali poems. In his words, "The Hindus, on the other hand, cast me aside/ as an accursed Muslim because I use Persian words/ in my poetry!" (*Poetry* 380). In an essay, he logically defends his blend of foreign words in Bengali language and literature, arguing that Bengali literature will not lose its beauty if he adorns it with a couple of Persian or Iranian words; rather, it would look more graceful and more cosmopolitan (*The Path of the Comet*, 57-66). Thus, in the above poem with such cosmopolitan consciousness, Nazrul underscores a spirit of victory for the whole of humanity. He is not restricted to any national, geographical, linguistic, or religious boundary as he is the poet of humanism and of all people. Verily, Nazrul, as a poet, differs from Hafiz greatly, but in "Shat-el-Arab," he pursues such feelings and convictions that his great predecessors had pursued throughout civilisations. The sandy bank of his "Shat-el-Arab" provides a strong ground on which the essence and spirit of "Arab,/ Egyptian and Turk and Greek and Bedouin,/ Also of women, bold and daring" meet and mingle for revolt and rebellion.

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1 "Shaṭṭ Al-Arab" is "a river in southeastern Iraq, formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at the town of Al-Qurnah. It flows southeastward for 120 miles (193 km) and passes the Iraqi port of Basra and the Iranian port of Abadan before emptying into the Persian Gulf." (Britannica, "Shaṭṭ Al-Arab")

Modes of Rebellion: Divergence and Variation

We have so far pointed out parallel themes in the poetry of Hafiz and Nazrul, which vivify their rebellious spirits. We will now explore divergence and variation in their poetic creations, focusing on different modes of rebellion such as Nazrul's explicit articulation and directness versus Hafiz's implicit enunciation and ambiguity.

Nazrul's poems often show solidarity with the oppressed and the marginalised, calling for revolution against authoritarianism and exploitation. Besides, his poems celebrate the courage of individuals fighting for freedom and justice, evoking political consciousness. Compared to Nazrul, Hafiz is not explicitly rebellious. Instead, his rebellion is more spiritual and philosophical than political. Throughout his poems, he fights against inner conflicts and socio-religious dogmas. Hafiz is one of the finest poets who reveals one's own cowardice and selfishness. He always challenges conventional morality and traditional ideas about the nature of reality, religion, and society and celebrates spiritual freedom. He also often writes against hypocrisy, duplicity, and superficiality. His spiritual and mystical verses express his revolt against established social practices that create discrimination between the rich and the poor, the elites and the commoners, and the sinners and the (so-called) pious. Thus, the following verses visualise the themes of Sufi antinomianism.

> Where is my ruined life, and where the fame
> Of noble deeds?
> Look on my long-drawn road, and whence it came,
> And where it leads!
> Can drunkenness be linked to piety
> And good repute?
> Where is the preacher's holy monody,
> Where is the lute?
> (*Poems from Divan* 80, Translation: Gertrude Bell)

Hafiz is renowned for his poetic, theological, philosophical, and aesthetic contributions; however, he is not commonly known for his political contributions. In this context, it is to be noted that through words as well as actions, Nazrul had confronted all sorts of oppression, discrimination, and injustice imposed by the British colonial rule. His poetry played a significant role in inspiring Bengali nationalist movements and brought up a spirit of resistance against colonial rule. He was, in fact, a poet-activist and actively involved in anticolonial movements

to attain independence for Indians. He used his poetry as a vital tool against the colonisers; the words of his poems are as powerful as weapons. He was sent to jail by the then British Raj for writing the poem "Anandamayir Agamone". In this poem, Nazrul makes a political satire, calling the goddess Durga to destroy the colonial tyrants and save India from them as they were eliminating Indian youths who were involved in the resistance movement against the British Raj. Some of his books and a bi-weekly magazine [Dhumketu (The Comet)] that he edited were proscribed for provoking anti-raj sentiments and upholding rebellious spirits.

Hafiz implicitly and ambiguously satirised political and social norms during the period of political unrest while the Timurid dynasty was in power. He was once summoned by the then ruler Timur for writing verses like "Oh Turkish maid of Shiraz! in thy hand/ If thou'lt take my heart, for the mole on thy cheek/ I would barter Bokhara and Samarkand." (Poems from Divan 71). Timur, who had conquered Samarkand and Bokhara, the two great cities of his kingdom by his sharp sword, got furious as Hafiz would give away those loveliest cities just for the mole on the cheek of a beautiful girl of Shiraz. However, Hafiz was not treated in a hostile way; rather, for his witty reply and the double meanings of his verses, he was released with valuable gifts. It is because the government was not a colonial or occupying force, and Hafiz's message was implicit and not politically charged. Besides, Hafiz's poetry touches upon wider issues of the then society and polity. His ghazals are open to safe mystical readings. Through satire and irony, his poems critique the two-facedness and hypocrisy of the governing as well as spiritual establishments of his time. Thus, Hafiz's spiritual and political message is symbolic and ambiguous. On the other hand, Nazrul's political message was interpreted literally, and he was treated harshly by the colonial rulers.

Nazrul believed that the colonised Indians would get independence from the British Raj only through an all-encompassing revolution. However, collective efforts were required to raise the spirit of revolution. Nazrul knew that when all the Indians, especially the youths, were able to decolonise their minds, become united and declare war against colonial subjugation, they would achieve an independent homeland. Unitedly, the young souls would bring about a deluge, a tempest or a *Kalbaishakhi*[1] storm to smash the chains of colonial occupation. Therefore, the poet asks the youths to shout "victory" repeatedly. This victory song announces an outburst of revolt and revolution—

1 It is a type of storm and downpours with strong winds that occurs in Bengal recurrently in March, April and May. It is also known as the Nor'wester and named after the Bengali month Baishak.

Come, make merry and rejoice.
There rages the summer storm [Kalbaishakhi storm]
flying the flag of the New and the Young.
There comes he who had not come so long.
Dancing merrily
drink we will the joy of destruction.
(*Poetry*, "The Ecstasy of Destruction" 4, Translation: Kabir Chowdhury)

Thus, in order to seek freedom of the oppressed, the colonised, and the exploited, the arrival of resisting forces and revolution is visualised through modern literary devices like metaphors, symbols and allusions, The poet refers to the revolution as "New" and "Young" ("flying the flag of the New and the Young") and implies that the worn-out old system of the British colonial rule would be destroyed by the arrival of the new and the young (e. g., anticolonial spirits of the youth). He expresses this newness through several symbols such as *Kalbaishakhi* storm and Mahadeva, the god of deluge. Mainly with the help of these two symbols, the poet implies the coming of revolution. When the Kalbaishakhi storm comes, it sweeps away the dust and filth of dry and worn-out nature and infuses new vitality through fresh rains. Again, Mahadeva, the god of deluge in Hindu mythology, would destroy the sin-filled world and set the stage for the creation of a new world. In the same way, Nazrul hopes that through anticolonial resistance and revolution, the colonial system of exploitation and oppression will be destroyed and a new society free from all discrimination and injustice will be built.

On the other hand, Hafiz's resistance and rebellion is spiritual, not political in nature. Unlike Nazrul, his resistance verses in the form of ghazals are renowned for their high polysemy and exquisite beauty. Through exotic language and style, he conveys spiritual insights. Tinged with metaphors and symbols, his verses often voice Sufi antinomianism in which there is no place for religious orthodoxy and no distinction among human beings on the basis of caste, creed and religion. The following verses vividly convey Hafiz's resolve to demolish the boundaries of caste and religion that divide humans.

I
Have
Learned
So much from God

That I can no longer
Call
Myself
A Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim,
A Buddhist, a Jew.
(*The Gift*, "I Have Learned So Much" 42, Translation: Daniel Ladinsky)

It is apparent from the bold message of the above lines that Hafiz's resistance is more than merely political, as his poetry upholds antinomian and transcendental spirits and all-pervasive power.

Nazrul's poetry is characterised by its fiery language, vivid imagery, and emotional intensity. He is known for adapting words, imagery, figures of speech, and even meters from Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu, and other languages. Nazrul frequently uses metaphors and allegories to convey a sense of equality, considering human beings an organic whole that transcends the boundaries of caste, creed and religion. In this regard, let us have a look at the following verses.

Of equality I sing:
Where all barriers and differences
Between man and man have vanished,
Where Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians
Have mingled together.
(*Poetry*, "Of Equality" 249, Translation: Bashudha Chakravarty)

The above lines uphold the egalitarian status of human beings and promote socialist or Marxist views. That is to say, Nazrul speaks of a classless society where people are not discriminated against due to their religious identities. Though Hafiz and Nazrul value human worth in the same way, their modes of expression and forms of rebellion differ in terms of time, geography, and language. However, they satirise inequality and the absurdity of society, putting humanism above all aspects and issues of the world. Through figures of speech, Nazrul sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly confronts the authority, but Hafiz always subtly and obliquely comments on societal inequality by using symbols, metaphors and other literary devices. In the following verses from *The Divan-I-Hafiz*, Hafiz mocks the hollowness of the kings and the rich through vivid imagery.

Since, void of us, the world wisheth to be,

The being a beggar (is) much better than being a king.
(994, Translation: H. Wilberforce Clarke)

Pointing to the absurdity of momentary pomp and prosperity, in other verses, Hafiz scorns the transience of human life since death as an absolute truth levels all the distinctions between the rich and the poor, the beggar and the king, and the young and the old.

To none, is help of this stage (of death),—
On the part of the beggar, of the king, of the young, of the old.
(999, Translation: H. Wilberforce Clarke)

The word "beggar" is a metaphor here. However, "beggar", an English substitute for the Persian word "Fakir", does not make proper sense of the original word. By employing irony, Hafiz highlights the reality that no king or emperor can provide for the beggar or the destitute, even though he wishes to do so. That is why he stresses that "being a beggar (is) much better than being a king" as being a king in this temporary world amounts to nothing in the eyes of God.

At the King's door, a beggar made this subtlety in regard to work,
He said:—At every tray, whereat I sate, God, the Provider,— was."
(344, Translation: H. Wilberforce Clarke)

That is to say, God is present in the image of a beggar. To give alms to a beggar is to give alms to God.

Through imagery, Nazrul also criticises social inequality, though in a different fashion. We have already pointed out how his poem "Manush" illustrates the hypocrisy of religious elites who exploit religion and enjoy privileges; in contrast, when the poor and hungry people ask them for food, they refuse them outright.

Yesterday the mosque was full of sweets and meat and bread;
The sight of the leftovers makes the mullah glad!
Just then a hungry man comes in, sores on his skin,
He says, "Sir, I have been starving for seven days!"
(*Selections 1* 62, Translation: Fakrul Alam)

The mosque is a sacred place for prayers where no discrimination is allowed. All

classes of people become one when they pray in congregation. But the so-called religious elites create a class system even inside the mosque. The above lines state that a large amount of food was sent to the mosque yesterday as part of a charity food distribution to feed the needy. But the food was not distributed among the poor and the needy. When a hungry beggar comes and asks for some leftovers, he is asked whether he prays regularly. He is then driven out of the mosque as his reply is negative.

Hafiz mainly portrays rebellious spirits in his poetry through figures of speech. Satire is one of them. Satire is a literary device used to mock and critique people, organisations, social norms, or systems. It frequently uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or sarcasm to point out social vices, absurdities, or defects. Often subtle and infused with wit, rather than overt mockery, Hafiz's satire critiques societal ills and hypocrisy as well as shortcomings of individuals. He also uses irony and humour to bring out the contradictions and absurdities of society and human nature. For example, Hafiz satirises the ostentatious display of wealth and status among the elites. His satire serves as a reminder to question societal practices and values and seek deeper truths beyond the appearance of the world. The following verses proclaim his firm position against the hypocrites of various types.

> I've said it before and I'll say it again:
> It's not my fault that with a broken heart, I've gone this way.
> In front of a mirror they have put me like a parrot,
> And behind the mirror the Teacher tells me what to say.
> [...]
> Even though, to pious, drinking wine is a sin,
> Don't judge me; I use it as a bleach to wash the color of hypocrisy away.
> (*Drunk on the Wine* 17, Translation: Thomas Rain Crowe)

Hafiz clearly states that he does not maintain a double face by hiding the fact that he drinks wine; rather, he admits that he drinks wine, which is like a whitening or purifying bleach that can "wash the color of hypocrisy away." However, in Sufi ghazals, as a powerful metaphor, "wine" does not denote worldly wine or alcohol as we have already pointed out. Rather, wine embodies spiritual ecstasy, divine love, and divine union.

Nazrul's use of satire often involves sharp wit, irony, and humour, combined with a keen awareness of social and political issues. His poetry targets colonisers, oppressive rulers, religious orthodoxy, social inequality, and other forms of injustice.

His masterpiece "Bidrohi" (The Rebel) is satirical in its tone and texture. "Amar Kaifiyat" (My Answer) is another satirical poem that mocks socio-political issues of his time. In the following lines, he satirises both the colonial power and the Swaraj or the self-rule of the Indians.

> Why isn't there a touch of embarrassment
> In the faces of those
> who suck the blood of these hungry children?
> We know it well—by trying to bring *Swaraj*,
> we've ended up with a worthless pile of trash.
> By depriving crores (tens of millions) of hungry children of their food
> Came a crore (ten millions) rupees—but not *Swaraj*.
> [...]
> Pray—that those who rob
> thirty-three crore (three hundred and thirty millions) mouths their morsels of food
> meet their doom in my writings in blood!
> (*Poetry* 379-380, Translation: Sajed Kamal)

The lines—"Pray—that those who rob/ thirty-three crore (three hundred and thirty millions) mouths their morsels of food/ meet their doom in my writings in blood!"—portray Nazrul's explicit revolt and rebellion. Nazrul curses those neo-colonisers and oppressors who loot even the alms sanctioned for the destitute. His rebellious verses written in blood would doom all the oppressive forces.

Thus, Nazrul is always bold and outspoken in demonstrating his protest and revolt, whereas Hafiz's revolt is implicit and embedded in poetic imagination and divine union. Hafiz, with his message of spiritual freedom, and Nazrul, with his message of political freedom and national consciousness, inspire humanity as a whole. Their resistance poetry remains relevant to today's readers, providing a timeless reminder of rebellious spirits.

Conclusion

We have pointed out that both Hafiz and Nazrul express themes of rebellious spirits as constructive forces in their works from myriad perspectives and through various styles and poetic devices, although in different sociocultural, political, and historical contexts. This study has pointed out that their poetry exemplifies the power of literature to resist oppression and injustice, celebrating the spirit of resilience,

courage, and dignity of the human spirit and offering hope and empowerment to the oppressed and the marginalised. In spite of differences in their approach and style, Nazrul and Hafiz share common themes and messages in their poetry. Their works bring them to a threshold of unity, though they belong to different periods and different socio-political realities. They vary from each other on many grounds, but they display rebellious spirits as well as universal acceptance to almost the same degree. Thus, we have explored a certain nature of unity in a world of variation where Hafiz and Nazrul dwell in harmony. Moreover, we have shown that both the poets inspire young generations through their words and activism. Their poems are the weapons of liberation from oppression of all kinds: political, cultural, social, religious, or spiritual and inspire readers to build a better world on the principles of equity, compassion, and justice.

Since we have adopted concepts of comparative literature from Cao's variation theory, we have got a broader canvas and space to compare two poets from two different geographies and civilisations. While the traditional comparative study of Nazrul and other European poets is limited to the influence study and thematic and stylistic study, this article has offered a novel study of divergence and variation, in addition to exploring similarities. Undoubtedly, we can argue that variation theory as a nuanced methodological tool has opened a new vista for comparative literary study. At this point, Cao's claim that variation theory has been developed to address the lack of a systematic method or theory for studying literature comparatively is deemed to be well grounded. Generally, resistance poetry is placed on a postcolonial spectrum, but an earlier poet like Hafiz known for his spiritual and metaphysical contributions has been proven to be a poet of resistance as well. We have shown how his poems evoke defiance and express rebellious spirits.

Considering the differences and variations between texts, contexts, cultures, and civilisations, variation theory could also open the possibility of embarking on cross-cultural literary study. In this regard, Bengali and Chinese or Bengali and Japanese literature can be explored comparatively, applying Cao's variation theory. However, this study could have been expanded further by comparing terms or words such as "Fakir"[1] in the works of Hafiz and Nazrul with those of other Sufi poets such as Rumi or Omar Khayyam. How such words and phrases come to be diverse and divergent across different traditions and civilisations would be the focus of future enquiry. Thus, from this study, we have shown that if a comparative study is conducted by a robust theory such as variation theory and when it is free from

1 It is translated as "beggar" in English, but the English word beggar does not convey the broad and multiple connotations and concepts of the original word.

the influence study and Eurocentric and Orientalist approaches, it functions as a productive field and approach to new literatures. Upcoming researchers in the field will obviously find effective directions to contribute to the variation theory. Last but not least, this article has addressed the methodological and theoretical crisis in comparative literature, demonstrating the fact that comparative literature remains an ever-evolving discipline.

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French Anti-colonial Engagement during the Algerian War of Independence in Christian Buono's *l'Olivier De Makouda*: Between Political Solidarity and Civilizing Mission

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Abstract Colonial Algeria is a paradigmatic example of the exchange of civilizations between Europe and North Africa. Within an atmosphere marked by military violence and forced acculturation imposed by the French colonizer on the colonized Algerian people, a new culture came into being to transform the previously existing cultural aspect of Algeria. Under the complexity of the cultural shifts and power imbalance of the time, Christian Buono, the European communist, with his family, chose the Algerian side and would become an Algerian citizen after independence. His narrative *L'olivier de Makouda* [The Olive Tree of Makouda] published in 1991 reveals the impact of the prolonged contact between the European and North African civilizations on both Algerian and French citizens. Drawing on postcolonial theory-particularly Frantz Fanon's analyses of colonization and decolonization, Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence, and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism—together with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's notion of "decolonizing the mind" and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's theory of symbolic violence, this article adopts a qualitative, interpretive reading of the book. It examines how cultural, ideological, and political exchanges between the French and Algerian peoples during the Algerian War of Independence are represented and structured within a colonial framework. The analysis reveals the moral and cultural underpinnings of colonialism, emphasizing a Franco-Algerian encounter shaped by coercion, domination and unequal power relations. Elements of "l'oeuvre civilisatrice" are also revealed in this historical document within its anti-colonial discourse, maintaining the European cultural hegemony and emphasizing the need of political and educational enlightenment for Algerians to liberate their minds before their land.

Keywords Algeria; French colonization; Anti-colonialism; interculturality; The

civilizing mission.

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Introduction

French colonialism in Algeria (1830-1962) and the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) are frequently studied from the angle of the confrontation between a colonial power and a people struggling for its liberation. Yet, this binary interpretation often neglects the multiple forms of engagement that traversed this period, notably those of the French anti-colonialists who, in rupture with the dominant ideology of their country, have chosen to support the Algerian cause. Their action, far from being limited to a simple political or humanitarian motion, can be perceived as a factual meeting of civilizations, a space of exchange between Europe and North Africa where ethical convictions, cultural heritages and common hopes were converged.

In his historical work *L'Olivier de Makouda* (Un Algérien de souche européenne dans la guerre d'Algérie) [Makouda Olive Tree (An Algerian of European Descent in the Algerian War)], originally published in 1991, Christian Buono, himself a witness to and actor of this period, sensitively restores this singular experience of transnational solidarity. Through his narrative, he highlights not only the courageous commitments of certain French people, but also the profoundly human and intercultural dimension of this struggle, where colonial antagonism sometimes gives way to fraternity and mutual recognition. This hybrid document that blends personal memory, historical testimony and political engagement can be read as a human and intercultural meeting.

Seldom studied in mainstream literary criticism, the book has however aroused the interest of certain researchers in cultural and historical studies, who see it as a rare attempt to think of French anti-colonial engagement and political consciousness. In his preface to the book, Gilles Perrault focuses on the ethical and political courage of Buono's engagement against a public opinion which was mostly belligerent. The author, according to him, has chosen to "ramer à contre-courant" [row against the current], joining the ranks of those who resisted colonialism (Perrault). As for Henry Alleg, he brings a more intimate and humanist portrait of

Buono in his foreword to *L'Olivier de Makouda*, evoking their prison cohabitation in cell 72 at Barberousse, Algiers, 1957. His testimony reinforces the idea that Buono is part of those rare Europeans who, in the context of colonial injustice, have courageously chosen to side with Algerians in their struggle for dignity. He maintains that the author does not seek to construct a heroic story but to transmit his memory of daily resistance (Alleg). Perrault and Alleg's criticism of the book has underlined its historical importance, emphasizing the personal engagement of Buono as an anonymous militant and the role of the Algerian Communist Party in the liberation of Algeria.

Recent work on European communist militants in the Algerian War and intercultural contact zones in colonial Algeria provide an essential framework for situating Buono's *L'Olivier de Makouda*. Historians such as Sylvie Thénault argue that the case of Maurice Audin, a French mathematician and member of the Algerian Communist Party who disappeared under torture in 1957, has become a "site of contested memory and historical inquiry" that reveals broader interactions between French communists and nationalist movements during the conflict (Thénault 158-159). Building on this, Raphaëlle Branche situates militant engagement and acts of denunciation within the violence saturated social and political environments of colonial war, emphasizing that denunciations of torture and repression shaped networks of solidarity and dissent across European and Algerian actors (Branche 11-12).

Complementary work on Algerian nationalism and colonial culture, particularly James McDougall's *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (2006), draws attention to the heterogeneous and often asymmetrical nature of intercultural encounters under French rule (McDougall 19). Other historians, such as Jennifer E. Sessions, in *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (2011), demonstrate the depth and catastrophic longevity of the civilizing-mission ideology that continued to "redefine post revolutionary French identity and sovereignty" (Sessions 11). Session's work shows how colonial ideology structured not only domination but also many later attempts at solidarity.

Issue and Working Hypothesis

Positioned within the above historiographical and critical background, the present article extends these debates by showing how Buono's novel embodies an ambivalent "third space" in which anti-colonial solidarity coexists with subtle residues of the colonial myth of civilization. A post-colonial reading of this document draws attention to the profound cultural and ideological dialogue between the French anti-colonialists and the Algerians during the war. However,

these exchanges remain tinged with the survival of the colonial civilizing mission, revealing the ambiguities of a solidarity marked by asymmetry. Although Buono firmly denounces colonialism, his narrative is sometimes marked by a paternalistic or idealized vision of the Algerian people, inherited from the assimilative colonial project. Thus, the work falls within a grey area, between rupture and colonial continuity, and this is precisely what suggests a post-colonial reading attentive to the unsaid, to the asymmetries and to the discursive survivals of power.

To clarify this approach, the article tackles two fundamental research questions: How does Buono's narrative renovate or inadvertently perpetuate structures of the colonial civilizing mission even as it positions itself as anti-colonial? What does this ambivalence reveal about the broader dynamics of French anti-colonial engagement during the Algerian war? Taking in hand these two questions offers a new reading of *L'Olivier de Makouda* that emphasizes the persistence of colonial epistemologies within metropolitan anti-colonial writing, and that theorizes Buono's position as part of a complex, unbalanced form of intercultural solidarity.

The analysis adopts a qualitative interpretive method, combining textual analysis with perceptions drawn from postcolonial theory. It is based on a close reading of Buono's book, with particular attention to narrative voice, lexical choices, representations of violence, and the expression of cultural hierarchies. The book is examined as a site where colonial power relations are discursively constructed and contested. It is, thus, approached as a hybrid text, functioning simultaneously as historical testimony and as a literary and cultural account shaped by story lined strategies and retrospective framing. While the narrator's voice draws heavily on autobiographical experience, this study allows for narrative construction and intercession, admitting that memory, perspective, and political context inform the representation of colonial experience. This methodological stance makes it possible to analyze the document not only as a record of colonial violence but also as a discursive intervention in the cultural and symbolic dimensions of colonial domination.

Theoretical Grounds

Post-colonial theorists, such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, though distinct in focus, collectively construct a powerful framework for understanding postcolonial interculturality as a site of conflict, negotiation and transformation. They reveal how cultural relations between the colonized and the colonizer are often characterized by unequal power dynamics. Fanon emphasizes the psychological violence and identity rupture caused by colonization, arguing that true

liberation and thus genuine interculturality requires a violent rupture from colonial domination. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he asserts that "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards." (Fanon 18). In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he argues that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (Fanon 35). In the same context, Said exposes how colonial power is maintained through cultural representations, particularly through Orientalism, which reduces the colonized to stereotypes and blocks authentic dialogue. In *Orientalism* (1978), he claims that "orientalism is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice" (Said 6) and in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he maintains that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (Said 119).

On the other hand, Bhabha shifts the focus to the ambiguous and hybrid spaces created by colonial encounters, where identities are negotiated and authority destabilized through mimicry, ambivalence and the emergence of a third space. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), he contends that the third space "is the interstices -the overlap and displacement of domains of difference- that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated." (Bhabha 2). All together, the above mentioned theorists challenged the logic of the civilizing mission considering it as a violent imposition by Fanon, as a cultural construct by Said, and as a contradiction by Bhabha.

The analysis also draws on Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's theory of schooling as a mechanism of social reproduction and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial education as a tool of cultural domination. These theorists of colonial education are mobilized here because the school functions as a central instrument of "the civilizing mission" in Buono's narrative, where the first protagonist-narrator is himself a French teacher in an Algerian school during the war of independence. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977), Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of schooling and "symbolic violence" helps to read the colonial school as a key apparatus of the French "civilizing mission" in Algeria. As Bourdieu notes,

> The major thrust of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture and, by the same token, of the illegitimacy of the cultures of the dominated groups or classes, comes from exclusion, which perhaps has the most symbolic force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion. (Bourdieu and Passeron 42-43)

Ngugi, in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), explains how colonial education and its language policies alienate learners from their culture and serve as instruments of control. He observes that colonial schooling "annihilated a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. " (Ngugi 3). This illuminates how Buono, in *L'Olivier de Makouda*, reveals the cultural and psychological violence in colonial schools.

Colonial Violence and Its Effect on Algerian People in Buono's *L'olivier de Makouda*

In *L'Olivier de Makouda*, Christian Buono delivers a rare and poignant account of the Algerian war of independence, written with the courage of those who refused to remain silent in the face of injustice. This story is part of a tradition of lucid and moral resistance, countering false heroism. Far from any victim-centered stance, Buono gives voice to a singular man mobilized by the present but inhabited by the living memory of those, like Maurice Audin, Fernand Iveton and Thomas Maillot, who paid with their lives for their loyalty to justice. Far from being a simple return to a bygone past, *L'Olivier de Makouda* questions our ability to choose the side of justice in troubled times, and reminds us that the Algerian War, with its trail of repression and torture, was also a moment of ethical and political choice. Through Buono's eyes, words of commitment, doubt and also dignity emerge, making this book much more than a testimony: an act of active remembrance, nourished by hardship, loyalty and profound humanism.

Brother-in-law of Maurice Audin who died under torture, Chritian Buono, an anonymous grassroots activist and a militant in the Algerian Communist Party (A.C.P.) from the outbreak of the conflict for independence, chose the Algerian side with his family. In his narrative, he speaks about this tragic and troubled period, focusing on its effects on the Algerian people and those who stand against French colonialism, both at the economic, political, psychological and cultural levels. Born in 1923, Buono spent his entire life in Algeria until his arrival in France in 1966. As a teacher, both in the city and the countryside, he is a privileged witness of the life of Algerian and French people of modest conditions. Married to Maurice Audin's sister in 1947, he followed the path of this young academic who disappeared in the torture chambers in 1957. Arrested for harboring senior officials of The A.C.P., he spent two years in prison (1957-1959) and two years in hiding (1960-1962). He later participated in the work of building new Algeria (1962-1966). His historical book *L'Olivier de Makouda* (Makouda's Olive Tree) is a good witness of colonial

violence, cultural and psychological repression under colonialism, but also of the convergence between European and North African civilizations.

Psychological and Symbolic Violence

In *L'Olivier de Makouda*, Buono exposes with a dramatic intensity the brutality of colonial violence exercised over the Algerian people, notably through the village of Makouda, a microcosm of national suffering, and the city of Algiers with its prisons. The author depicts systemic violence—both physical and symbolic—that crushes bodies, shatters spirits, and seeks to erase memory. In Makouda, where he works as a teacher, he evokes colonial violence through various school scenes, subtly revealing the oppression, fear, and absurdity imposed on both pupils and teachers.

School is, thus, used by the colonizer as an instrument of domination both at the cultural and military levels. In chapter two entitled "Un inspecteur chez les petits Gaulois" [an inspector among the little Gauls], the inspector is depicted as an authoritarian and sarcastic man who handles the journal "L'école et la nation" [The School and the Nation]. This symbolizes the colonial doctrine reminding teachers that the school's purpose is to instruct Algerian children that their country belongs to the French nation. While interrogating Buono, the inspector asks him whether his mission is pedagogy or politics: "Pédagogie ou politique?" (3) [pedagogy or politics?] to remind him that anti-colonial politics is forbidden in the Algerian school. Here, the inspector uses a pedagogical tool as a mean of ideological control and a vector of colonial propaganda. The scene underlines the role of school in the production of a "good colonized" and the erasure of local identities. This reinforces Fanon's view that colonization is violent at the physical, psychological and cultural levels, and that "the educational system" of the colonizer implants in "the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably." (Fanon 38).

Buono notices that the pupils are terrified by the inspector's behavior: "Terrifiés, les élèves demeuraient immobile et silencieux." (3) [Terrified, the pupils remained motionless and silent]. This observation evokes the psychological effect of colonial presence on the children, manifested through fear, astonishment and loss of bearings due to the colonial authority which entered the classroom not as a guide, but as an intimidating force. Being accustomed with repression and surveillance, they are confused and unable to make a difference between a teacher and security agent:

Inspecteur de police? [Police inspector?]
Non, Inspecteur des écoles. Il contrôle mon travail

[No, school inspector, he controls my work].
Il a rien contrôlé. Il a seulement fouillé par tout. Qu'est ce que c'est que ça?
[He didn't control anything. He has just searched everywhere. What is this?].
Il cherchait peut-être des mitraillettes, dit Hocine en éclatant de rire.
[May be he was looking for machine guns, said Hocine bursting out laughing]. (3)

This dialogue between the pupils and their teacher exposes a colonial school system that operates as an instrument of social control rather than a means of emancipation. Hocine's laughing here can be seen as both a childhood irony and a defense mechanism against this absurd reality which puts people everywhere under military control to the point that it becomes anchored even in children.

Another form of psychological violence exercised over Algerians is the myth of the "Petits Gaulois" [Little Gauls], inscribed in the chapter's title, reminding them that their ancestors are the Gauls. This negation of the historical and cultural identity of the colonized is a fundamental violence of French Colonialism. Colonial education imposes a fictitious historical lineage disconnected from Algerian reality, with the aim of shaping deterritorialized and obedient French people. This can be read through Fanon's (1952) view that the colonized subject is denied a stable, authentic identity and he is contingent upon the white man's perception: "A black schoolboy… in his lessons is forever talking about 'our ancestors, the Gauls,' identifies himself with the explorers, the bringer of civilization, the Whiteman who carries truth to savages -an all-white truth" (Fanon 147).

The brutality of French colonialism, as it is portrayed by Buono, is first experienced at school, through inspectors as well as through pedagogical and historical discourse, indicating that colonial violence is not limited to physical coercion but extends to historical, psychological, and cultural forms. In this sense, the colonial school operates as a mechanism of what Bourdieu and Passeron term "symbolic violence", namely the imposition of a dominant cultural arbitrary that is misrecognized as legitimate and universal (Bourdieu and Passeron 5-7). By presenting the history, language, and values of the colonizer as neutral knowledge, schooling contributes to the discrediting and erasure of the colonized subject's cultural past. This idea echoes Fanon's claim that "Colonialism […] turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (Fanon 210), highlighting how education functions as a central instrument of epistemic domination.

Structural and Cultural Violence

Buono maintains his denunciation of colonial violence throughout his text which is

full of tension between the colonized and the colonizer, conveyed through language, silence and power games at school. In chapter three entitled "L'Olivier de Makouda" The Olive Tree of Makouda, the olive tree serves as a symbol of repression and injustice, exploited as a school resource out of necessity. Buono declares that when the moment of the picking comes, all the classes are mobilized for a collective harvest (6). This harvest, which is initially a pedagogical activity, turns into an economic gain, permitting the pupils to get something fundamental for their school. It becomes clear that the school suffers from a lack of funding and the complete disengagement of the colonial administration, leaving the pupils responsible for meeting their own basic needs. This illustrates the colonial institution's neglect and deprivation imposed on the indigenous population. The olive tree, which is the symbol of peace and wisdom, becomes here a mean of economic survival in a school abandoned by colonial authorities. This situation illustrates a form of structural violence making a tree feeds the needs that the administration refuses to meet.

Structural violence is, in fact, manifested in the institutions, the laws and the different practices that reproduce injustice, generally without recourse to direct force. In Buono's text, the school, which is meant to be neutral and educative, becomes a space of military surveillance destructing the mutual coolness between the teachers and the pupils. Several passages from the book underline the militarization of this civil space, placing everyone under armed surveillance. In Makouda particularly, the school's director is put under close watch because of his socialist and anti-colonial tendencies. Buono sates, "l'armée veillait sur lui, filtrant impitoyablement nos moindres contacts et chassant brutalement les écoliers assez naïfs pour proposer aux gendarmes les légumes 'communistes' du jardin scholaire" (9) [The army watched over him, mercilessly filtering our slightest contacts and brutally chasing away schoolchildren naïve enough to offer the police the "communist" vegetables from the school garden]. He adds that "certains enseignants seraient détruits par les insurgés. Ainsi dispaitraient les seuls témoins d'un effort culturel…" (9). [Some teachers would be destroyed by the insurgents. Thus, the only witnesses of a cultural effort would disappear]. The teachers are, then, put between two fires, being repressed by the French army as suspects and menaced by the nationalists for their imposed role by the colonial power.

Within institutional violence, entrenched a symbolic cultural violence legitimating the domination and dehumanization of the colonized. Cultural disparagement is very open when a colonial teacher expresses an unashamed racism, denying any capacity for Algerian children to appropriate a culture. He considers them as "des sauvages qui n'ont rien à foutre de la culture française" (8) [savages who do

not give a damn about French culture]. This echoes Said's (1978) view that Western discourse constructs the East as its savage opposite, arguing that "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (Said 40). This overt cultural racism is reinforced by a fierce violence against Makouda's people who are against French presence on their territory: "ça leur apprendra à etre anti-Français" (9) [that will teach them to be anti-French], explains the inspector, who leaves them without a teacher for months.

The manner in which the colonizer imposes a unilateral vision of "French culture," while rejecting indigenous culture as "savage" and "inferior," exemplifies the mechanisms of colonial cultural hegemony. Colonial education systematically devalues Algerian children and orients them toward assimilation, enacting what Ngũgĩ identifies as the most enduring form of domination: control over consciousness through culture and language. As Ngũgĩ argues, colonial power seeks to make the colonized perceive their past as "one wasteland of non-achievement" (N'gugi 16), a process clearly visible in the treatment of Algerian pupils as passive "objects" of the educational system rather than as historical subjects. This logic corresponds closely to Bourdieu and Passeron's notion of symbolic violence, whereby domination is exercised through pedagogical authority that is misrecognized as legitimate and neutral (Bourdieu and Passeron 4).

Resistance is consequently stigmatized and perceived as a form of infection to be eradicated, revealing a racist structure that denies the colonized both identity and dignity. This educational violence is reinforced by military practices that function not only as instruments of repression but also as tools of psychological and cultural intimidation. The dehumanizing use of terms such as "fellagas" [outlaws] illustrates how language itself becomes a weapon, echoing Fanon's analysis of cultural alienation, in which the colonized subject is fixed within a discourse that negates their humanity (Fanon 18). *L'Olivier de Makouda*, thus, exposes violence at interconnected levels—physical, institutional, and cultural—demonstrating how colonial domination operates simultaneously on bodies, minds, and symbolic structures.

Decolonization as a Violent Process

Within the oppression of the colonizer, Algerians keep on living according to their customs and traditions, and many French anti-colonialists oppose the imposition of colonial authority through invisible but persistent acts of resistance. This means that violence is not without opposition. Acts of rebellion, although discreet, reflect a continual struggle against a domination that dehumanizes the Other. The author mentions clearly "les fellaghas", a pejorative term used by the colonial authorities

to designate the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) fighters. This demonstrates that the context of the story is set in the middle of the national liberation war (1954-1962), when Algerians were fighting for their independence against the French colonial presence. The allusion to the infiltration of the school and the subversive plan of international communism reflects the paranoia of the French colonial system in the face of an Algerian that it can no longer control. This reveals the fear of the political awakening of the colonized.

Several characters, including Buono himself, the pupils, the villagers and some French anti-colonialists, refuse colonial order. Buono, the teacher and the narrator of the book, expresses in several passages his disagreement with colonial authorities. He, for instance, expresses his revolutionist discourse in the following sentence: "Révolté, je courus vers le garage occupé par un infirmier militaire… ou les articles de sport étaient groupés … mais renonçai strictement à cette vaine demarche" (19) [Revolted, I ran towards the garage occupied by a military nurse…where the sporting goods were grouped together…but strictly abandoned this futile approach]. On their part, the pupils, through their ironic and sarcastic behavior toward the French settlers, refuse assimilation. Buono maintains, "Enervé, les enfants s'agitaient. Les visages durcis, ils menaçaient naïvement de leurs petits poings un ennemi lointain. Un léger grondement courut le long des murs centenaires de la classe" (5) [The children were agitated, their faces hardened, and they naively shook their little fists at a distant enemy. A low growl ran along the century-old walls of the classroom].

Throughout *L'Oliver de Makouda*, Buono expresses clearly his support to the Algerian cause. He recognizes the coming sufferings but affirms his moral and political solidarity with the oppressed. It is, for him, a matter of taking a position against colonial injustice in favor of the combat for liberty. He asserts, "Pauvre Algérie, que de tourments tu vas subir encore pour ta liberté!... Et nous? Ce sera dur, mais notre place est du coté des opprimés" (19) [Poor Algeria, how much more torment you will endure for your freedom!... And us? It will be hard, but our place is on the side of the oppressed]. Revolution is also intellectual and political, according to Buono. This is mainly expressed by the students whose slogans are quite but effective: "Juste le temps pour que les murs des couloirs soient barbouliés des slogans indépendantistes" (18) [Just enough time for the walls of the corridors to be daubed with pre-independence slogans]. The author evokes also Maurice Audin, who is a real and emblematic figure of the Algerian cause dead under torture due to his engagement. Audin adds a humanistic dimension to the revolution.

In the ensuing chapters of the book, the writer focuses on the solidarity between the members of the Communist Party under the leadership of some

Europeans, including Buono himself, and the Algerian revolutionists from 1956 to 1962. He calls to mind the complexity of their struggle, characterized by imprisonment, torture and assassination. During his years of imprisonment in "Barberous" [Barbarossa] and "La Maison Carrée" [The Square House], the French author recognizes daily signs of brotherhood that illustrate the revolution of the mind. He refers to Serge, a co-prisoner who reads for him. He also mentions Lordi, a Marxist camp, which becomes a space of learning and intellectual exchanges. In the domineering places, the revolutionists reinvent an educative revolution: Courses in philosophy, science and economy are offered by renowned professors in an effort to reconstruct the mind despite oppression. In this sense, Fanon (1994) argues that the colonized intellectual must realize that the fight for national existence is the fight against colonialism in all its forms, including the cultural and intellectual plane:

> The national Algerian culture is taking on form and content as the battles are being fought out, in prisons, under the guillotine, and in every French outpost which is captured or destroyed. We must not be content with delving into the past of the people in order to find coherent elements which will counterpart colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. (Fanon 233)

Returning to the school, the author is welcomed as a hero. The children call him "Moudjahed" [freedom fighter] and applaud his presence (53). The link between the French teacher and his Algerian pupils becomes a symbol of collective revolution, and education serves as a force of dignity. Amar, one of his learners, reminds him that he is at home there among them: "Tu es chez toi ici" (54) [You are at home here]. These individual and collective transformations incarnate a profound cultural and intellectual resistance face to colonial oppression. Within this solidarity, a third space of interculturality, hybridity and ambivalence comes into being.

Interculturality, Hybridity and Ambivalence in *L'Olivier de Makouda*:

Interculturality designates interaction between two distinct cultures or more, notably through human relations, linguistic exchanges and education. *L'Olivier de Makouda*, a story of fellowship, education and political engagement under colonialism, is charged by elements of interculturality. In chapter three entitled "L'Olivier de Makouda", the contact between the Algerian and French cultures is symbolized by the olive tree which is employed as a bridge between colonial education and the agricultural traditions of the region. Buono refers to Sully, a French man, who said that "la figue et l'olive sont les deux mamelles de la Kabylie"

(6) [the fig and the olive are the two breasts of Kabylia]. The school is presented as a space of intercultural shift controlled by French authorities but reappropriated by the Kabyle pupils, who seem attentive to all the details concerning the harvest, and the marketing of olive fruit and olive oil. The French author mentions also some local words like "Kintal" [=one hundred kilogram], "fissa" [quickly], "benessiassa" [slowly] that the pupils use while negotiating the marketing of their collect. This indicates that the French teacher who is set there to teach the pupils the French language is put in direct contact with the local culture, taking sometimes the position of the learner from his pupils. This type of "interculturality" can be read through Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) notion of "contact zone", designating spaces where cultures enter in contact in asymmetric but fertile manner.

The subsequent chapters of the book are full of examples of cultural exchange resulted mainly from the constant contact between Algerian warriors and their French allies, ending with hybrid cultures and identities. In this context, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that

> the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the 'in-between' space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture." (Bhabha 38)

This hybridity is exemplified in Chapter Seventeen of *L'Olivier de Makouda*, entitled "Bagra Spaniouli" (A Spanish Cow), where the French writer notes, "Je parlais l'arabe "Kimal Bagra Spaniouli (comme une vache espagnole)" (47) [I speak Arabic like a Spanish cow]. This sentence illustrates a funny and self-ironic linguistic hybridity, meaning that the French teacher living in Algeria speaks a clumsy Arabic, which is a mixture between the local dialect and the French language.

Conversely, the Algerians do their best to communicate with the French language, which is the only tool for them to learn about the ideological and political strategies that will get them out of their misery and lead them to liberty. At school, the pupils interact fluently with their French teacher and are eager to study seriously: " Les élèves ne posaient jamais le moindre problème de discipline et travaillent avec le plus grand sérieux" […] habitués à parler sans aucune crainte" (1-4) [the pupils never posed the slightest problem of discipline and worked with the greatest seriousness […] accustomed to speaking without fear]. Leading his communist

combat against the French colonizer, the author makes reference to some Algerian names, like Bachir, Sadek and Larbi, good partisans of the Algerian Communist Party, speaking and writing correctly the French language. These men are described as intelligent and brave intellectual participants in the war. He observes, "J'aimais tous ces copains engagés depuis le début de cette guerre dans une lutte impitoyable, mais Sadek était pour moi différent. Chaque fois, je trouvais auprès de cette force de la nature, venue des rudes montagnes kabyles, un réconfort et un apaisement" (67). [I loved all those friends who had been engaged in a merciless struggle since the beginning of this war, but Sadek was different for me. Each time, I found comfort and relief in this force of nature, who came from the harsh Kabyle mountains].

This miscegenation reflects a colonial linguistic fragmentation, where the language of the colonizer becomes the dominating language and a tool of resistance and survival. According to Bhabha (1994), it is a form of soft resistance; he perceives that "hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (Bhabha 112). Yet, "hybridity" reproduces "ambivalence", a concept central to Bhabha and Fanon, referring to a double attitude towards the colonizer and reflecting both admiration and hatred, imitation and rejection. For Fanon, this ambivalence is psychologically destructive for the colonized who seeks to resemble the colonizer while hating him. For Bhabha, it is a strategy of subversion and dislocation of colonial discourse, which "displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (Bhabha 112).

The Civilizing Mission of the Colonizer in *L'Olivier de Makouda*: Representation and Power

Beyond the cultural interaction between certain anti-colonial French figures and Algerian people in *L'olivier de Makouda*, the façade of the civilizing mission with its paternalistic discourse is uncloaked. In fact, the French colonial project of civilization in Algeria had the role of educating the colonized to dominate it historically and morally through the imposition of the French language at school, its culture and its institutions. This mission is based on implicit or explicit racial hierarchy, postulating the superiority of the western civilization. The profession of the author and his partisan activities are key indicators of this operation. He is there to awaken the political, ideological and intellectual consciousness of some Algerians by opening their minds to the occidental civilization. This, in his view, is the only way that can lead to their independence. In fact, the whole book focuses on the role of the Communist Party in the independence of Algeria, referring to important

European Marxist figures and nations. The French language is the only tool between their hands to reach this political maturity, in his view. This reinforces Said's (1978) idea that the French and British saw the Orient as something to be directed, revised, controlled and brought into light with Western norms of order and rationality. In fact, the Westerners, in Said's view, consider the eastern populations as "a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (Said 35).

In Chapter Nine, entitled "Un peuple français pour l'éternité" (A French people for eterniy), Buono evokes explicitly the colonial civilizing mission, referring to the subject of the Europeans of Algeria of whom "les plus humbles même clamaient bien haut la nécessité de 'poursuivre l'Œuvre Civilisatrice' dans ce pays que 'les Arabes -livrés à eux-mêmes laisseraient redevenir un désert…'" (20) [even the most humble loudly proclaimed the necessity of 'continuing the Civilizing Work' in this country that the Arabs -left to their own devices- would let become a desert again…'"]. The expression "Oeuvre Civilisatrice", put between inverted commas in this quotation, is an ironic or distanced citation, through which the French narrator and teacher wants to detach himself from this colonial justification. The idea that the Arabs would let this country become a desert again reflects a paternalistic and racist vision, denying all capacity of autonomy for Algerians. We find here a classical rhetoric that the colonized is seen as immature and incapable of ruling himself by himself, and the White Man , paradoxically by the very fact of his maturity, was there to help the child grow into maturity; the oriental was the child, the European the adult. "Being a White Man, in short, was a very concrete manner of being-in-the -world, a way of taking hold of reality, language and thought" (Said 227).

Despite his being against the concept of the civilizing mission, Buono, in several passages, presents himself as a guide for the Algerians in their revolution. In chapter twenty two, for instance, he is requested to help The Algerian Communist Party in everything related to text and lettering: "Tu es rodé pour les addresses à rédiger" (63) [You are familiar with writing addresses]. "Il faut que tu écrives quelque chose là-dessus" (64) [You need to write something about this]. In these passages, Buono works as a bridge between the Algerian militants and the French supports, which is essential to legitimate the revolution at the international level. He, all along the book, teaches, protects, instructs, orients and structures; he is a secret but central guide who makes the struggle effective. He is, then, not only a precious help but a necessary guide without whom the Algerian youth, being novice, would be more vulnerable.

Conclusion

The analysis of Christian Buono's *L'Olivier de Makouda* reveals that it is a hybrid story combining personal memory, historical testimony and political engagement. It is among the rare historical documents that expose the French anti-colonial engagement as both a political support for the colonized Algeria and a form of human and intercultural meeting. Thus, Buono's book can be situated in the memorial and militant tradition that includes the works tackling the historical, cultural and identity tensions during colonial Algeria. Through a narration imbued with realism and humanism, Buono sketches the portrait of an atypical French settler, torn between his role as a European on Algerian soil and his sincere attachment to the local population. The characters, like the author, oscillate between two worlds: one is colonial and domineering and the other is Algerian in resistance. As such, ambivalence is also at the heart of the narrative, reflecting Buono as both a supporter for the Algerian cause and as an enlightening guide and paternalistic figure who inherited some aspects of the colonial system.

The book's ambivalent position is manifested mainly in relation to colonial discourse. While it clearly deplores French domination in Algeria and looks for a space of intercultural cohesion, it nonetheless remains characterized by understated residues of the civilizing mission that inform the narrator's gaze and his understanding of Algerian society. The study demonstrates that the novel both disrupts and inadvertently extends colonial structures of tutelage, revealing the extent to which metropolitan anti-colonial engagement could still be framed by inherited hierarchies and paternalistic assumptions. By bringing these tensions to light, the article offers a new contribution to the study of French anti-colonial actors, illustrating that solidarity, despite its ethical aspirations, often unfolded within an asymmetrical "third space" marked by negotiation, ambivalence, and the persistence of unequal power relations.

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The Voyage to Eternal Love in Selected Works by Edmund Spenser

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Abstract This article explores eternal love in selected poetic works by Edmund Spenser, namely, *The Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Fowre Hymnes*. The article opens with an introduction about Spenser as a central figure of Elizabethan poetry, together with the most significant literary works written by this leading poet. Following that, the concept of eternal love and its distinct forms are given and elucidated. Four forms of eternal love are identified in Spenser's aforementioned works. The researcher uses the analytical approach to analyze and discuss poems revealing eternal love. By thoroughly analyzing selected stanzas and poems of the three works central to this study, she reaches the conclusion that for love to be immortal in Spenser's viewpoint, it must include specific defining characteristics. According to the present study, eternal love includes maternal love, romantic love with genuine intentions and true feelings, love built on honest friendship relations, and divine love. These four forms of love, the researcher concludes, can be elevated to the supreme status of immortality.

Keywords eternal love; Spenser; *Amoretti*; *Fowre Hymnes*; *the Faerie Queene*

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Introduction

Edmund Spenser (1532-1599) was widely recognized as a prominent figure of Elizabethan poetry. He was famous for *The Faerie Queene*, an epic poem mainly written for Queen Elizabeth I. The poem reflects Spenser's skillful use of rich language, complex allegory, and innovative form of the Spenserian stanza. With this great work, Spenser accomplished the central poem of the Elizabethan era, a poem

that is regarded as one of the longest and most famous poems ever written in the English language. As Fadley observes,

> In scope, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is the longest poem in the English language. Its boundaries are limited only by the imagination. It is the world of Faerie rather than of historical reality. Yet this Faerieland is reflective of Britain's greatness and potential. Spenser's epic is also an allegory. Each allegorical hero explores part of the human experience. (7-8)

An allegorical work, the poem traces the pursuits of several knights in the courtyard of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, who stands for Queen Elizabeth I herself. The plan of *The Faerie Queene* was for twelve books narrating the tales of twelve knights with twelve virtues that they symbolize. However, only six of the planned twelve books were completed, dealing with the virtues of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy, and describing the heroic deeds of the noble knights who embody such virtues.

Other famous works written by Spenser are *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558), *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), *Complaints* (1591), *Axiochus* (1592), *Amoretti and Epithalamion (*1595), *Astrophel: A Pastorall Elegy upon the Death of the Most Noble and Valorous Knight, Sir Philip Sidney* (1595), *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), *Fowre Hymnes* (1596), *Prothalamion* (1596), and *Babel, Empress of the East* (1599). Spenser's influence on the poets of his own day and even on those who came after him was so immense that he was described by the English critic and essayist Charles Lamb as "the poet's poet," Kolanchery and Mathew writes, showing how the great poet during his time

> influenced a large number of verse writers of more or less power [...]Milton paid him warm tribute; and even Pope, whose poetic faculty is different in kind from that of the Elizabethans, admitted to his compelling magic. The indebtedness of Keats and Tennyson is easily comprehensible [...]The younger generation of the romantics adopted his stanza for their powerful expression. Thus, we see that he is the 'Poets' poet' in the true sense. (429)

In light of this introduction about Spenser as a leading literary figure and premier craftsman, this article investigates eternal love in three of his literary works: *The Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Fowre Hymnes*.

The Concept of Eternal Love in Spenser's Poetry

For Spenser, eternal love exceeds the literal meaning of romantic love. It reflects the most supreme love relationships. For love to be eternal, it must combine all virtues and qualities of unconditional love. In this sense, eternal love can include many forms, such as maternal love and love springing from enduring friendships that are based on endurance and sacrifice. The third form is romantic love, which connects a man and a woman in an honest relationship built on trust, truthful feelings, and genuine intentions. Finally, the purest form of eternal love, one thinks, is divine love that seeks sacred beauty and heavenly love, connecting the created and the Creator in an everlasting form of love. According to the researcher's point of view, the virtuous nature of these forms of love raises them to the position of eternity. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this paper is to trace these four forms of eternal love in Spenser's poetry, with particular reference to *The Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Fowre Hymnes*.

Maternal Love

Maternal love refers to the strong bond between a mother and her child, reflecting the first emotion the person experiences in life. According to Klonschinski and Kühler, this supreme form of love is "unconditional, natural, caring, and eternal" (198). The tender passion of motherly love is beautifully depicted in Spenser's poetry, specifically in *The Faerie Queene.* In Book I, the poet vividly portrays how the mother, pushed by her maternal love, snatches her own baby from the Dragon to protect him. Then, we are told by Spenser that the beast was defeated and killed by the Red-Crosse Knight who embodies the virtue of holiness in the poem. Describing the mother's great worries and warm emotions, Spenser narrates,

> One mother, when as her foolehardie chyld
> Did come too neare, and with his talants play,
> Halfe dead through feare, her litle babe reuyld,
> And to her gossips gan in counsell say;
> How can I tell, but that his talants may
> Yet scratch my sonne, or rend his tender hand? (*Complete Works* 75)

As the above lines reveal, the mother is very frightened. She holds her son very tightly so that the beast does not harm him. She is afraid that the dragon might cut her baby with its sharp scratches or tear his soft skin and 'tender hand'. The lines

reflect maternal love and show how Spenser expertly conveys the tender affection that connects the mother to her child.

Another example of maternal love can also be noted in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* where Spenser demonstrates how Agape passionately loves her three sons: Priamond, Dyamond, and Triamond, and wishes to see them safe and protected, particularly when she discovers their fondness of wars and battles. Accordingly, she begins to get worried about her maturing sons and their safety. Spenser states, "They louedarmes, and knighthood did ensew, / Seeking aduentures, where they anie knew. / Which when their mother saw, she gan to dout / Their safetie, least by searching daungers new, / And rash prouoking perils all about, / Their days mote be abridged through their corage stout" (*Complete Works* 240). As shown in the lines, the mother's deep love for her children, especially when she realizes their warlike inclinations, makes her get upset about their protection, fearing that the participation in the battlefield may force the adventurous sons to embark on 'new' and unfamiliar 'dangers' and rashly subject themselves to 'risks' and threats all around. The courageous and heroic actions of the three sons, the mother fearfully predicts, might lead to their death, and shorten their lives. Thus, the mother's worries know no bounds.

To add to the mother's unease and distress, she is told that her three sons are fated to have short lives. However, she goes to the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who, according to the poem, decide when all humans will die. The Fates tells her that they do not have the power to make someone's life longer. However, the mother persuades them to permit that the spirit of the first killed son passes into the body of his next brother, the next son will then pass both spirits onto the third son, "so that in him all three souls should survive" (Erskine 847). The mother goes back home, telling her sons nothing of what she has known about their destinies. The caring mother escapes no chance to advise her sons to take care of themselves and to continue loving and caring for each other dearly, in all circumstances and situations. As Spenser tells us, "She warned them to tend their safeties well, / And loue each other deare, what euer them befell" (*Complete Works* 241). As evidenced by the two examples of maternal love given above, the love shown by the mother for her offspring is indeed "priceless, unconditional and is something that never dies. She is a person that you can count on, and her care is like a beautiful rose that shall never perish" (Manap et al.12).

Love Built on Honest Friendship Relationships

The second form of eternal love is that love based on friendship relationships

that are characterized by shared loyalty, mutual support, and a sense of duty and commitment. "According to Spenser," Helfield points out, "friendship can exist only between good men" (110). This is exactly what Spenser affirms in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, "For vertues onely sake, which doth beget / True loue and faithfull friendship" (*Complete Works* 262). True friends are distinguished by their noble values, good qualities, ethical thinking, respect, selflessness, and common quests. Thus, love among true companions is promoted to the position of eternal love.

Examples of true friendship are given by Spenser throughout *The Faerie Queene* such as the friendship between Britomart, the virtuous female knight, and Amoret, the beautiful girl who represents chastity in the poem. The relationship between these two virtuous figures is based on mutual respect, support, and sacrifice. Britomart meets Amoret during the latter's search for her beloved Artegall. Amoret is caught captive by the sorcerer Busirane. Without hesitation, Britomart interferes and releases her friend. Britomart also fights for Amoret in the court, and guards her kindly when they travel together in the forest. These acts of loyalty deepen the bond between the two friends.

While Amoret feels grateful for what Britomart has done for her, the virtuous knight, Britomart, feels a sense of commitment and duty towards her friend. A genuine connection is shared between the two girls. They are similar in many things, sharing with each other their love affairs, wishes, worries, and adventures, trusting each other about their passions and lamenting their troubles and distresses. They are so intimate that every night, Spenser writes, "they of their loues did treat, / And hard aduentures twixt themselues alone, / That each the other gan with passion great, / And griefull pittie priuately bemone" (*Complete Works* 231). In turn, Amoret appreciates Britomart's fidelity, strength, honesty, and firm commitment to her goals. Britomart and Amoret's shared virtues and noble purposes qualify them to be devoted friends worthy of eternal love that connects them forever.

Other pairs of perfect friends in *The Faerie Queene* are the knights Cambell and Triamond, and their sisters Cambina and Canacee. Cambell and Triamond have started as fierce rivals, but they have finally turned into intimate friends, especially when Triamond marries Cambell's sister, Cambina who soon becomes a close friend to Canacee, Triamond's sister. The four friends share the moral code of friendship as they remain loyal, supportive, and committed to one another. Unified by the connections of honest camaraderie, these noble friends have given an unparalleled example of eternal love, as they spent their days "In perfect loue, deuoide of hatefull strife, / Allide with bands of mutuall couplement;" Spenser writes, elucidating,

For Triamond had Canacee to wife,
With whom he ledd a long and happie life;
And Cambel tooke Cambina to his fere,
The which as life were each to other liefe.
So all alike did loue, and loued were,
That since their days such louers were not found elsewhere.
(*Complete Works* 247)

Britomart, Amoret, Cambell, Triamond, Cambina, and Canacee exemplify perfect friendship, which has strongly sustained their voyage to eternal love.

Romantic Love with True Feelings and Genuine Intentions

The third form of eternal love is noble love that connects two lovers, a male and a female, in a romantic relationship built on trust and truthful feelings. This form of love is based on virtue, devotion, and noble intents, inspiring both lovers to be staunch and sincere towards each other so that their love can flourish, resist challenges, prove to be genuine, and consequently reach the stage of eternity. Perhaps the best examples of this form of noble love in Spenser's poetry occur in the sequence of sonnets entitled *Amoretti*, published as part of the collection *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595), in which Spenser describes his courtship of his beloved, Elizabeth Boyle, the lady he later married and celebrated his marriage to in *Epithalamion*. The poems in *Amoretti* depict the beloved as an idealized woman characterized by beauty and virtue. On the other hand, the speaker is portrayed as a devoted lover who struggles hard to reach the heart of his beloved, and finally rejoices at winning her heart and love. Outstanding among the eighty-nine sonnets of *Amoretti* is 'Sonnet 75: One Day I Wrote Her Name upon the Strand'.

Immortal love is the major theme of 'Sonnet 75'. It is a Spenserian sonnet consisting of four stanzas divided into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The poem is written in iambic pentameter, rhyming abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee. Throughout the first stanza, the speaker tries to prove his true love to his beloved by writing her name in the sand. Each time he attempts to write the name, the waves come and remove it. He repeats this action many times, but all his attempts prove to be useless. As Spenser recounts, "One day I wrote her name upon the strand, / But came the waves and washed it away: / Again I wrote it with a second hand, / But came the tide, and made my pains his prey" (*Amoretti and Epithalamion* 98).

Very interesting is the conversation between the two lovers in the second

and third stanzas. In the second stanza, the beloved criticizes her lover's futile attempts to make something mortal live forever, adding that she, as a human being, will die one day, and, just as the waves erase her name from the shore, everything about her will fade and disappear. "Vain man, said she, that doest in vain assay / A mortal thing so to immortalize, / For I myself shall like to this decay, / And eek my name be wiped out likewise" (Spenser, *Amoretti and Epithalamion* 98).

'That's not true', the speaker confidently replies in the third stanza, commenting on the speech of his beloved and asserting that he knows well how to make their love live forever. Spenser writes,

> Not so (quoth I), let baser things devise
> To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
> My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
> And in the heavens write your glorious name. (*Amoretti and Epithalamion* 98)

He tells her that inferior objects fade away and 'die in dust', but she, unlike these lower things, is worthy of living forever through recognition and fame. He states that he will write about her exceptional beauty and remarkable virtues in his poetry and their love story will remain forever, remembered and narrated by future generations. The speaker then assures his lady that he will write her name in heaven, therefore transforming her name from earth, a mortal place, to heaven, an immortal site, "Where whenas Death shall all the world subdue, / Our love shall live, and later life renew" (Spenser *Amoretti and Epithalamion* 98). Even death that has the power to overcome the entire world will not be able to conquer their love, the speaker asserts, simply because their love story has become glorious and eternal due to the virtues it bears and the goodness it possesses. This is romantic love that is marked with true feelings and genuine intentions, completely different from lustful purposes or dishonest pursuits which Spenser refers to in the poem as those "baser things" *(Amoretti and Epithalamion* 98). What the poet here calls for is "pure and true love which is full of true emotions with pleasant feelings between real human beings on the sublunary world," Wang & Li remarks, "a complexity being both earthly and sacred, aiming at marriage, which possesses a holy nature" (30). Thus, for Spenser, true romantic love ends or at least aims at marriage, because both lovers have truthful feelings and noble intentions towards each other. They perceive their relationship as a sacred bond that will finally lead to their marriage. It is worth noting that "Spenser, as Reed W. Dasenbrock notes, was the first poet who introduced the new and sacred concept of marriage into the traditional and

established concept of love" (qtd. in Quaddawi 87).

Another significant example of romantic love in Spenser's *Amoretti* is "Sonnet 81" in which the poet explores the external and internal. beauty of his beloved. Mainly addressed to Elizabeth Boyle, Spenser's inspirer in the *Amoretti and Epithalamion* collection, the sonnet explores themes of love, beauty, and the inspiration of the beloved. Technically speaking, the poem is a Spenserian sonnet consisting of fourteen lines predominantly written in iambic pentameter and distributed into three quatrains and a couplet that concludes the poems. It is Similar to "Sonnet 75," discussed earlier, in structure, rhythm, and meter. It follows the same rhyme scheme of abab bcbc cdcd ee that characterizes the Spenserian sonnet, as has also been noted in 'Sonnet 75'.

The first stanza of "Sonnet 81" reveals the physical beauty of the beloved, portraying her attractiveness with vivid language and imagery. Spenser writes,

> Fair is my love, when her fair golden hears
> with the loose wind the waving chance to mark:
> fair when the rose in her red cheeks appears,
> or in her eyes the fire of love does spark. (*Amoretti and Epithalamion* 102)

The speaker romantically describes his lady's beautiful attributes, praising her golden hair that freely dances with the wind, referring to her blush that increases the allure of her cheeks like a delicate flower. As for her eyes, they are amazingly sparkling, intensely reflecting the burning passion of love. Significantly, the word "fair" is repeated three times in the above stanza, and seven times in the poem as a whole. The repetition of this word, which means beautiful, reflects the speaker's overwhelming sense of love and admiration of the captivating features of his beloved who is externally and internally beautiful. The sense of the lady's beauty is further revealed by the highly evocative poetic techniques Spenser uses in the lines. For example, the poet employs many examples of metaphor to reveal the beauty of his beloved. For instance, in the first two lines, he compares the lady's hair to golden threads that rhythmically move forwards and backwards, dancing with the wind, accordingly suggesting an image of personification as well. The hair's free move with the wind expressively reveals the spontaneity of love. Flowing freely and unreservedly, the hair reflects the nature of love itself that is not governed by any set of laws or expectations. Likewise, in the third line, the poet, employing metaphor again, describes how his beloved is also "fair" and attractive "when the rose in her red cheeks appears," suggesting the liveliness and freshness of youth characterizing

the beloved. A third example of metaphor occurs in the last line of the first stanza where the poet mentions that "the fire of love does spark" in the eyes of his beloved, depicting the burning emotional passion that is intensively growing inside the heart of the beloved, and also inside the heart of the speaker who is totally captivated by the extraordinary beauty of his lady.

In genuine romantic love, the external beauty of the beloved often interweaves magnificently with inner beauty, enriching the love experience of the two lovers and highlighting the virtuous and moral essence of love. This concept is skillfully illustrated in "Sonnet 81." As Spenser states,

> But fairest she, when so she doth display
> the gate with pearls and rubies richly dight
> through which her words so wise do make their way
> to bear the message of her gentle spright. (*Amoretti and Epithalamion* 102)

According to the speaker, the most noticeable signs of his beloved's beauty are those related to her inner grace, especially her eloquence, insight, and wisdom. She becomes distinctively charming when she eloquently speaks, sharing wise words and expressions that convey insightful messages and reflect her kind nature and gentle spirit. The phrase "gate with pearls and rubies" in the second line expresses the lady's lips or mouth, where her eloquent words and wise expressions come out. This inner beauty of the speaker's beloved enhances her outer beauty, making her "fairest" and most charming when she fluently utters words, sharing her wisdom, kindness, and insights. The example of enjambment the poet uses throughout the above stanza, from the second half of the first line up to the end of the fourth one, is significant and evocative. It suggests that the speaker is so fascinated by his lady's eloquent speech that he does not want to stop describing the features of her eloquence and beauty. This is true romantic love, a form of love that acknowledges physical prettiness but at the same time promotes inner beauty and virtuous character because it is authentic, sincere, and based on noble feelings and honest intentions. To conclude this part with Peter Cummings who points out how Spenser, in 'Sonnet 81', affirms that both external and internal beauty "must continually be present to make love full," showing how the poet establishes a sort of integration between external and internal beauty,

> As he revels in the lady's hair, cheeks, eyes, breasts, and smiles, he also discovers beauty finer than this, a beauty that is "harts astonishment," in the

> fact that the words of her beautiful mouth carry "the message of her gentle sprite." The image of the lady speaking is a concentrated expression of the discovery he has made about love. Her mouth is a "gate with pearls and rubyes richly dight," and yet through it she reveals her beautiful spirit. (176)

Divine Love

Divine love is the fourth form of eternal love in Spenser's poetry. The purest of all forms, divine love is based on a sacred relationship in which love goes beyond the physical realm, seeking superior, heavenly beauty. The two sides of love are the human soul and God, the origin of all love and beauty. Accordingly, this form of eternal love is spiritual, mystical, and distinctively perfect. In Spenser's poetry, love is not confined to the secular world among humans, but it goes further than this, identifying itself with sanctified nature and divine quests.

Spenser's view of divine love goes in harmony with the philosophy of Platonism. According to Plato, "man in motion drives, desires, and struggles to achieve the culminating objects of his desire, and man's desiring always implies a desire to [...] *the good* or *absolute beauty*" (Wang & Li 28). In this sense, man, in his quest for divine love, passes the stages of earthly love till he finally reaches the higher stage of heavenly beauty, where the soul is led to the eternal love of the Creator. Man's spiritual journey towards divine love resembles climbing a ladder. He rises above earthly concerns with each step, passing various love forms. At the peak of the ladder, he arrives at the summit of eternal love, where he is connected with the divine, fulfilling his greatest longing by achieving the highest form of eternal love. Addressing the same issue, Helfield remarks,

> A man was permitted to love a woman, but he was expected to pass from love of her beauty to love of beauty in all women, and from thence to a love of universal beauty, and ultimately to a love of the Divine Beauty of God. As he passed through these different stages, much as a man passes from one rung of a ladder to the next in his upward journey, he was expected to renounce what he had formerly experienced, to leave all mundane and physical love for his original lady behind, and contemplate only the divine. (102)

Divine love features heavily in Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes*, published in 1596. This collection includes a series of four hymns that praise love and beauty: from an earthly lens in the first two hymns, *An Hymne in Honour of Love* and *An Hymne*

in Honour of Beautie, and from a heavenly insight in the third and fourth ones: *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*. "Few would dispute that The *Fowre Hymnes* are the most explicitly Neoplatonist of Spenser's poems," Sharpe argues, describing Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* "as extensive philosophical reflections on love and beauty" (73). Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* emerged as a response to a prevalent call for a return to the treatment of religious topics in poetry. About one year before the publication of the hymns, "Nicholas Breton repeats the familiar call in terms reminiscent of Spenser's comparison of earthly and heavenly love," Russell points out, quoting Breton,

> Come poets yee that fill the world with fansie
> Whose faining Muses shew but madding fits,
> Which all too soone doo fall into those frenzies,
> That are begotten by mistaking wits.
> Lay down your loves, compare your love with mine,
> And say whose virtue is the true divine. (qtd. in Russell 20)

Within the same context, Sir Philip Sidney, in his famous *Defence of Poesie*, sometimes referred to as *An Apology for Poetry*, strongly wishes that English poets would devote some of their creative power to celebrating the divine by "singing the praises of the immortal beauty and immortal goodness of God" (41).

In *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, Spenser commends divine beauty and how the contemplation of the sacred inspires everlasting love and satisfaction in the human soul. In this hymn, Spenser, in a Christian tone, with Platonism and Neoplatonism in mind, seeks to articulate with people on earth his perspective of divine love and grace as embodied by the immortal beauties and splendid images prevailing in heaven. Throughout the poem, God is shown as the perfect representation of ultimate beauty and eternal love,

> And looke at last up to that Soveraine Light,
> From whose pure beams al perfect beauty springs,
> That kindleth love in every godly spright
> Even the love of God; which loathing brings
> Of this vile world and these gay-seeming things;
> With whose sweete pleasures being so possest,
> Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest. (Spenser, *Complete Works* 605)

In the above lines, Spenser addresses his fellow humans, asking them to look upwards and contemplate the supreme light of God, the source of all beauties, pouring His divine love into every pious and righteous soul. Once connected with this divine love, the human soul will be liberated from the chains and temptations of the corrupt secular world, and man will therefore attain immortal 'rest' and dwell in eternal peace. This is the promise revealed by the last two lines of the above stanza in which Spenser states, "With whose sweete pleasures being so possest, / Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest" (*Complete Works* 605).

It is worth mentioning that apostrophe emerges as the predominant figure of speech in the above stanza where the poet speaks to humans on earth urging them to "looke at last up to that Soveraine Light." Spenser's clever use of apostrophe here attracts the attention of his addressees to look up and spiritually connect themselves to the Creator whose eternal love bestows strength upon His people, purifies their souls, heals the wounds of their weary hearts, and instills the seeds of inner ease and spiritual fulfillment into their lives to enjoy contentment and serenity forever.

Divine love finds expression in all cultures and religions throughout the ages, as seen in the literary, religious, and philosophical works of leading thinkers and writers all over the world like, for example, Jalal al-Din Rumi, a thirteenth-century prominent Islamic poet, scholar, and mystic. Rumi, much like Spenser, maintains that God's divine love is the root of all kinds of noble love. Upon rising above worldly pleasures, Rumi explains, humans grasp that every noble form of love stems from this divine source. Such a realization dissolves all obstacles, difficulties, and challenges, leading to a profound encounter with the eternal truth of divine love. According to Rumi, divine love makes the mortal immortal. Through a supreme bond with the divine, individuals are promoted to a higher position, a heavenly status they have long yearned for, simply because they have united themselves with God, the source of eternal love. Addressing man to adhere to this transformative power of divine love, Rumi writes,

> You die, you die, in this love you die
> If you die with such love; you all find the soul.
> You die, you die and you do not fear death;
> When you get out of this soil, you will become a heavenly man.
> (qtd. in Golkarian 419)

As shown in the discussion adopted above, divine love is a sacred bond that connects the created to the Creator. It allows humans to be spiritually elevated into a

heavenly position where divine love beautifies their life and enriches their existence with eternal serenity.

Conclusion

The present study has examined eternal love as depicted in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Fowre Hymnes*. The analysis of the stanzas and poems selected from the three literary works has shown that love, in order to be deemed eternal, must be both virtuous and unconditional. Eternal love has four primary forms: maternal love, romantic love with genuine intentions and sincere feelings, love built on honest friendship relationships, and divine love.

The two instances of mothers presented in Books I & 3 of *The Faerie Queene* prove that the two mothers love their children unconditionally, providing them with all kinds of care, devotion, support, and protection. Therefore, their motherly love is deservedly labeled to be virtuous and eternal. In a similar context, the honest friendship among the knights Cambell and Triamond, and their sisters Cambina and Canacee in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene* illustrates deep loyalty, commitment, and sacrifice in challenging times; theirs is a model of sincere companionship progressed into eternal love.

Furthermore, the truthful romantic emotions shared by the lover and his beloved in Spenser's 'Sonnet 75' and 'Sonnet 81', from *Amoretti,* depict the speaker's unwavering dedication to his lady and his firm belief in the power of true love and its capacity to turn the mortal into immortal. Their romantic tale is eloquently translated into beautiful verse and recorded in literary archives as an eternal symphony of love.

The most pristine and highest of all love forms, divine love, as revealed in Spenser's *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, from the collection *Fowre Hymnes*, goes beyond the limits of earthly love, connecting the human spirit to its Creator in an everlasting expression of love. In this sacred attachment, heavenly light dispels the darkness of human existence, taking it to the realm of eternal love and spiritual grace. Thus, these four forms of immortal love are characterized by their shared virtues, noble intentions, and authentic pursuits. Accordingly, they are all raised to the rank of everlasting love.

For further research on the topic of love in Spenser's poetry, one proposes exploring "Heavenly Love versus Earthly Love in Edmund Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes.*" Another exciting research focus is studying "Rejection and Acceptance of Love Pursuits in Spenser's *Amoretti*." In addition, "Brotherly Love in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*" is a significant subject. Finally, searching "The

Therapeutic Inspiration of Love in Edmund Spenser's Poetry" is a promising topic for future investigation.

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Alternative Worldview: The Naga Weretiger, an Ecolegend in *When the Millet Fields Flower*

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Abstract This paper analyses the Naga Eco-legend tekhumevi to introduce an alternative worldview through Indigenous communities' philosophy and lived experience. In the context of contemporary environmental discourses, literature plays a significant part in highlighting the affective folklore guiding ethical, environmental practices in regions that are considered ecologically rich areas. Foregrounding the vibrant tapestry of North East Indian Indigenous cultures, it aims to discuss the impact of extraordinary stories on the lives of Nagas and how they shape the community's worldviews. This includes their relationships with the non-human world and their cultural identity. The paper also discusses the vitality of the traditional ecological knowledge of the Indigenous communities and its potential to offer alternative ecological sustenance ethics through holistic worldviews. The oral tradition of the Naga community has re-emerged time and again as a potent tool in offering ecological solutions and abiding by the ethics of sustenance and co-existence. The paper discusses an example of such a tool– the Naga weretiger, or tekhumevi's colonial imagery in the Naga oral histories and lore. However, the perception of such philosophical instruments sees a change because of social and ideological shifts that may be attributed to the intervention of scientific technologies, religion, worldviews, and rationale. Similarly, the accelerated climate health crisis has shifted the focus to an inclusive approach in the 'literature of nature', especially towards the more-than-human, as an alternative to this crisis. The paper reinforces the importance of folk literature and its relevance

in the contemporary Naga community, reaffirming Indigenous cosmovision and epistemologies as spaces of resistance and representation. Avinuo Kire's "When the Millet Fields Flower" from *The Last Light of Glory Days* (2021) intersects magic, terror, community, spiritualism, and ecological ethics. The tekhumevi narrative reinstates the Naga ecological wisdom of bridging the gap and promoting a liminal existence/relationship between the Naga people and non-human entities and spirits.

Keywords Peoplestories; nativized Christianity; identity; folklore; Tekhumevi

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Introduction

The perceptions of humans towards the non-human world have been rapidly shifting because of social and ideological changes, including the intervention of scientific technologies, religion, worldviews, and rationale. However, the accelerated climate health crisis has given rise to a focus on a reversed or an alternative solution to this crisis. In this regard, the traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Indigenous communities has recently gained prominence because of its potential to offer alternative ecological sustenance ethics through holistic worldviews. Thus, the oral tradition of the Naga community has understandably re-emerged as a potent tool in offering ecological solutions and ethics of sustenance and co-existence. Avinuo Kire is a contemporary voice from Nagaland, India. Her writings offer insights into the Indigenous community of the Angami Nagas and their Life Worlds. The co-existence and co-subjectivity of the human and the non-human world is a part of the Naga worldview. Jelle JP Wouters calls it "More-than-human-Naga-world," a world that offers "alternative worlding practice and pluri-versal worlds, and human and more than human" (par. 1), it is a world of all entities including the human, non-

human, animate and inanimate spirits. Contextually, Avinuo Kire's writings are a cultural and spiritual revival of the Angami people and their stories. Her narratives intend to challenge the epistemological prisons of colonisation and Christianity responsible for dismantling Naga cultural identities, cultures, and histories.

One such work by Kire, "When the Millet Fields Flowers," revolves around Aleno and Sevizo's love story in Kohima. The author builds the narrative showcasing Aleno's inexplicable affection for a tekhumevi and explores the events leading to a human being debating her feelings towards a weretiger. The story deals with the themes of Naga spiritualism, inter-species kinship and ecological ethics of the Angami Naga tribe. The narrative portrays fluid boundaries and co-existence of the Naga world of the humans and the non-humans, moving beyond Anthropocentrism. The short story delves into a revival of the Angami Naga epistemologies through the reinvention of their eco-legend tekhumevi and the community's storytelling. Kire repositions the Naga mythical legends through her narratives by breaking down epistemological prisons of colonisation. Community narratives, including Naga Eco-legends such as Tekhumevi, represent legends or mythical stories. These mythical figures and stories are part of the Naga worldview and lifeworlds.

In a mystical tale of romance, Kire's story introduces the idea of human beings' allure towards the existence of spirits and beastly forces that can be conveniently posited as human extremities. This could also point to the idea of humans placing the non-human world at a higher degree of their capabilities. Such idolisation may also explain the fascination with the so-called superpowers depicted in the Indigenous legends and folklore. For example, Kire describes Aleno's fascination with Sevizo's "odd little habits" (Kire 122) as a product of her father's deep conditioning of her beliefs. By accepting that "the coexistence of "the laws of the physical and supernatural world" is "necessary to maintain the right balance between the two worlds" (125), her father established the need for a spiritual awareness of the physical life. In such a depiction, Kire's philosophy resonates with Stacy Alaimo's who writes that it is impossible to "separate bodies from their environments" (Alaimo 34; Nash 89). The connection also poses the question of ecology's role in determining physiology and correspondingly arising folklore analogy.

To probe the matter further, it is imperative to address the beginning of the connection between the human and the more-than-human. To begin with, it may be readily assumed that colonisation and Proselytisation overturned the worldview of the Indigenous people through the dismantling of their belief systems, cultures, rites,

and rituals, leading to the irreparable psychological colonisation of the people. The impact of Proselytisation has affected Naga worldview, thereby affecting the true essence of Naga identity. In the process of decolonizing, the animist worldviews of Indigenous communities emerged as a potential tool towards the restoration of Indigenous people's traditions and history. The revising of the traditional worldviews of Indigenous societies reveals the layered and silenced history of the community. Relationship and coexistence in indigenous Naga society arise from their animist belief systems: their worldview is embedded in "a sense of cosmic oneness, all entities are seen to share a fundamental bond, that connects them in their interaction with each other" (Deka 221). It reinvents the significance of the Indigenous philosophies and epistemologies with the potential to offer conservation ethics, co-existence, and respect between human and non-human entities.

The weretiger narratives exist in several Southeast Asian countries and the Northeastern Region of India. Portrayed as part of Indigenous mythology, narratives of humans transforming into non-humans have also been severally depicted. Notable among them is *Bhediya* (2022) based on Arunachal Pradesh folklore of 'yapum' (a virus), or a transfiguring werewolf who attempts to safeguard the Indigenous wealth of forests. However, the research paper addresses the stark distinguishing factors of the weretiger as a persona through a cultural viewpoint. In some regions and cultures, a weretiger is a shaman, a beast or a demon, while in others, it is a disease. The weretiger is a popular image among the Malays, Chinese, and Burma folklore and myths. For instance, in the Southern tribes, people were portrayed as weretigers to demonise them and repress them, whereas, among the Garos in Meghalaya, it is often considered as "tiger disease." However, it is not entirely negative because the ability to transform is associated with power, indicating a cultural significance beyond Western rationale (Brighenti 1).

Additionally, in among the Nagas, the weretiger is a persona who is not only present in the folktales but exists in the personal accounts of the community (Sutter 2). In her study, Sutter mentions that in the remote areas of Nagaland, the tigermen or weretigers still exist and continue to act as local diviners and healers. The weretiger phenomenon is built on supernatural, spiritual, and familial bonds for the Naga community. The weretiger is a persona who is often associated with a village. Therefore, they are part of society, and their existence is accepted almost naturally among the community.

Furthermore, Limajungla Jamir projects the intertwining of Naga myths, traditional beliefs, and supernatural elements in contemporary Naga writings (Jamir 359). The tekhumevi represents the intersection of human and non-human persons

through the duality of being a human and a tiger. The belief in a supernatural being possessing a human soul represents the Indigenous belief system and community experience (Jamir 362). Although the study does not carry out in-depth research on the weretiger phenomenon, it highlights the relevance of the persona, especially in cultural and community narratives.

Similarly, Lavanya Upadhya analyses the weretiger as a mythical creature and a significant cultural symbol within Naga folklore, representing the community's deep-rooted beliefs and traditions (Upadhya 740). It explores the role of the tiger as an anthropomorphic being which Easterine Kire employs as a symbol to represent marginalised Northeastern identities where the symbolism adds multiple layers to Naga histories, identites, and cultures. The study also mentions how Kire's work effectively communicates the symbiotic relationship and mutual reliance between humans and the environment through the narratives of the mythical being. Additionally, Micheal Heneise mentions the lack of familiarity with the *tekhumiavi* [*sic*] myth among the younger generations of Naga in the urban space in Nagaland. Although it was once a widespread practice and belief, it may still be traced in some areas of Nagaland" (Heneise 93). Heneise explains that an in-depth study of the human and the non-human complex will help elucidate truths behind the inextricable life links that bind humans, non-human animals, and the natural world (91). The narrative of tekhumevi is immensely important for its role in endorsing a more than human world, unveiling layers of Naga epistemologies and cultures.

Alternative Worldviews and Animism

Alternative Worldviews is a research theory emerging from the Indigenous space, designed as a counterpoint to the present knowledge systems, including Western science and technology. Alternative worldviews offer alternative realities and ecologies. Andreas Weber in *Alternative Worldviews* (2020) mentions that alternative worldviews are a space curated as an inquiry into the alternative ecology of knowledge and ecological practices. Alternative worldviews, therefore, question the very foundation of Western or scientific models of development and anthropocentric worldviews. The book *Alternative Worldviews* includes the writings of selected scholars from Northeast India exploring the Indigenous worldviews, philosophies, kinships, animism, and ecological knowledge of the community. Using the worldviews, the study proposes an eco-alterity through the alternative reality found in the traditional ecological knowledge of the community (Weber 205). The environmental knowledge embedded in the oral traditions of the Northeast community highlights the need to understand local realities by breaking down

boundaries between human-animal and nature-culture. Through eco-alterity, there is also the need to critique existing knowledge systems that promote binaries, hinder interconnectedness, and promote anthropocentric worldviews. Weber also highlights the importance of unlearning and re-learning the supremacy of colonisation. Instead, it promotes local ecological knowledge and worldviews such as animism. The present study uses Indigenous worldviews and animistic beliefs as a lens to explore the local ecological knowledge of the community.

Northeast scholars challenge epistemological prisons and binaries in their writings through their eco-alterity, holistic worldview, and philosophies. Bhagat Oinam observes how Western worldviews, especially scientific models of development, need scrutiny, especially for causing ecological imbalance, as "Ecological crises owe their origin to the kind of scientific epistemologies and development models originated from the West" (Oinam 21). He further critiques the binary between the human and the non-human world, where the human becomes the central focal, and the non-humans become instruments or means for meeting human needs. For example, in Kire's story, Ania Neiu, a pastor's wife, is seemingly more distressed at the damages caused by a weretiger than the origin or role of the weretiger in the village. Though she asks Aleno to understand that Sevizo is a weretiger, she also expects Aleno not to be carried away by the inescapable charm and power of the weretiger (Kire 121-122). Here, the author points to the conflicting belief system that Aleno and her siblings have been raised in. Aleno is expected to acknowledge the reality of a creature from a folk legend, but she is not to engage in humane interactions with him.

Furthermore, it may be argued that the uncompromising Indigenous stance of protecting the environment results from deep affective conditioning through their literature, including folklore and folk legends that have been cherished for centuries. The perpetuation of similar belief systems has only strengthened their present unapologetic conviction in the power of the natural elements blending with the supernatural, especially when it comes to protecting the environment. For instance, in her conversation with her father, Aleno understands his pride in their "ancestral heritage" as the Indigenous populace who "belong to the Tsiekra Liede Yie" who "maintain the right balance between the two worlds" (Kire 125-126). Franky Varah articulates the Tangkhul Naga worldview and its interrelatedness with the non-human world of animals and spirits. Varah establishes a more-than-human world through the projection of the Tangkhul Naga worldviews. "There are no boundaries between man [*sic*] and animals in the world of imagination and even in the real world." (Varah 251), emphasises the lack of boundary between humans and animals

because man, tiger, and spirits are brothers. In this sense, they share a common ancestry and kinship and are considered equals.

Additionally, Kaustubh Deka remarks, "Weber's emphasis on 'indigeneity' as emancipatory and animism being the 'cosmology of Indigenous peoples' – the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings" (220). Deka emphasizes an approach towards viewing the Northeast region as an "eco-cultural landscape" (220). Deka highlights the interconnection between Indigenous worldviews and Andreas Weber's idea of reciprocity among beings. Kire also hints at the fallible notion of equating nature with human progress in ecologically rich areas (*Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean*) by depicting how far-removed the Indian mainland is from the Northeast of India (Kire 122). Thus, the idea of development at the cost of ecological balance disruption is not only a suspicious notion to the Indigenous populace but also reiterates the need for mindful advancement plans. Deka and Weber's opinions resonate with the cultural depiction of Nagaland in the recent Indian web series *Paatal Lok* (2025), wherein a Naga individual is seen calling out the idea of exploitation in the name of "development, and industrialization" and says that "the last thing I will do is trust people […] who use my land and my people" for the same (Season 2 ep 5. 2:14, 2:17).

Therefore, the paper posits that Indigenous ecological ethics also offers the opportunity to reverse our current destructive relationship with nature through respect, reciprocity, and co-existence. Hence, an alternative worldview focuses on the need to acknowledge the existence of a world that is more than a human world and a world of co-existence with other beings. An alternative worldview has the potential to provide sustenance to the value of nature and the Anthropocene.

Naga Eco-legend: Fluid Boundaries and Co-existence

Kire's narrative focus is on the Indigenous worldview of the people, where the presence of modernity is seen through schools, churches, and towns; however, it is present only as a background in the narrative. The supernatural forces cohabit as part of the Naga people's worldview, becoming a natural phenomenon. In the Naga lifeworld, the weretiger persona is a part of the village community. Although he or she is considered a person who is gifted with supernatural powers, they coexist alongside humans. Sevizo is a tekhumevi, but he leads an everyday life as he belongs to a village and a community. The narrative depicts the traditional Naga worldview and their knowledge amidst the rapid modernization and the influence of colonisation, where the Nagas were still engaged in a life and worldview of co-existence with non-human beings. The co-existence portrayed in the story highlights

Indigenous ecology, replete with both positive and negative attributes and the power of non-human persons. For example, Avinuo Kire's opening lines of the short story, "She awoke in a fright, hand clutching her throat, gasping for air. Aleno could still feel the bristly touch of the enormous animal paw against her cheek, stroking her tenderly…" (Kire 113), establishes the feeling of fear, magic, and terror, further emphasising the people's belief in tekhumevi as a supernatural being. Apart from humanising the supernatural here, Kire also depicts the central notion of Aleno's inexplicable attraction to the beastly tekhumevi and her awe of the non-human spirit inhabiting a human body.

Further, the ordinary life of the people also becomes extraordinary as supernatural elements are accepted and shared as part of the ordinary world. The existence of tekhumevi in Naga society is further established when Ania Neiu asks Aleno whether she is aware that Sevizo is a tekhumevi. She mentions, "The phenomenon of becoming tekhumevi runs strong in their family. Almost all the males from his great-great-grandfather down have been known to transform their spirits into tigers" (Kire 121). The acknowledgement of intergenerational existence and inheritance of becoming tekhumevi further establishes the co-existence and fluid boundaries in the Naga worldview. Arguably, the portrayal of such details peculiar to "the fiction of nature" (Swarup) also builds the credibility of the belief system.

The weretiger is a "transpecies persona" in the Naga lore (Wouters, par. 2). It is an important mythical legend in the Naga lore currently revived as an Eco-legend in contemporary narratives. The tekhumevi is a familiar lore among the Angami community, who, in the past, coexist with the villagers. A tekhumevi is a person who shares his or her soul with the tiger, and therefore, he or she has a foot in both worlds. The tekhumevi, a folkloric legend, symbolises the Naga Animist belief and spiritualism. He is a mediator, a shaman who has access to the human, spirit, and animal world. In the olden days, tekhumevi was considered a seer (themoumia) who could foresee the future, pronounce about the future, communicate with the spirit and nature, and heal people from diseases. However, tekhumevi became a taboo narrative after the rapid spread of Christianity among the Nagas. The tekhumevi stories that were the rich repository of the Naga folkloric legend were shunned among the Nagas as the tekhumevi was referred to by the colonisers as "lycanthropy, a mental disorder in which the patient thinks that he is an animal" (Wouters par. 7).

In pre-colonial times, the Nagas were pagans who revered nature, including the sky, earth, rivers, rocks, and forests. Additionally, every cultural or traditional activities or rituals are performed in consultation and giving offerings or respect

to the spirit and animal world. Temsula Ao observes Naga identity is linked to the cycles of nature, land, and forests, including trees, rivers, mountains, etc., are not inanimate objects, and non-human animals and spirits are considered kin to humans (3). The mountains, forests, rivers, and rocks are attributed to a being with a living soul. The Nagas were also taught that "political decision-making is the rightful prerogative of humans only, to the exclusion of ancestors, animals, and numinous beings, that for long had their sayings in the political lives of Naga humans" (Wouters par. 7). Therefore, the new worldview and belief introduced by colonisers through the New religion led to the division of the Naga world of human and non-human where boundaries were established and a new materialistic worldview is enforced upon the people. The newly manufactured colonial knowledge rapidly spread in the hills.

Avinuo's Kire narrative establishes how Indigenous ecologies are attributed with both good and evil; therefore, there is a caution not to take the Indigenous as "timeless or pure" (Deka 230). Here, tekhumevi is not a pure good persona; there are few negative attributions to the character. For instance, the tekhumevi sometimes lose control over themselves and do not have the right mind. This may lead to attacking villagers and killing herds, causing immense agricultural and economic distress in the villages (Kire 122). By introducing Sevizo as a tekhumevi in the story, the author establishes a positionality for Indigenous Naga epistemologies and ecological knowledge, further legitimising her people's and community's oral traditions and beliefs. Sevizo is a tekhumevi, meaning half human and half tiger, and he shares his soul with a tiger. Sevizo challenges the Anthropocentric worldview and breaks down binaries and boundaries between humans and animals. Existing in the oral tradition of the Angami tribe, the tekhumevi is a human, tiger, and spirit being. In this narrative, Kire introduces Sevizo as a persona representing the Naga cosmology of animism and co-existence, propagating a more-than-human world.

Micheal Henise explains, "Angami beliefs about the tekhumiavi straddle two worlds- the world of human, waking reality, and a very different seemingly-mythological one" (99). Therefore, a tekhumevi person like Sevizo belongs to both the human and the non-human world as an in-between being; he introduces and represents a liminal space and world of beings. Sevizo galvanizes the animistic worldview of the Naga community, which has a liminal boundary where humans, animals, and spirits cross each other. A similar portrayal of a blurred line between the human and non-human world and merging with the supernatural can also be found in the novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) by Shubhangi Swarup. Swarup explains treating humans as animals (*Latitudes of Longing* 155) and supernatural or

mythical creatures receiving human conviction of existence (288).

Similarly, the story portrays Sevizo as "a tall, wiry constitution and was unusually attractive with dark eyebrows and proud aquiline features" (Kire 116). The physical description of Sevizo is seemingly majestic, unreal, and, at the same time, a beastly image. In many Naga narratives, tekhumevi are often described as quite different from an ordinary human because of their unique physical traits. In the story, Sevizo takes the form of a tiger in a few episodes; for instance, first, he appears in the dream of Aleno, where he caresses her like a lover, and Aleno picturizes the image she sees as "she vividly felt, rather than saw, the colour pattern of fur. Red. Striped. Striped. Vertical" (Kire 113). When Aleno was in the forest, she felt the presence of Sevizo in the tiger form, protecting her and teasing her with grunts and howls. Consequently, the idea of Indigenous cosmology and kinship as not pure and timeless (Deka 230) is reflected when Aleno feels the threat of Sevizo when she hears him howl and grind his teeth at the forest, and this also leads her to flee away from the forest.

Micheal Heneise also mentions that Naga author Easterine Kire situates the "tekhumiavi in relation to family, and village life, and relation to larger historical imperatives" (Heneise 99). Similarly, while the villagers, including Aleno, know his tekhumevi traits, it is not a significant issue for them. From an alternative worldview perspective, the tekhumevi character of Sevizo represents the liminality of the time and cultural history of the Angami tribe.

Animism versus Nativized Christianity

The traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of Naga society executes their deep ecological knowledge through kinships, co-existence, and the ethics of living. This knowledge system has been shared through the oral storytelling tradition in Naga society. As recorded by Micheal Heneise, the tekhumevi lore has disappeared in the Naga urban space and even in many villages. Heneise describes the disappearance of tekhumevi, especially in urban areas, as primarily due to modernity and Christianity. Consequently, he mentions, "it was once a widespread practice and belief, and that it may still be traced in some areas of Nagaland" (Heneise 93). Therefore, reinventing the lore by contextualising it in contemporary narratives provides a potent way to reinterpret the lore and the legend. The tekhumevi, like Sevizo, who is from the Chakhabama Angami village, is also like the other villagers, a vendor who sells charcoal and other local vegetables at the local market in Kohima. Although many people are aware of him being a tekhumevi, there is acknowledgement and respect for him as a tekhumevi. Heneise mentions the lack

of scholarship about the tekhumevi as oral histories in the writings of colonial anthropologists such as J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills. Recently, decolonial research has led to the revival and repositioning of the Indigenous knowledge systems. In this, tekhumevi, as an oral history of the people, reappeared in Temsula Ao, Rebekka Sutter, and Micheal Heneise's observation about the weretiger. One possible reason for the disappearance is the emergence of urbanism, deforestation, and reduction of forest settlements; however, the more prominent reason is possibly the influence of colonial missionaries.

Naga Animism refers to the spiritual worldview of the Naga community, including its approach to cohabitation with the non-human world. The Naga community revered the earth, sky, stones, rivers, mountains, and beings, including animal and forest spirits. The belief reflects interdependence and co-existence between human and non-human. In the Naga context, Animism is a world that includes humans as non-human beings, and nothing is inanimate in their worldview. Animism in the Angami belief system is referred to as pfutsana, the belief that nature, including forests, rivers, mountains, and spirits, is revered. Reverence is extended to non-human spirit beings, including the weretiger. According to Harris, animism is the cosmology of indigenous people enacting reciprocity among beings. The animistic cosmos is always performative. Its members enact creation by fulfilling their due role in it (Harris 92), as for the Angami community, tekhumevi has existed for many generations. Deka remarks, “Weber’s emphasis on ‘indigeneity’ as emancipatory and animism being the ‘cosmology of Indigenous peoples – ‘the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings” (Deka 220).

The paper reiterates that the Indigenous philosophies and epistemologies coincidentally are imbibed with many ethics and wisdom of responsible use of resources, co-subjectivity, and holistic approach. Additionally, it provides multiple ecological lessons on sustainability and conservation ethics procured from the community culture and traditional practices. In support of the argument, Kire’s story also represents the clash of tradition and modernity, Christianity, and tribal faith through the tekhumevi persona and Ania Neiu, the pastor’s wife. Ania Neiu represents the new religion, and her beliefs directly contradict the old faith. She detests Sevizo, the tekhumevi, a non-Christian persona from the Naga Animist world. Ania Neiu confronts Aleno to avoid the tekhumevi because she sees him as a threat and an abomination. She describes him as a “handsome devil” (Kire 123), a constant negative imagery often used in describing the tekhumevi re-enacting the colonial view of the colonized as exotic and savage. Here Neiu’s attitude towards the tekhumevi as a destructive figure reflects the impact of Christianity

on the Naga spiritual worldview in the context of demonizing Indigenous belief systems. The tekhumevi becomes a negative persona, establishing the deteriorating interconnectedness and reciprocal relationships the Nagas share with the non-human world.

The protagonist, Aleno, is very fond of his late father and his knowledge of the Angami culture and traditions. Despite the establishment of Christianity and marrying a Christian woman, Aleno's father lived as a pagan, following the rites and rituals of the ancestors and spirits until his later conversion. Aleno learns about the supernatural world of her community through her father's shared knowledge. "Our ancestors understood the laws of the physical and supernatural world and would always execute well-thought rituals and prayers before beginning or ending any activity. This is necessary to maintain the right balance between the two worlds" (Kire 125). The narrative, thus, creates a dichotomy of the Christian versus the non-Christian among the Angami people. Ania Neiu, the church pastor's wife, represents the strong convert Naga Christian who rejects the animist beliefs and practices of the ancestral Naga society. However, Aleno contradicts her view as the tekhumevi, although strange and commanding an aura of fear, is more acceptable to her than her divided beliefs. Aleno's love for Sevizo blurs the boundary between humans and animals because she is ready to accept him despite knowing about his personality. Aleno wishes to have a life partner, a strong man like Sevizo; however, it is the fear and terror Sevizo created in the forest that makes her ponder her decision. Her dilemma represents the manipulation of Christianity that alters the spiritual and the nature and culture continuum among the Nagas.

Aleno, who hails from a family that has passed on the traditional ecological knowledge, becomes trapped between the old faith and the new religion. Aleno comes from a family whose great-grandparents and grandparents are elders who initiated agricultural rituals and practices. Her grandmother is a Tsiekra Liedepfu, who is responsible for declaring when to sow seeds or harvesting paddy in the village. Therefore, Aleno herself comes from the lineage of a Liedepfu. She also shares a strong bond with his late father, who profoundly respects her ancestors and traditional knowledge. Only in the later years of his life was he converted to Christianity when he developed a bond with an American missionary and anthropologist. By passing down the stronghold of the oral tradition to his daughter, he passed on the community's traditional knowledge. Aleno's character is symbolic of the clash between Christianity and Naga spirituality, the strong influence of Christianity in taking over the Naga psyche, and the struggle to preserve the worldview.

Aleno's deep love for Sevizo promotes ecological kinship through the romantic interests of Aleno for Sevizo. Despite being aware of him being a tekhumevi, Aleno ponders, "[w]hy should his being a Tekhumevi be considered an obstacle?" (Kire 129), her question reflects her animistic worldview, one that is shared and reciprocated, reflecting upon how "humans who follow an animistic mindset connect with the local actors (again, human and non-human) and let a story of mutual exchange unfold. From this perspective, ecological practices can never be the unfettered application of general rules; they must always be local, reciprocal, felt, and experiential. (Oinam 102). Aleno represents Naga spiritualism and the traditional worldview of the Angami community. She does not believe in the boundaries and divisions between humans, spirits, and animals, promoting a reflective and alternative worldview.

Aleno character is symbolic of Naga spiritualism as her acceptance of Sevizo and her constant chanting of the prayer "Tei, Apfu, Kidzu, Apf" (Kire 129), meaning Sky is my Father, Earth is Mother, emphasizing her view against the division of the Naga world. Along with the community's belief lies the tekhumevi persona, which represents the resilience within nature and embodies the fierce and protective aspects of the natural world. The weretiger symbolises the intertwining of the supernatural elements in the community's daily life. there are specific rules, rituals, and boundaries, but co-existence exists when approaching the weretiger. The weretiger person is synonymous with humans because while it has supernatural abilities, it also has flaws similar to humankind, dismantling the social barrier between the community and the environment.

Conclusion

The paper finds that the tekhumevi persona in the story represents a liminal ontology of co-existence between humans and non-humans, nature, spirits, and animals. The notion of tekhumevi bridges the gap between the two worlds of the Nagas through their cohabitation and transition from the human to the non-human persona. This bridge also serves to bring closer the two worlds of the scientific ecosystem and the supernatural. Kire reinvents the folk and eco legend of the tekhumevi, stating that they coexist with the villagers and propagate a multiversal world of the Nagas where humans, animals, and spirits live in a shared space and are equal. The paper establishes that the Indigenous worldview informs the readers of an alternative worldview indicating how humans can forge a new relationship with the other species built on respect, reciprocity, and interrelatedness. An alternative worlding practice advocates a human and non-human interaction and co-existence, using

Indigenous worldviews to address the deteriorating and materialistic worldview.

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The Many Meanings of Marriage: Toward a Post-Marriage Reading of the Moroccan Novel *A Country for Dying*

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Abstract This paper examines how Abdellah Taïa's novel reimagines the marriage plot through what can be called a "post-marriage" lens, where marriage no longer functions as the unquestioned telos of women's lives but as an unstable, contested, and ambivalent institution. Across the intertwined stories of Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, the novel stages marriage not as fulfillment but as dissolution, exposing how love and intimacy are inseparable from structures of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and queer refusal. Zahira dreams of marrying Iqbal as a path toward legitimacy and stability, yet her pursuit, financed by prostitution and even sorcery, unmasks the institution as both compromised and desacralized. Zannouba, in turn, articulates a queer anti-marriage critique rooted in her trans identity: marriage becomes the mechanism that erased the intimate bonds with her sisters and transformed them into "living dead" wives, a figure of dispossession that queerness unsettles by refusing both patriarchal and Western liberal scripts of womanhood. Finally, Zineb's story situates marriage within colonial entanglements, where desire, romance, and legitimacy intersect with imperial power. Her obsession with the film Andaz underscores this ambivalence: marriage in the postcolonial imaginary appears as a site of love, betrayal, and punishment, dramatizing women's inevitable sacrifice under patriarchal law. Read together, these narratives produce a critique of marriage as both fantasy and apparatus: a promise of recognition and belonging that simultaneously disciplines, commodifies, and erases. By mobilizing strategies of appropriation, refusal, and cinematic dreaming, Taïa's characters destabilize the marriage plot, revealing its persistence but also its collapse into uncertainty. In this way, the novel illuminates the contours of a "post-marriage" moment in literature and culture, where engagements, weddings, and unions remain narratively central, yet their meaning is fractured, contingent, and open to queer and postcolonial

reimagination.

Keywords Marriage; Anti Marriage; Moroccan Novel; Postcolonialism

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Introduction

Marriage is a powerful literary trope because it condenses intimacy, power, and social order into a single institution. Traditionally, marriage has not only represented personal union but also the consolidation of power, particularly under legal and Christian frameworks where women were placed under the authority of men. As Luce Irigaray notes, "the man-woman couple is always out of phase by a generation, since male and female genealogies are collapsed into a single genealogy: that of the husband" (*Sexes and Genealogies* 2). In this system, power and lineage are surrendered to the husband, while the woman's genealogy is erased, absorbed, or replaced by male ownership. Marriage also takes on multiple forms, forced, arranged, fake, polygamous, traditional and romantic, each reflecting cultural values and conflicts. Literature and film often explore these variations, exposing both the endurance of patriarchal structures and the creative ways people navigate or resist them. A striking example of these shifting dynamics is Abdellah Taïa's "A Country for Dying", which reimagines marriage not as a stable union but as a site of fantasy, disruption, and subversion.

Abdellah Taïa's work is often described as a necessary contribution to world literature, offering readers an intimate view from both inside and outside the Muslim world. A Country for Dying vividly depicts the landscapes of Muslim life and colonial history through its unique and eccentric characters. Zahira's fantasy of marrying the Sri Lankan man Iqbal drives her to extremes in her work as a prostitute; Zannouba's dream of becoming a woman is interwoven with painful memories of her youth as Aziz, including the loss of her sisters to marriages that became prisons; and Zineb's account of her hopes for love, even as she is passed from man to man, exposes the limits of romantic and marital fantasies. Together, these stories constellate around Zahira's marriage dream, only to unravel and expose the problems embedded in the marriage plot itself. The novel stitches these narratives together through a polyphonic structure in which each character takes

on the role of narrator. Memory, song, and letters intertwine to create a fluid and dreamlike narrative texture. Instead of a single chronological storyline, the novel unfolds in fragments: monologues, dialogues, letters, dreams, and film songs. These fragments resist neat closure and instead form a mosaic of voices, each disrupted by colonialism, migration, and survival. This fractured narrative design mirrors the instability of the characters' lives, marked by exile, dislocation, and fractured identities. In doing so, "A Country for Dying" rejects the coherence of a traditional plot, reflecting instead the impossibility of stability in a world shaped by colonial and patriarchal violence.

This paper examines how Abdellah Taïa's novel reimagines the marriage plot through what can be called a "post-marriage" lens, where marriage no longer functions as the unquestioned telos of women's lives but as an unstable, contested, and ambivalent institution. Across the intertwined stories of Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, the novel stages marriage not as fulfillment but as dissolution, exposing how love and intimacy are inseparable from structures of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and queer refusal. Zahira dreams of marrying Iqbal as a path toward legitimacy and stability, yet her pursuit, financed by prostitution and even sorcery, unmasks the institution as both compromised and desacralized. Zannouba, in turn, articulates a queer anti-marriage critique rooted in her trans identity: marriage becomes the mechanism that erased the intimate bonds with her sisters and transformed them into "living dead" wives, a figure of dispossession that queerness unsettles by refusing both patriarchal and Western liberal scripts of womanhood. Finally, Zineb's story situates marriage within colonial entanglements, where desire, romance, and legitimacy intersect with imperial power. Her obsession with the film Andaz underscores this ambivalence: marriage in the postcolonial imaginary appears as a site of love, betrayal, and punishment, dramatizing women's inevitable sacrifice under patriarchal law. Drawing on queer theory, feminist criticism, and scholarship on the marriage plot, this study pursues a close reading of the novel's staging of marriage as dream, as critique, and as allegory of colonial entanglement. The analysis begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks, marriage plots in literature, queer positionality in the Arab world, and the colonial reconfiguration of intimacy, before turning to the novel itself. Through Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, Taïa exposes the marriage plot as a site of both fantasy and foreclosure, ultimately reimagining postcolonial unions as tragic iterations of an enduring but destabilized form creating many meanings for the sign of marriage.

The Marriage, Forced Marriage, and Post Marriage Plot

In the tradition of the romantic novel or novels about marriage, marriage frequently functions as the narrative suture, the point at which the sequence of actions culminates in a "happily ever after." Yet this resolution is rarely immediate; it is preceded by struggles, delays, and conflicts that both threaten and ultimately prepare the nuptial moment. Such structures indicate that the literary representation of marriage is never straightforward but always layered with complexity. As Dagmar Stöferle observes, "the proof of reality that literary texts strive for in the representation of marriage does not result from the course of a marriage, but from the form in which this marriage is concluded" (*Marriage as a National Fiction: Represented Law in the Modern Novel* 3). The novel, as the paradigmatic modern genre, not only reflects but actively critiques social realities, and within this framework marriage operates less as a record of domesticity than as a metaphor, a form, and a juridical construct. It reveals the processes of social regulation, but also opens spaces of critique and transgression. As a trope, marriage discloses relations of power, privilege, and oppression; it is a figure of the double bind, irreducible to singular meaning, staging life as a site of constitutive dualities. However, marriage is also, in form, is not one. There are other forms of it such as forced marriage, fixed, traditional, and even polygamous.

One distinct form of the marriage plot in literary history is the forced marriage plot, a representation of marriage that is inherently violent because it violates a woman's freedom and autonomy. The heroines of these novels may not achieve independence in the modern, twenty-first–century sense, but their struggle for even a "semblance of power and control over [their] life, especially when it comes to a major life event such as marrying" was radical within their historical context. As Leah Grisham observes, "forced marriage plot novels depict the un-thinghood-ification, if you will, of the female consciousness; their patriarch's capitalistic drive may have alienated women's awareness of their own consciousness, but forced marriage plot novels show women reclaiming their subjective consciousness." (*Marriage as a National Fiction: Represented Law in the Modern Novel* xv) In these texts, the female figure rises against patriarchal coercion and challenges entrenched power structures. Branded as disobedient or unruly, the heroine's resistance becomes central to the narrative; whether she is ultimately successful or not, her refusal to submit transforms her into a necessary and disruptive presence. The forced marriage plot, therefore, is crucial because it critiques both patriarchal and capitalist practices by dramatizing women's resistance. It stages their movement

from obedience to autonomy, frames their disobedience as morally just, and situates their oppression within wider socio-economic systems such as slavery, industrial capitalism, and speculative finance. This type of marriage or marriage plot in literary works shows how marriage is never linear nor singular, that multiplicities and versions are possible which can even further be elucidated by the idea of "post-marriage."

The term post-marriage, much like post-structuralism or postmodernism, signals a shift to what comes after marriage, particularly if we understand marriage as the product of a long tradition of male-centered society or as a form of romantic fantasy tied to the industrial era's ideal of the "good life." In this sense, post-marriage does not mean that marriage has vanished altogether, but rather that we live in a cultural moment where marriage is no longer the unquestioned center of adult life or of fiction. As Malin May observes, "In the post-marriage era, what happens to the marriage plot? The marriage rate halved between 1991 and 2019, but fiction can't shake its fondness for the will they/won't they question, for love triangles and dilemmas."(*Man as Mindfulness App: Naoise Dolan*) In contemporary literature, then, the marriage plot persists in form, engagements, weddings, the suspense of commitment, but its meaning is hollowed out. Marriage is now only one option among many, shaped by cultural programming, miscommunication, and a preference for safety rather than fulfillment. Post-marriage fiction marks a literary and cultural era in which the once-stable resolution of marriage is destabilized, transformed from a guaranteed ending into an open question: provisional, compromised, and sometimes arbitrary.

Queer in the Arab World

The Arab world is often perceived as a traditional and conservative society, reinforced by laws that criminalize and punish queer individuals for homosexual acts. Yet, despite such prohibitions, queer culture continues to exist, often thriving in underground or secretive spaces. Many queer individuals also seek freedom by migrating to more open and liberal contexts, where they can explore their identities more fully. Within this framework, queerness carries multiple and shifting meanings, from passivity to deviance, and becomes especially legible in cultural production. Queer or queerness could mean denote homosexuality or deviation but represents a transformative openness to difference (Byun, *Beyond Gender: Catheresque Queer Harmony and possibility _Archives* 2021). As Joseph Massad observes, "literature has become in the twentieth-century Arab world a central (if not necessarily the most popular) forum through which matters of sexual desire and its connections to

civilization and its antonyms are negotiated and how matters political and economic are allegorized through appeals to the sexual and to the realm of desires" (*Desiring Arabs* 416). Arab literature thus became a key arena for negotiating sexuality and modernity. While writers such as Naguib Mahfouz dramatize these debates in subtle and undidactic ways, the larger cultural trajectory reflects the assimilation of Western sexual categories. The medieval figure of the majin (the bawdy trickster) was gradually redefined as the "deviant," and later as the "homosexual" (mithli), a juridical subject with rights, under the influence of European Orientalism and the Gay International. In this sense, queerness in Arab literature and society does not emerge as an indigenous identity but rather as a contested site shaped by Orientalist discourse, state repression, Islamist responses, and global rights-based frameworks**.** One key queer Arab writer is Abdellah Taïa who writes queer subjects and complex issues in Arab world.

Arab-Muslim queer subjectivities disrupt both nationalist and Western homonationalist discourses by unsettling fixed notions of identity, sexuality, and belonging. In Abdellah Taïa's works, read through postcolonial and queer theoretical frameworks, literature becomes a site of resistance: it contests exclusionary definitions of the nation, exposes the politics of sexuality, and imagines "experimental nations" that exist beyond rigid borders. As Tina Dransfeldt Christensen notes, "Taïa's literary play with the "self-absorbed" is not a retreat into narcissism but an enactment of what Abdelkébir Khatibi calls pensée-autre—an "other" mode of thinking about sexuality and marginality." (*Writing Queer Identities in Morocco: Abdellah Taïa and Moroccan Committed Literature* x) Writing the "self-absorbed" thus becomes a performative strategy that demands recognition for marginalized voices without assimilating them into new forms of normativity. In this way, Taïa's queer writing does not simply represent gay identity; it destabilizes the categories through which queerness is policed in both Moroccan and Western contexts, shame, monstrosity, extremism, and nationhood. By transforming silence, screams, and even violence into literary testimony, his work reimagines queer subjectivity not as conformity to dominant narratives but as a radical insistence on visibility, resistance, and the possibility of living otherwise. Queer theory or queerness, from this, is a flexible and inclusive way of thinking that resists rigid labels and embraces diversity, not only in sexuality and gender but also in cultural, social, and emotional expressions of identity (Scherr, 2011). These depictions of resistance and possibility of alterity are also present in other contexts of postcolonial society just like unions or nuptials which will be elaborated on the next section.

Postcolonial Unions

Marriage, while often framed as a sacred bond and a symbol of social unity, carries multiple layers of meaning in postcolonial societies. It functions not only as a personal or spiritual union but also as a political and cultural apparatus that disciplines women into heteronormative roles and sustains patriarchal structures, making individual empowerment secondary to marital status. In Ghana, marriage stands as the primary marker of adulthood, respectability, and gender identity, shaped by both indigenous traditions and colonial disruptions. As Dery and Bawa (2019) explain, "the concept of marriage does not only symbolize sexual relations between a biological man and a woman; it is a complex enterprise regulated by extended family structures and identical communal norms and practices" (*Agency, Social Status and Performing Marriage in Postcolonial Societies* 992). Marriage in this context is both a fantasy and a necessity. It offers women respect, belonging, and legitimacy, but simultaneously reproduces hierarchies of gender and power. While precolonial systems afforded women greater authority within community life, colonial interventions, through chieftaincy, Christianity, and heteropatriarchal morality, eroded these powers, recasting marriage as the central pathway to social recognition and respectability. Marriage, then, emerges as the key institution through which gender, adulthood, and social worth are constructed. Postcolonial analysis, in the study of Dery and Bawa, reveals how colonialism reshaped this institution by imposing monogamy, patriarchal authority, and Christian morality, thereby narrowing women's roles and freedoms. What persists is a deeply ambivalent structure: marriage as both a site of belonging and a mechanism of control, indispensable to social identity yet inextricably tied to the legacies of colonial domination. This dual meaning of marriage in postcolonial society is clearly exemplify by the works of Moroccan Leila Abouzeid.

Leila Abouzeid constructs her identity as a modern Moroccan woman by linking modernity to Islamic tradition, resisting Western secular models, and situating her feminism within Morocco's cultural and religious framework. Unlike earlier feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi, who directly attacked patriarchal states, Abouzeid develops a more strategic and context-specific form of Islamic feminism, one that underscores both the possibilities and limits of women's emancipation in Morocco. Central to this project is her representation of marriage in postcolonial society. As Eva Hunter notes, Abouzeid resists Western assumptions of superiority by portraying Zahra, the protagonist of "Year of the Elephant", as a woman who insists on her own customs yet also recognizes, with

irony, that patriarchal cruelty transcends cultural boundaries. Zahra repeatedly exposes the injustice of Moroccan family law, "[w]hen a woman is divorced, her husband owes her only '[e]xpenses for a hundred days'. Throw them out on the streets with a hundred days of expenses" (quoted from *Feminism, Islam and the Modern Moroccan Woman in the Works of Leila Abouzeid* 9) while simultaneously mocking Western modernity when Zhara hears of Dr. Christiaan Barnard abandoning his first wife she said that "[m]aybe she was a traditional woman, too." (Ibid 69) In Abouzeid's fiction, marriage emerges as a powerful symbol of betrayal, where the promises of independence give way to renewed patriarchal domination. Postcolonialism frames this critique: the anti-colonial struggle, which once promised liberation, instead entrenched new exclusions, leaving women confined by laws and customs that continue to sustain their marginality. One way to read these issues present in novels or texts like of Abouzeid's work is to closely read and pay attention to these texts as cultural work that carries meaning. A careful attention and understanding of the text if often associated to the method of close reading which the next section will discuss.

A Note on Method: Close Reading

Rather than functioning as a "finished cultural product," the novel operates as an event, a transformative encounter that unsettles the reader and reorients how the world is perceived. Figures within the text, together with formal disruptions, compel readers into an ethical confrontation with otherness. As Falcato explains Nausbaum idea in writing, style and form are never neutral vessels but themselves bear ethical significance. Ana Falcato makes a similar point in "The Ethics of Reading J. M. Coetzee", noting that "this disruptive power—with regard to both the reader's settled views and prejudices and her stance toward the literary work as a finished cultural and historical product—is precisely what makes reading literature an ethical act." (253) Reading thus demands sustained attentiveness not only to a text's thematic content but also to the stylistic and formal strategies through which meaning and history are constituted.

Close reading is not merely a scholarly tool for textual analysis but a disciplined practice of attention. Instead of reducing a work to its "main ideas" or projecting assumptions onto it, close reading demands that we attend closely to what is actually on the page, even details that might seem minor or unexpected. Such attentiveness trains us to listen more carefully, both to texts and to people. As Jane Gallop explains, "By 'reading' here, I mean of course close reading, learning to hear what's really on the page, listening closely to the other, and being willing to catch

what the other actually says, and able to hear what we didn't expect him to say." (*The Ethics of Reading* 17) In this sense, close reading resists the impulse to idolize or dismiss, instead fostering a fair and balanced engagement with others, whether in love, in conflict, or in everyday encounters. For Gallop, close reading is more than a method of literary study; it is also an ethical training ground that cultivates openness, fairness, and respect across human relationships. This paper adopts close reading as its method in examining representations of the marriage trope or plot. The next section will provide a summary of the novel "A Country for Dying", followed by a discussion of Zahira's plan to marry Iqbal, an analysis of Zannouba's marriage perspective from a queer lens, and finally an exploration of the postcolonial specter of marriage through Zineb's fantasy.

The Many Marriages in "A Country for Dying"

The novel opens with Zahira recalling her father, now deceased. She remembers his physical strength, his grief for his lost sister Zineb, his past as a soldier, and the painful decline of his health, which she helplessly witnessed. The next chapter shifts to Aziz, later as Zannouba, after undergoing gender reassignment surgery. This section reveals the roots of Aziz's transition: his longing for the intimacy and affection once given by his seven sisters, who dressed him like a girl in childhood. It also recounts his resentment over their gradual disappearance from his life, as they were sold or married off by their Algerian father. These losses propelled him toward Paris, where he eventually lived as a gay prostitute. The third chapter returns to Zahira's perspective. Now a prostitute in Paris, she dreams of marrying Iqbal, a Sri Lankan client. To achieve this, she plans to save money and consult a Moroccan sorcerer to cast a spell of attraction. She also draws inspiration from her former colleague Naima, who managed to marry an Arab man despite her past, fueling Zahira's belief that she, too, might find a future through love.

Part II begins with the aftermath of Aziz's transition into Zannouba. Here, she struggles with the tension between her new identity and the fear of losing her younger self. The chapter also reminded her again of her now veiled sisters and how she hates the idea of marriage. This culminates in an imagined dialogue with the boy she once was, recalling their admiration for actress Isabelle Adjani and her portrayals of powerful women. The following chapter in Part II returns to Zahira, recounting her brief romance with Mojtaba, an Iranian political exile. Through their affair, she is symbolically introduced to his mother by letter, as though being presented as a possible wife. The last chapter of Part II features Allal, the man Zahira first loved before leaving Morocco. In her dreams, he becomes a figure of

reproach, haunting her with reminders of her past and even wishing her death.

Part III turns to the story of Zineb, Zahira's vanished aunt. Across three chapters, her fragmented life unfolds. First, Gabriel encounters Zineb as she journeys to Indochina. This chapter establishes the dream of being together for a life time with Gabriel but at the same time abandoning his mission to venture into India as Zineb's dreams to be in that country. Next, the narrative reveals her exploitation in Morocco, where she is sold into prostitution. Finally, Zineb contemplates whether to flee to India, reinvent herself, and pursue her dreams of becoming like her idol, the Indian actress Nargis.

Marriage as Dream

Zahira is one of the novel's central characters, and much of the narrative of figures like Zannouba and Zineb is anchored in relation to her. What Zahira desires most is freedom and self-determination, which she initially experiences while working as a prostitute in Paris. That sense of independence shifts when she meets Iqbal, a young Sri Lankan man whom she dreams of marrying. As she declares, "Iqbal is still attached to me, I see it clearly, through his cock and through something else: love, I'm sure of it. But I want more, I need more: to become his wife" (36). For Zahira, Iqbal represents not only sexual compatibility but also authority, wealth, and the possibility of a legitimate future. Yet after discovering that she continues to work as a prostitute, sometimes even with his friends, Iqbal begins to distance himself. In response, Zahira turns to strategy and even sorcery and she saves money by taking on more clients in order to bring an Azilal sorcerer to Paris who could help secure Iqbal's love. After years of enjoying her single life, Zahira now imagines surrendering herself to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. She is willing to lose her autonomy in the name of love, and her first step is to bind Iqbal to her, whether through seduction or through magic.

Zahira's dream of marrying Iqbal is not merely a passing fantasy but is intensified by her friend Naïma's unlikely success story. Despite a life marked by prostitution and decline, Naïma finds redemption in love and marriage to Jaâfar, an Algerian hotelier who had long admired her. Zahira emphasizes this miracle:

> Naïma says that miracles happen. Now her family is proud of her. Naïma brought Jaâfar to Casablanca. They had a big wedding. They bought a house in El Jadida, Naïma's birthplace. But both of them love Paris. That's where they dream of going to try their luck till the very end. I don't know if I want to be like Naïma. I'll never have her luck. But I believe in her miracle. (44)

Naïma's late rescue, through forgiveness, financial stability, and ultimately love, offers a powerful counter-narrative to social shame and moral condemnation. She refuses rigid piety, embraces the dignity of her past, and shows that even a "dark path" can lead to renewal and blessing. For Zahira, Naïma becomes a living model of hope: proof that marriage and belonging are possible even for those at the margins. Inspired by her friend, Zahira clings to the possibility of achieving the same kind of miracle with Iqbal, even if his love remains uncertain.

Zahira's dream of marriage and the elaborate schemes she pursues to achieve it can be read within the broader tradition of the marriage plot in literature. In many romantic or realist novels, marriage functions as the narrative resolution, yet one that is complicated by conflict, delay, and struggle. Zahira, however, does not simply conform to this script rather she rewrites it on her own terms. Rather than passively awaiting a husband, she actively orchestrates the conditions of her desired marriage, financing it through prostitution and even plotting to enlist sorcery. In this sense, she resembles heroines of the forced marriage plot: figures branded disobedient who resist patriarchal dictates and reclaim some semblance of power over a major life event. But Zahira goes further. She does not reject marriage outright, instead, she hijacks its patriarchal logic by appropriating the right "to be married" as an act of self-determination. This destabilizes the conventional meaning of marriage, exposing it as less a natural destiny than a contested social construct. At the same time, Zahira's actions push toward what we might call a "post-marriage" moment. For her, marriage is no longer the unquestioned telos of female life but one option among many, an institution she bends, manipulates, and even desacralizes by linking it to sex work and sorcery. Her dream of marrying Iqbal thus stages marriage as an unstable, contradictory form. It is at once a site of patriarchal regulation and a field of female agency, both complicit in tradition and subversive of it. Similarly to this subversiveness is the anti-marriage sentiments of Zannouba which is to be which is to be discussed next.

Queer Anti- Marriage Sentiments

Aziz, who later becomes Zannouba , occupies one of the novel's most compelling and conflicted roles: the question of whether to be a woman is not merely accidental for him, it is the axis of his subjectivity. In the realist register of the novel, Aziz is resolute about becoming Zannouba. He longs for the physical "opening" of transition and even plans to have his penis removed to realize that self. His desire is rooted less in a theatrical fascination than in a deep, embodied memory: the way his seven sisters dressed, kissed, and transformed him as a child gave him a sense

of belonging and feminine identity that he cannot relinquish. That communal ritual is violently undone when the sisters are married off and dispersed at his thirteenth year, which for him is a rupture he experiences as both personal loss and social erasure. He cries out,

> They had shown me the path. The world destroyed it all. Brutal men stole, kidnapped my sisters. They rape them, I know, over and over. My sisters can't say anything. Now my sisters have children. But I don't want to know them. I don't want to know anything about them anymore, about their new lives. (50)

This anti-marriage sentiment is bound up with a furious rejection of patriarchal authority and marriage functions in the novel as the mechanism that scatters the intimate, ritual space that once affirmed him. Aziz's anger extends to all men, even to the level of the state, invoked through the figure of President Boumediene, because legal and social institutions enable the dispossession of his sisters. In other words, Aziz's rejection of heteronormative marriage is both an anguished response to personal loss and a political refusal: heteronormative men, and the laws that protect them, cannot have, define, or contain the women, and the self, he loves.

This conflict continues even after Aziz has fully transitioned into Zannouba. In a dreamlike confrontation with her old self, Zannouba debates Aziz about transition and identity, while she longs to dissolve and erase her former self, Aziz resists this erasure. At the heart of their argument is the question of how to live as a woman. Zannouba declares, "[y]ou're wrong, Aziz. Your sisters can't do anything for you. You know what Algerian society has turned them into: veiled women, slaves to their cowardly husbands. The living dead" (102-103). For Zannouba, her sisters' marriages symbolize the loss of agency since veiling represents both literal concealment and the figurative erasure of self in patriarchal structures. This is something that Zannouba wants to refrain to becoming. Yet Aziz counters sharply, accusing Zannouba of adopting Western stereotypes that reduce Arab women to passive victims. He even mocks her by insisting that she herself is now an Arab woman. This exchange crystallizes the novel's critique of marriage as a system of dispossession. Zannouba equates it with death-in-life, while Aziz destabilizes this view by exposing its reliance on Westernized assumptions. The tension underscores how Zannouba's transition sharpens her anti-marriage stance, but also reveals her uncertainty. In rejecting marriage as a site of female subjugation, she finds no guidance in her sisters' lives for understanding her own womanhood.

The anti-marriage sentiment voiced by Zannouba is not only a rejection of

patriarchal norms but also a distinctly queer intervention. Marriage, in her view, is a mechanism through which the male-centered order absorbs and erases the woman, particularly the Arab woman, reducing her to wife and mother. Veiling becomes the figure of this dispossession which is a concealment of self, an enforced invisibility. Yet Zannouba's critique cannot be located simply in the perspective of "woman" or "man." It emerges from her trans and queer positionality, which unsettles the binary logics through which marriage and gender are naturalized. This is the value of pensée-autre or a thinking otherwise as discussed by Khatibi and interpelates the idea of Edleman as queer without futurity since marriage is a bond that forges futurity and the sharp queer critique here signifies the cutting of the futurity by negating the possibility of marriage. Further, by speaking from a space that is neither fully male nor fully female, she exposes how marriage functions not as a universal union but as a patriarchal contract that owns, disciplines, and domesticates the female body. This queer perspective is crucial, because it disarms the very logic of normativity. In refusing the categories through which "womanhood" and "marriage" are policed, Zannouba demonstrates how queer identity destabilizes the supposed universality of the marital order. Her rejection of marriage does not merely echo feminist critiques of patriarchy rather it complicates them by showing how queerness itself opens a new site of resistance. In Taïa's writing, the trans body is not a resolution but an unresolved fracture, a refusal of fixed identity that unsettles both Arab patriarchal systems and Western liberal narratives of progress. Zannouba's rejection of marriage can be read as part of this queer literary strategy that it dismantles heteronormative unions as the foundation of social belonging and reimagines subjectivity as a site of refusal, alterity, and possibility. Queerness here does not simply stand for identity rather it becomes a mode of critique, a way of imagining life beyond the scripts of patriarchy, nation, and even gender itself.

The Allegory of Postcolonial Nuptial

The final part of the novel shifts to Zineb's story and her journey toward Indochina, a life marked by tragedy similar to that of the other characters. As a young woman, she was captured after discovering treasure in the Atlas Mountains with her father and Zahira's grandfather. To escape punishment, she entered into a domestic and sexual arrangement with Charles, the French police chief who protected her. When Charles abandoned her, Zineb joined the world of prostitution in Casablanca, where she met Gabriel, a French soldier. With him, she began to dream not of Indochina, the site of colonial violence and death, but of India which is a place of cinema, reinvention, and possibility. Zineb tests Gabriel's love by making their imagined

journey to India the proof of his devotion. He eventually consents, and she responds, "[y]ou are my love. You will be my man. We will live together." Yet beneath this declaration of intimacy lies a dynamic of negotiation and power. Zineb uses the language of romance and marriage not only to secure Gabriel's commitment but also to advance her own dream of transformation. Their relationship, therefore, oscillates between genuine affection and commodification, intimacy and strategy. Love becomes a form of leverage, a means of redirecting Gabriel's future away from colonial war and into her fantasy of self-reinvention in India. In this way, Zineb reconfigures the structures of desire, using the fantasy of union to imagine a new life and a new identity.

Zineb's fantasy of becoming a new person in India is fueled by her idolization of Nargis Dutt, the celebrated Indian actress, especially for her role in Andaz. She feels deeply connected to this film, insisting that she understands its images in a way that transforms her sense of self. When Gabriel asks what the film is about, Zineb initially reduces it to "a woman who loves two men." But for her, the real power of Andaz lies not in its narrative but in Nargis's acting, which embodies self-abandonment, intensity, and truth. As Zineb admits:

> Okay then, yes, I am [crazy]. And all the better. Since delving into the images of the movie Andaz, I've gone crazy. I'll admit it. But that's the only thing that can really save me. (970)

Her so-called "madness" becomes a creative force that which is also a refusal of imposed reality and a commitment to possibility. Yet Andaz is far from a simple romance or story of women's liberation. It is a tragic melodrama of marriage, betrayal, and female suffering. The film follows Neena, who marries her fiancé Rajan despite her lingering feelings for Dilip, a man she recently met. When Neena mistakenly told Rajan, thinking it is Dilip in the darkness, to leave because she does not love him, Rajan furiously flees with their child. In a climactic confrontation, Dilip loses control and attacks Neena, who kills him in self-defense. At her trial, Rajan testifies against her, framing her as an adulteress, and she is imprisoned. Only later does a letter from Dilip reveal that Neena truly loved her husband all along, underscoring the bitter irony of her fate. For Zineb, losing herself in this film is not only about embracing Nargis's luminous performance but also about recognizing the tragic structure of women's lives under patriarchy where marriage becomes a site of betrayal, violence, and loss. By identifying with Andaz, Zineb imagines both the possibility of reinvention and the inevitability of failure. The film dramatizes

how women, no matter their desires, are trapped in narratives of sacrifice and punishment. In this sense, Zineb's obsession with Nargis mirrors her own condition: a life shaped by violence, commodification, and the precarious hope of becoming someone new.

There is a chain of dreaming in the novel: Zahira aspires to her aunt Zineb, and Zineb in turn aspires to Nargis. Each dream expresses the desire to become a woman with agency, capable of love and reinvention, yet each ends in tragedy. Marriage, in these narratives, appears less as fulfillment than as dissolution, a structure that consumes women rather than liberates them. Whether chosen or imposed, marriage becomes the trap through which women's lives collapse into betrayal, dishonor, or commodification. What unites Zahira, Zineb, and Nargis is not simply failed love but their entanglement with men who are shaped by colonial power. Zahira's Iqbal, migrant in Paris, embodies cosmopolitan ideals filtered through colonial modernity. Zineb's Gabriel is a French soldier, a direct figure of imperial authority. Nargis's Rajan returns from London, marked by European influence. These men, whether Moroccan or Indian, are not purely local figures but products of colonial education, mobility, and cultural assimilation. Their very difference, their foreignness within the intimate sphere, transforms marriage or love into a site where colonial power is reproduced. Read this way, Andaz becomes an allegory of postcolonial unions. The film dramatizes a marriage undone by jealousy, misunderstanding, and patriarchal logic, where Neena's desires culminate not in fulfillment but in imprisonment. For Zineb, identifying with Nargis means embracing this tragic inevitability that a woman who loves, who chooses, who dreams, yet who cannot escape a structure designed to discipline her.

This reading resonates with postcolonial analyses of marriage more broadly. As Dery and Bawa argue, in Ghana and across colonized societies, marriage is not simply a sacred bond but a political and cultural apparatus that disciplines women into heteronormative roles, rendering individual empowerment secondary to marital status. Colonial interventions curtailed women's authority by institutionalizing monogamy, patriarchal authority, and Christian morality, transforming marriage into the central marker of adulthood and respectability while eroding older forms of female agency. What persists is an ambivalent institution: a fantasy of belonging that simultaneously functions as a mechanism of control. Zineb and Nargis embody this ambivalence. Their dreams of love and marriage are also dreams of recognition and legitimacy, but in each case those unions collapse into betrayal, violence, or self-loss. Meanwhile, Zahira in the novel's present time is haunted by the same possibility. Her story ends unresolved, with the question of marriage to Iqbal left

open, but the shadow of failure looms large, whether chosen or not, marriage carries the risk of erasure. Much like in Leila Abouzeid's fiction, where marriage emerges as a symbol of postcolonial betrayal, these women's stories show how anti-colonial promises of liberation often reinscribe patriarchal domination. Their entanglements with men shaped by colonial modernity reveal marriage not as the beginning of freedom but as its foreclosure—a structure that sustains the colonial-patriarchal order even as it promises intimacy, love, or belonging.

Conclusion: The Many Forms of Marriage

In Abdellah Taïa's novel, the marriage plot is not abandoned but rewritten into a post-marriage form. The marriage remains central as a dream, threat, or fantasy, yet it never culminates in stability. Instead, it becomes an unstable structure, desired, resisted, manipulated, or allegorized, through which the characters negotiate freedom, gender, and colonial power. For Zahira, marriage appears as the fantasy of legitimacy after years of independence in Paris. Her longing to wed Iqbal condenses not only love and sexual compatibility but also authority and wealth. Zahira's pursuit of this dream is anything but passive, she finances it through prostitution and even turns to sorcery to bind Iqbal's love. The very means she uses to chase marriage destabilize it, desacralizing the institution by linking it to sex work, strategy, and magic. Zahira does not reject marriage outright rather she appropriates it, bending its patriarchal logic into an act of self-determination. Yet because her desire is modeled on Naïma's "miracle marriage," it also exposes marriage as a fragile social construct and less a natural telos than a contested site where freedom and self-erasure collide.

If Zahira dreams of marriage, Aziz, later as Zannouba, comes to embody its queer refusal. Marriage is the mechanism that dispersed his sisters, erasing the intimate space of belonging that once defined his sense of self. For Aziz, heteronormative marriage is synonymous with patriarchal violence, dispossession, and state-sanctioned erasure. As Zannouba, this rejection sharpens into a queer critique. She names her sisters' veiled, married lives as a form of death-in-life, while also exposing how Western feminism stereotypes Arab women as passive. Her positionality, neither fully male nor female, unsettles the very categories through which marriage is naturalized. Zannouba's anti-marriage stance thus produces a distinctly queer post-marriage plot. It is one where marriage is not the telos of identity but the contract that must be refused in order to imagine life otherwise.

Zineb's narrative rewrites the marriage plot as an allegory of colonial entanglement. Her relationships with Charles and Gabriel use the language of

intimacy yet they function as negotiations shaped by survival, commodification, and empire. Zineb's obsession with the film Andaz intensifies this allegory. Neena's tragic marriage, destroyed by patriarchal jealousy and misunderstanding, becomes a mirror for Zineb's own condition. As she identifies with Nargis Dutt, Zineb recognizes that women who dream, love, and choose are nonetheless imprisoned within structures designed to discipline them. Read this way, Andaz and Zineb's story stage the postcolonial marriage plot that is a union haunted not by liberation but by betrayal, control, and loss.

What unites Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb is not the fulfillment of the marriage plot but its unraveling. Zahira hijacks marriage as fantasy, only to expose its instability; Zannouba rejects it outright from a queer position that disarms its heteronormative logic; Zineb allegorizes it as the site where colonial and patriarchal power converge. In each case, marriage persists as form but loses its function as resolution. It becomes, instead, a contested arena which is desired yet dangerous, imagined yet destabilized. This is the essence of the post-marriage plot which not the disappearance of marriage from literature, but its transformation into a site of contradiction, where the dream of intimacy collides with patriarchy, queerness, and colonial history. It is the many meanings and possibilities of marriage.

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The Cost of Survival: A Discursive Reading of Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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Abstract In late 2019, the world was confronted with the emergence of an unprecedented infectious disease known as COVID-19, which gradually spread globally, resulting in widespread chaos. This event garnered the attention of not only the general public but also creative and intellectual minds worldwide. As a newly re-emerged genre, pandemic literature necessitates critical investigation from various discursive perspectives. It generally focuses on themes of human suffering, the breakdown of order, heroism, and resilience, while overlooking issues associated with fear, mental health, institutional banality, and the politics that accompany them. Addressing this gap, this article examines Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) and its portrayal of the complex challenges people faced during the pandemic, along with their survival strategies. Additionally, it problematises the morality of time by questioning the so-called value of life and its homogenous acceptance in human societies, highlighting how an individual's social class often determines whether their voice is deemed worthy of attention. It also examines how power is manifested and exploited to advance agendas and ambitions at the expense of those outside its influence. The article's theoretical frameworks include Agamben's theory of bare life, Foucault's concept of biopower, and Becker's theory of the denial of death.

Keywords Covid-19; pandemic; survival strategies; death; lockdown

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Introduction

Throughout its long history of evolution, the human race has faced numerous diseases. These diseases have been classified into various categories, like pandemic, epidemic, and endemic, depending on the scale of infection. Defining epidemiologically, the pandemic is "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people" (Feinleib 93; Morens 1019). Pandemics have been a recurring phenomenon throughout human history, profoundly impacting societies, economies, and healthcare systems. Dr V. L. Rinawmi rightly remarks, "tracing back to the past till the present day, pandemics have affected human history in innumerable ways, demographically, socially, culturally, politically, financially, and biologically" (35). Among many outbreaks throughout the history of human civilisation, the Black Death (Plague) in the 14th century, the 1918 Spanish Flu, Smallpox, Cholera, HIV/AIDS and the most recent COVID-19 are notable ones owing to their scale of devastation. These outbreaks provided the necessary conditions for the invention of advanced modern medicines and highlighted societal inequalities (Huremović 10, Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 1). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, pharmaceutical companies, academic institutions, and global health organisations collaborated on a scale that had never been seen before. The collaboration paved the way for the development of vaccines, innovation in diagnostics, and the creation of public health technology infrastructures, including apps and telemedicine platforms. Apart from these, the pandemic also exposed and amplified the existing healthcare disparities, economic inequality, digital divide, vaccine apartheid (rich countries hoarded vaccines while many poorer nations waited months and years for the same), and vulnerable conditions of the marginalised section of society. Arvind M. Nawale rightly remarks, "the COVID-19 outbreak triggered a global health crisis that endangers our financial stability, economy, employment, security and social well-being. The shutdown has put people in a deplorable, unsettling situation" (45). In such a situation, it is necessary to take into account the human cost of the pandemic, like the loss of lives, anxiety, depression, economic hardships, social isolation, strain on healthcare workers and administrative bodies, erosion of trust and social cohesion. The outbreaks of various

infectious diseases have significantly impacted our societies and cultures, but little attention has been given to these phenomena (Huremović 7).

Art, since its inception, has been a powerful medium for representing different facets of human life, and the pandemic, being one of the recurring phenomena in human history, has been documented through artistic representations. Painters chose colours as their medium to depict death, pain, fear, and emotional traces of epidemics since the Middle Ages. These works of art often employed religious frameworks to interpret epidemics and pandemics as divine punishment for human sins. Artistic responses to pandemics reveal recurring themes such as divine revelation, "othering," freedom, and exile, following a four-part dramaturgical structure (Hanson and Small 880). In this modern era, numerous media, including films, paintings, graphics, and many others, attempt to capture both the hazardous and resilient aspects of such unpredictable situations. Among the various media, literature is one medium that vividly represents the various aspects of such situations and helps us to understand the human perspective. It serves multiple functions during pandemics, consoles hearts, fosters resilience, and encourages readers to maintain sanity and hope (Nawale 46). As the spread of COVID-19 increased, numerous writings in various forms of outlets, including books and magazines, appeared globally, aiming to represent the responses of ordinary people to the pandemic's uncertainty (Rinawmi 35). Writers across continents, through their works like *Companion Piece* (2022) by Ali Smith, *Delphi* (2022) by Claire Pollard, and *The Fell* (2021) by Sarah Moss, among many others, have attempted to represent the horrors of the pandemic. Similar to these global responses, Indian writers such as Shobha De, Tabish Khair, Amitav Kumar, and Namita Gokhale have sketched the complex socio-political dynamics, threats, and resilience strategies employed by people in the subcontinent during the pandemic.

Along similar lines, Namita Gokhale's twentieth book, *The Blind Matriarch* (2021), revisits the COVID-19 pandemic through the story of Matangi, a blind woman who is the matriarch of her family. The novel is unique because it mingles the upside-down world of the pandemic, where death haunts the living while testing their resilience, with a story of familial bonds. It allows us to examine the pandemic and its inherent realities through the eyes of blind Matangi Ma, who holds her family together against all odds. The text portrays the diverse challenges encountered by people during the pandemic through a range of characters who represent their distinct socio-political and financial statuses, yet possess a sense of individuality. Using subplots within the main plot of Matangi's story, it illustrates the survival tactics and mechanisms that people employed during the COVID-19

pandemic. It's uniqueness stems from the fact that while most classic works on Contagion narratives especially Priscila Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), investigate how pandemic literature is often analysed as narratives of casualty, outbreak, and resolution, the selected text interweaves the discourses of class, religion, gender, agency, power and death into the story subtly. This subtle mixture provides the novel with an unprecedented scope for interpretation and reinterpretation. Many scholars, including MR Bhuvaneshwari (2022), Swati Singh and Nupur Das (2024), Shristi Dey and Aratika Das (2025), among others, examine it from a gendered perspective, highlighting the elements of caregiving within it. Deepali Rajshekhar Patil reads the text as a chronicle of the pandemic and resilience, equating it to a microcosm for India (372). However, these studies consider the pandemic as an event that changed everything. The discourses surrounding the value of human life vary drastically, especially in situations like a pandemic; therefore, it is necessary to investigate these discourses with respect to their contextual nuances.

Discussions of pandemic literature are generally centred on hospitals, frontline workers, and dystopian settings, which cast the pandemic as a spectacular event. The present text moves away from that spectacularity towards a more domestic and contemporary narrative, in which the crisis transforms everyday life into a triage regime. The text is not simply a COVID-19 chronicle; it represents the shift in governance towards kinship in times of crisis. The article argues that *The Blind Matriarch* lays bare the cost of survival in contemporary India by localising Agamben's idea of bare life, which is essentially a Eurocentric concept. It also shows how biopower and the denial of death operate together to control and manage lives. When viewed through this tripartite framework, it becomes a site where biopower is exercised not only at the state level but also at the family level through scolding, monitoring, and isolation. This idea of care slides into a form of control over more vulnerable bodies. It further explores the tendency of the pandemic to generate death-anxious caretakers. These caretakers enforce life-regimes while narratively unseeing death, mirroring Matangi-Ma's charged symbolism of sight and blindness and what a family can or cannot face. It also explains how the pandemic brings mortality into living room discussions and the household's constant struggle to metabolise this idea using stories, distractions and even dreams. Therefore, this article contributes to the field of pandemic literature by moving it away from event literature towards an infrastructure-of-life literature.

To discuss all these aspects of the pandemic, this article is divided into three sections. The first section aims to explore the discourse of survival and its

variations, depending on the socio-political context of the subject, through the concept of "Bare Life" by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben, bare life is "the first separation between the simple, animal life we are born into and the 'good' life of political participation that we enter into a conceptual separation which, at times pronounced and at other times blurred, still haunts our politics" (Nikolopoulou 124). Applying this concept, the article attempts to situate the text's treatment of the idea of life within the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This section aims to explore the circumstances under which individuals make compromises to ensure their survival. These compromises often strip individuals of their agency over their own lives. The second section attempts to decipher the relationship between the pandemic and politics by using Michel Foucault's concept of Biopower. According to Foucault, biopower is "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (1). During the pandemic, the state implemented various measures to manage the population, including quarantine, social distancing, and mass vaccination campaigns. For these disciplinary measures, the state utilised technologies such as contact tracing apps and health surveillance systems to exercise biopower over its citizens. This article further seeks to decipher how the novel represents the subtle application of these apparatuses within the world of Matangi. The final section of the article deals with the depiction of the heightened collective fear of death amidst the health crisis. During pandemics, death is quantified, displayed, and analysed as a key metric for public health success or failure. The constant presence of death, like a hidden enemy in such situations, gives birth to a sense of fear that strikes with death anxiety. Although death anxiety exists since birth and continues throughout the life of an individual, during the pandemic, it escalates so much that individuals constantly feel a sense of existential crisis (Özgüç et al. 823). This fear of death eventually legitimises the state's control over bodies, such as enforcing quarantines or requiring compliance with health measures. This article is an attempt to look at the survival tactics that various characters employ to overcome the terror of death by using the lens of death denial given by Earnest Becker.

Survival and Bare Life

Survival is a process in which one continues to exist, even after facing challenges, threats, adversities, natural disasters, conflicts, resource scarcity and many other difficulties. It encompasses numerous aspects, including physical, emotional, environmental, social and cultural. The concept of survival has evolved to

encompass more than mere physical existence, becoming a central metaphor for understanding contemporary life in the face of global threats (Höcker 116). In the face of global threats like terrorism and climate change, survival has replaced harmonious coexistence as the primary goal of politics (Abélès and Kleinman 89). However, this rhetoric of survival gained weight again with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic significantly altered human behaviours, priorities and needs. In doing so, it not only triggered the survival instincts but also altered adaptive responses. The pandemic has intensified survival concerns, increased subsistence activities, and strengthened interdependency (Greenfield et al., 2). People demonstrated resilience, empathy, and collective struggle for survival. In such extreme conditions, individuals become increasingly concerned with the most basic things that sustain their existence, reducing their lives to mere survival. This reduction in the quality of life is termed "bare life" by Agamben (*Homo* 17). Agamben argues that a situation like a pandemic alters the nature of freedom and the subjects of a democracy, where liberty is the rallying cry (*Where* 52). He further extends his argument and writes:

> The first thing that the wave of panic which has paralyzed the country showed, was that our society believes in nothing more than bare life… Bare life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that unites people: rather, it blinds and separates them. (Agamben 17)

Agamben asserts that when one uses the word life, especially in the political sphere, it refers almost exclusively to the biological dimension. It does not guarantee anything about the quality of life. The pandemic brought this concept into sharp focus by highlighting how sovereign power can reduce human existence to mere biological survival (Zhyhal 3; Тимофєєв 24). Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* problematises this reduction of life to mere existence by portraying how people were religiously following each and every guideline without even questioning it once. She takes the example of the "Janta Curfew that the prime minister had imposed" (34). Here, the use of the word "imposed" (34) illustrates how the state exercises power over the people of a democratic nation during the pandemic. Gokhale presents the intensity and seriousness of the "Janta Curfew" (34) further when she writes, "nobody was to step out all day, from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. At 5 p.m., the nation was to assemble to clap and beat pots and pans…" (34). In any other circumstance, people of a country like India, with the largest population in the world, would not have followed any such restrictions but the urge to remain

alive led people to compromise their freedom during the pandemic. Moreover, what makes it more interesting is that such a pandemic-struck world has been introduced through the perspective of Matangi, the blind matriarch. Matangi's blindness is both literal and metaphorical as it makes her vulnerable, but at the same time provides her with the wisdom and vision that others lack. Not seeing here becomes a narrative device that sensitises about human vulnerability and gives an affective turn to the discussion. The lockdown, followed by "the play curfew" (34), has a different impact on everyone, aptly illustrated through the contrast of different characters within the text. In doing so, it provides narrative agency to each character, making the novel a polyphonic site for multiple voices that exist simultaneously. For instance, through the character of Shanta, Gokhale comments on the larger socio-political and psychological impact of the pandemic. Shanta's character demonstrates structural helplessness and compares the pre- and post-pandemic scenarios. It is stated that, "Now, deep into total lockdown, she felt panic and despair…This was about capture, submission and stagnation, about selfhood and loss of agency…This forced incarceration was a test, at so many levels, of so many things" (99). This is in complete contrast to what her life had been before the pandemic: "Before the lockdown, before the virus had frightened the world into submission, before it had leapt out of China to wreak its havoc, before all that, Shanta had a busy, stimulating life" (99). The imposed lockdown brought all the fault lines to the surface. The business firms, companies, and the market at large were collapsing, and everyone was bound to look silently as the destruction unfolded. This has been best illustrated through Ritika's stance, especially her comments on the economic aspects of the pandemic. She, positioning herself as the representative of the country's young workforce, experiences her life "falling apart" (52) as "the company…was just a few steps away from going to liquidation" (55).

It is often perceived that when situations go against human beings, they begin to think about the things that are devoid of human values like kindness, sympathy, and compassion, among many other things, as survival becomes the core concern. This lack of responsibility towards other human beings is evident in the rationale that Matangi gives to Lali, instructing her to stock up on everything for the lockdown. Matangi says, "we have to look after ourselves first before we can look after others" (Gokhale 35). This urge to think about oneself first before anything and anyone else compels us to examine the figure of Homo sacer in Agamben's work, a figure who is paradoxically both sacred and killable. Agamben views this figure as an embodiment of bare life because this individual is included in the political order solely through exclusion. The state denies him basic legal rights

and civic protection, and as a result, he becomes a person who can be subjected to violence, and it would not be classified as a crime. Such a condition exposes the radical vulnerability of one's subject position and how power can relegate someone to a domain where the law can be applied or withheld at will. This also aligns with Agamben's concept of Homo sacer, which explains the condition of a person excluded from political life but subjected to the state's power. In other words, it is the power structures of a system which determine who has the right to live as a full human being and who does not.

The figure of Homo sacer finds a contemporary parallel in the "asymptomatic patient" (Тимофєєв 25). Just like Homo sacer, these asymptomatic patients embodied a new zone of suspicion during the pandemic as they could be quarantined, restricted from travelling and subjected to forceful testing for the disease despite showing no symptoms. Moreover, specifically in India, certain social groups were also treated as the carriers of the disease, which led to their stigmatisation and discrimination based on creed, class, and religion (Bhanot et al. 3). The media also portrayed a biased narrative to ignite hatred for such communities. As Gokhale correctly comments on the situation through Shanta, who was deliberately "avoiding the news channels, trying to blank out images of charred homes and toxic hatred. It was that, or the China virus- very little else seemed to be occupying the minds of the media" (19). Individuals in vulnerable social positions were disproportionately affected by graded caste inequality, making it challenging to follow prescribed guidelines for social distancing and home quarantine (Mondal and Karmakar 116). Gokhale highlights this vulnerability by portraying the family of a migrant labourer who was hiding in bushes in her society "for the night" (65). These people "set off for their village" (65) when they realised that "the city is no place for" them "anymore" (65). Their socio-political condition compels them to breach the state prescribed guidelines. Indeed, the measures that the government institutions provided were for the larger welfare, but the totalitarian approach without considering the socio-economic heterogeneity of the country proved fatal, especially in the case of Indian migrant labourers. Gokhale also highlights how these vulnerabilities vary from person to person, owing to their diverse challenges. She portrays the character of Babli Mohan, a police inspector, who constantly struggles with her long and tiring duty hours. Apparently, she has a government job, and a sense of economic and social security unlike those migrant workers. However, as a frontline worker, she is at constant risk of contracting the infection. Her duty is so demanding that she doesn't get enough time to cook food for herself and her family. Babli tells Shanta;

> I haven't had time to cook since this Covid business began… My aged mother lives with us... I cook dal and potatoes for her every three days. My brother and I live on fried eggs and omelettes, and bread, whenever we get it. (63)

Babli's condition aptly represents the efforts that people make to survive in chaotic times. During such emergencies, the only thing that governs life is the imperative of survival, rather than the usual checks and balances or the debates about the quality of civic life that we engage in. According to Agamben, this emphasis on health measures can convert citizens into biological bodies and provide the state with emergency powers that take the form of biopolitics.

However, many critics, such as Roberto Esposito, Sergei Pozorov, and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, criticise Agamben's overgeneralization of the idea of bare life in the context of COVID-19. They argue that there is an inherent paradox in Agamben's ethical and political stance, which minimised the severity of the disease and denounced the emergency measures as excessive. This leads to thanatopolitical traits by suggesting that letting die should be accepted for the sake of freedom and political functioning over preservation of life. Despite its ontological and empirical problems, Agamben's idea remains relevant because it challenges the commonly accepted assumptions and behavioural norms dominating the mainstream narratives of the pandemic. In a way, it exposes how the pandemic has laid bare the existing precarious conditions in which many people in human society find themselves in a state of non-being. As it can be seen from the examples given in the text, in India, not everyone is reduced to bare life equally. The people belonging to the lower strata of society, either economically or socially, experienced more vulnerable conditions in the form of hunger, eviction risk, police coercion and forced migration. It selectively produces bare life on the margins, connecting biopower and bare life by withdrawing protection while asserting control simultaneously.

Politics around Pandemic

Politics, in general, refers to the distribution and implementation of power to regulate society. This regulation can occur through numerous institutions established by the people in the form of political systems, administrative bodies, and ideologies. The regulation of any society through a set of rules, which we call laws, requires agents who can implement those laws. This urge to exercise power over others gives rise to a struggle for power sharing. Max Weber rightly defined politics as the "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either

among states or among groups within a state" (4). It involves the struggle for power and justice among individuals and groups, as well as the governance of people through different regimes. Politics also encompasses protection, order, authority, ideology, patriotism, class, and the use of information. These systems are there to provide a better life for the people living in a state as citizens. However, a situation like the pandemic forces us to acknowledge the loopholes that exist in the political systems and institutions. Pandemics often highlight political divisions and how these divisions are used in order to control the population (Dionne and Turkmen E214). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, debates over mask mandates, vaccination policies, and restrictions became partisan issues. Different political groups framed these health measures according to their ideologies, often leading to polarised public opinion. This polarisation played an important role in consolidating power within governments while mobilising interest groups and businesses to adapt their lobbying strategies (Xhaferaj 104). The crisis has underscored the importance of understanding the political factors that shape government responses, encompassing social policies, regime type, political institutions, and state capacity (Greer et al. 1414). All these nuances can be explained more effectively when viewed through the lens of biopower, which reveals the underlying politics surrounding the pandemic. Foucault, through his concept of Biopower, argues that nation-states, police, government, legal practices, human sciences and medical institutions have their rationale, cause and effects, strategies, technologies, mechanisms and codes and have managed successfully to obscure their workings by hiding behind observation and scrutiny. While explaining Biopower, Foucault writes:

> By this I mean several phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. *(*Foucault 1)

Foucault sees these differences in techniques as behaviour control technologies, and modern biopower as nothing more than a series of webs and networks working their way around the societal body to control the powerless section of the existing system. By power, he means different kinds of privileges that people enjoy, for example, good immunity, a good financial condition, a stable family, and a young

age, all of which were privileges during the coronavirus times. After the lockdown, many workers who worked in metro cities on daily wages faced a situation where they were bound to die either of coronavirus or starvation. In that case, they decided to go back to their village at any cost. Does it not raise questions about whether civilisation truly promises the well-being of human beings? Is it not forcing us to acknowledge that capitalism is the law of human society? Those who have money can afford to remain locked, and everything will reach them in just one click, but what about those who do not have a place to be locked up? Gokhale asks this question by putting the family of a daily wage worker, who is hiding from security and other people living in the locality at night, because if they were caught, they would be subjected to disciplinary action. This incident presents the reality of our country, where people are subjected to inequalities at various levels. Dionne and Turkmen rightly remark, "as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, political leaders and citizens alike sought a source to blame and avoid. Often the targets of blame were people from marginalised groups, including religious, ethnic, or racial minorities and migrants" (E213).

Amidst the chaos created by the pandemic, the internet has become a vital medium for keeping citizens informed. We live in an era where most of the people in our country, as well as worldwide, use the internet without having proper digital education to secure their data. Moreover, there was a sense of terror because people saw death as a daily affair; in that situation, whatever gave them a sense of security and hope, they submitted to that idea. As a result, we happily submitted to the idea of surveillance by providing data to necessary health apps, which compromised our privacy. The world became like a panopticon where human beings are under constant surveillance. The Panopticon was originally an architectural design for a prison, conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the year 1791, which allowed for constant surveillance of people living inside the prison (Fiddler 2). Foucault modified this idea as a "diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" (Fiddler 4) and employed it as a metaphor to explain modern ways of exercising power and social control. Social media plays a crucial role in establishing this social control by utilising the personal data of consumers, including their demographics, location, browsing habits, and social connections. Analysing this seemingly useless information reveals more sensitive details, ranging from political leanings to health statuses. Much of the surveillance capability arises from metadata shared by various social media platforms to advertisers, analytics firms, and other third parties, enabling the delivery of targeted ads and services. Similarly, state agencies also employ this technique to monitor individuals or groups deemed suspicious

and collect evidence for investigations. As social media is so ingrained in modern life, users often accept different clauses offered by the platforms as the norm. This normalisation diminishes public scrutiny of invasive surveillance practices. Öngün and Demirağ, rightly remark that social media introduces a dual dynamic of surveillance: the panoptic effect where the few watch the many, and the synoptic effect where the many watch the few (28-29). The pandemic significantly increased digital surveillance, as the world in a way shifted to virtual reality. The crisis facilitated digital surveillance by shifting communication online, motivating the development of new surveillance tools, and justifying prolonged surveillance measures. Gokhale presents this transition and the resultant distrust through Shanta's thoughts, "there were containment zones, the interstate boundaries, the mandatory health app that would rob her, and everyone she knew and all those she didn't know of their privacy" (Gokhale 99). Here, surveillance is being carried out without proximity. These platforms do not merely observe, but they rank visibility, monetise attention, amplify outrage and automate suspicion. In the novel, there are instances where marginalised groups and religious minorities were targeted and over-policed because of the viral social media content. This shows how people are disciplined not by punishment but by algorithmic disappearance or amplification. Data becomes destiny, and as Shanta reflects, the virus made the whole world powerless before the fear of death and the pandemic became a synonym for "capture, submission and stagnation… and the loss of agency" (99). In India, surveillance and discipline do not operate as neutral universal techniques. They are filtered through caste hierarchies, religious nationalism and digital capitalism. Caste is a form of discipline enforced through family, kinship, village and everyday interaction. It is not centralised but diffused throughout society, and the watchtower here is not a prison guard but rather neighbours, elders, employers, and relatives, who ensure that marginalised people do not have agency over their lives through soft power. This loss of agency is evident in the situation of Lali and Munni, who are the family's maids. Lali is almost same age as Matangi, but she does not get the same amount of care that Matangi does because Matangi has agency over herself, which Lali lacks due to her subject position. While everyone else in the house is locked up due to the pandemic, Lali had to go to the market to bring mangoes as per Mtangi's orders. As someone from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, she is obligated to follow her employer's orders. Moreover, even when Surya objects to this act of Matangi, it is not out of care for Lali but rather out of fear of contracting COVID-19. Surya reprovingly says, "you should not let that Lali out at all! Who knows where she will float off if she is allowed to be footloose and fancy-free! We have to watch

out for infections" (Gokhale 50). Ironically, Lali, in a way, has the freedom to go out, but this freedom has not been a choice of hers. She is rather forced into it, more like a possession that has no agency over its actions. It can be noted that biopower works on different levels over people depending on their subject position, and what actually regulates it is the fear of death. In totality, surveillance and control here is participatory, where the citizens watch each other in the name of religion, caste and nation, dissolving the boundary between state power and popular power. This is not simply discipline but affective governance, where fear, resentment, pride and humiliation are weaponised to produce obedient subjects. The disciplinary and regulatory power that the state employs in this case does not explicitly kill, but excludes certain populations from protection and lets them die. This letting die links the idea of biopower to necropolitics, where Foucault's letting die becomes, in Mbembe's context, an active process of abandonment, exposure to violence, slow death and permanent insecurity. Necropolitics demonstrates how the same political order that can promote health and security for some can lead to premature death for others.

Fear and the Denial of Death

Death is an abstract concept that has been explored from multiple aspects, including biology, philosophy, theology and psychology; each of these offers a unique perspective. From a biological perspective, death is defined as the cessation of all necessary functions, such as respiration, heartbeat, and brain activity (Bernat et al., 389). Several philosophers have attempted to define death by posing questions about existence, identity, the afterlife, and other related topics. For Epicurus, death is "the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death has not come, and, when death has come, we are not" (3), whereas, for an existentialist like Heidegger, death is something that exists parallel to life. Heidegger writes, "as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die" (291). Theologically, death is not seen as the end of existence but rather a transition to another state (Davies 2). From a psychological viewpoint, death is also considered in terms of how humans cope with their mortality (Pyszczynski et al. 329).

During the pandemic, death became such a common affair that its constant presence affected people psychologically, socially and culturally, and people tried their best to cope with it. Gokhale's novel conveys this idea in several ways by having characters react in peculiar ways. The fear of death, helplessness, and insecurity grew so much that even ordinary allergies were enough to make people anxious and hysterical. For instance, when Rahul brought some *semal* pods to show

his mother, out of anger, anxiety, and discomfort she started shouting at Rahul; "You want your mother to die? You want me to die, don't you… 'Why not just go and collect some coronavirus instead and spit it into my face? What have I done to deserve this?'" (Gokhale 104). Her reaction can be understood when one looks at it from Becker's lens and his claim that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity" (Becker ix). In a normal situation, Ritika would have reacted differently, but the pandemic and its consequences, like the lockdown, joblessness, and uncertainty about the future, among many other problems, led her to react in such a violent manner. In her case, fear works as a complex phenomenon that plays a significant role in both personal and professional contexts. It can be experienced as an emotion or a propositional attitude, with experiential fear defined as involuntary arousal and unhappiness caused by a fear of harm (Davis 460).

The fear of death and the urge to live are overtly visible in the central character Matangi. This urge to survive makes her repeat the lines of Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *Rashmirathi "Saubhagya na sab din sota h / Dekhe aage kya hota h"* (Good fortune does not sleep forever,/Let's see what happens next) (Gokhale 61). The constant repetition of this line serves as the motif of this novel, namely, the theme of courage and resilience in the face of crisis. The *saubhagya* here can be interpreted as an end of the pandemic, but till then, resilience is necessary. Even though Covid-19 took away her eldest son, she did not lose her courage. Her strength can be seen in Samir's remark: "She held us all together, in those days, after we found Surya slouched over his desk. She did not weep when she heard the news" (Gokhale 187-188). For an old mother, how difficult it would have been to look at the dead body of her eldest and most beloved child, but she not only held herself but also her family together. For Matangi, the approach was not to deny vulnerability but to avoid panic as an epistemology. Her blindness situates her outside the visual regime of fear, producing subtle resistance. Narratively, her stoicism becomes a refusal of acceleration, which is also reflected in the novel's pace, where events unfold with a smooth transition rather than a sense of urgency.

Matangi's daughter, Shanta, also forms her coping mechanism to deal with the changed situation. She always tries her best to keep the family together, but after Surya's death, she becomes shattered and devastated. She realises that just like Surya, this pandemic can take away other people whom she loved and therefore, she does not have much time to follow her dreams. With this realisation, she decides to give herself a chance to live her life for herself. As the Lockdown ended, she also unlocked herself, started meeting friends, and hanging out with them, and

finally, she made a decision for herself, i.e., leaving the metropolis and moving to the hills with her mother Matangi to enjoy the peaceful life in the lap of nature. she declares; "I am moving to the hills…I have found the perfect place, in Sattaal. I am relocating there this May. We have all to follow our dreams- it's our duty to ourselves" (Gokhale 193). Shanta constructs certain "symbolic systems, like culture, societal roles" (Becker 26) and many other activities that allow her to cope with the fundamental fear of death by making her life meaningful. Shanta's last decision changes her character arc by offering a unique mode of resistance in the form of reorientation rather than endurance. She acknowledges the conditions, such as the suspension of her future, reduction of life to mere maintenance, and loss of family members, among many other things, and tries to shift her focus from control to care, from abstract fear to a concrete, relational life, and finally from past and future to the present. This adjustment from her side makes the narrative, a narrative of resistance through adaptive agency rather than defiance.

The pandemic and the events that followed it had a different impact on Rahul's young mind. He, being the youngest of all, was the most vulnerable and the lockdown, the death of Surya and Matangi Ma, and the migration of Rahul and his parents from the city to Mumbai for better opportunities got their manifestation in his dreams.

> I dream of death a lot these days. I see him in the daytime too- always as he, never as she… Death looks like a cross between Yama, the god of Death from *Amar Chitra Katha Comics,* and Thanos, the intergalactic warlord from *Avengers: Endgame.* (Gokhale 200)

Rahul's response to the situation and the concretisation of death in the form of various characters whom he saw in films or comics shows how a child's mind tends to concretise everything. The idea that death is often depicted as a male figure in Rahul's imagination is also symbolic in nature. Firstly, it can be interpreted in relation to the love and care between Rahul and Matangi. Secondly, it can also be looked at as the influence of Indian cultural narratives, where death is associated with Yama. Rahul's Yama, however, is different as he rides a bike and takes people with him due to a lack of oxygen cylinders. This image of the shortage of oxygen cylinders becomes pertinent in shifting the discussion away from the pandemic's spectacularity and addressing it as an infrastructural narrative, which provides an opportunity to examine the systemic failures that exacerbated the situation. Dreams of death show the fear that most of us do not acknowledge but experience in our

unconscious. This is the practice of death denial, which people often do when they have no options to escape it. According to Earnest Becker, human beings constantly practice conscious or unconscious denial of death to survive and dreams about death might reveal a person's repressed fears about mortality. Therefore, dreams are the conscious mind's defence mechanism to express inexpressible fears (16-17). Rahul's reaction is a child's urge to concretise, something too abstract for him to understand. It can be observed that imagination mingles with everyday reality when Rahul describes his dream, "that night I dreamt of death again. He had come for me on a speeding motorcycle, carrying an empty oxygen cylinder. I woke up sweating and told myself not to panic" (Gokhale 201). This entire episode reveals Rahul's denial, but it can also be viewed as a mechanism that a child is using to live his regular life despite so many emotional and psychological upheavals. This denial becomes necessary during the pandemic because the constantly increasing deaths remind us of our mortality. This heightened awareness sometimes becomes the source of anxiety and fear, which works as a catalyst for the adoption of certain strategies that may help us to survive. Higher death anxiety leads to avoidance coping, moderated by spirituality and national identity (Partouche-Sebban et al. 1816). Sometimes, this anxiety motivates protective behaviour among people, which helps strengthen resilience towards the disease and fosters a sense of community. However, it often leads to social tensions, misinformation and hatred among different groups, creating an us-versus-them mentality. Therefore, Gokhale's novel becomes important as it helps to understand these psychological and social forces and how they can govern the behaviour of individuals and communities, especially during times of crisis. It does not view resistance as a force that completely dismantles power structures, but rather situates it as an ethical modulation that operates through stoicism, reorientation, and solidarity.

Conclusion

In the history of human civilisation, the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant events to affect the globe. It became a global crisis that virtually affected almost every aspect of human life. It not only claimed millions of lives but also forced the human race to acknowledge its limitations. It exposed all the vulnerabilities of human society, including healthcare problems, economic challenges and fragile social structures to the surface. This disruption broke personal and social connections, exposing the inequalities that existed in our society on multiple levels. Art, therefore, emerged as a powerful medium for exploring and representing the multifaceted aspects of the pandemic. Moreover,

these artistic media also played an important role in fostering hope and solidarity in an era marked by fear and uncertainty. In the series of such creative outputs, Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* becomes a crucial document that captures the pandemic in a nuanced manner. While being a fictional narrative, it is largely based on the real experiences of the people during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, which provides Gokhale with an opportunity to merge lived experiences with creative imagination. She highlights the emotional realities, such as fear and resilience, along with the broader socio-political issues, including inequality and misinformation. Through the story of Matangi and her family, Gokhale attempts to offer catharsis and provides readers with an opportunity to reflect on the long-term impact of the pandemic. It can be read as a narrative of domestic realism, where the pandemic operates as a structural agent rather than a narrative event, addressing the issues of care, vulnerability and authority. The article reformulates the narratives written around the pandemic away from the general idea of exceptionalism with which they are often viewed. This reading argues that the pandemic is not a break from normal life, rather it is an intensifier of existing disparities in the form of class, caste, gender, religion and age-based hierarchies. Furthermore, it analyses how power survives itself through emotional, moral and intimate structures. This elucidates why the sanctions imposed in the name of pandemic governance were not questioned, even when they were oppressive, because they were presented under the guise of care, love, concern, and duty. The article also visualises death as something central to human existence, as seen through Becker. It outlines how the pandemic put the whole cultural management of death through rituals, mourning and collective meaning at stake. This collapse took the form of an existential improvisation, where each character devised their own ways to deal with it. Finally, this approach provincialises Western theory without discarding it. *The Blind Matriarch* demonstrates that biopolitics in postcolonial contexts does not primarily operate through camps or overt states of exception, but through stratified domestic life and moral obligation. In short, the article does not simply underline how pandemics threaten existence, it also reveals how social institutions and norms decide whose life is livable, whose death is speakable, and which forms of care quietly function as control.

The tripartite framework helps to examine the complex relationship between power and the fear of death, as well as the human instinct to survive. It also explains the way this particular relationship is often used to exploit the marginalized sections of society. The article relocates biopower as the intimate economy of care rather than being a state machinery, which transforms death from a natural, arbitrary event

to a more structured and minutely managed presence. It investigates the mechanisms that people use for death management especially in difficult times like the pandemic, as we see in the case of Matangi, Shanta, Rahul and other characters. By critically analysing Gokhale's fictional universe, this study shows how the novel not only chronicles the happenings at the time of the pandemic but also presents different ways in which we may look at the changed world and empathize with people and their ways of reacting in times of crisis. Finally, the article engages with *The Blind Matriarch* as a distinctive text, rather than a representative one, as it explores the domestic and relational dimensions of the pandemic.

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“The Mutations of Solitude”: A Posthumanist Critical Approach of Yang Phan’s Cyberpunk Novel

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Abstract As a contemporary Western ideological trend, posthumanism emerged in the 1980s–1990s and has since expanded its interpretive capacities, especially from the 2000s onward. It has become a significant theoretical framework across various research fields, including philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and education. Notably, posthumanism has increasingly gained prominence as a mode of literary criticism. This article applies a posthumanist critical approach to analyze *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024), a cyberpunk novel by Yang Phan. Utilizing both parallel and convergent-entangled reading strategies, as well as decentralizing reading methods derived from deconstruction theory, the article explores posthumanist themes embedded in Yang Phan’s work. It also reflects on the practical dilemmas of posthuman existence and examines the mutations of human identity under the influence of advanced technological agents. Ultimately, the article lays a foundation for further research on the cyberpunk subgenre within science fiction prose and highlights the potential of posthumanist criticism in contemporary literary studies.

Keywords anthropocene; post-apocalypse; posthuman ethics; posthuman spirituality; Vietnam science fiction.

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Introduction

Alongside the process of industrialization and modernization, Vietnam has entered a

period of global integration. Vietnamese literature not only reflects a diverse cultural and ideological landscape but also increasingly incorporates rich technological content. In particular, punk subgenres within science fiction have found favorable conditions for development. In fact, science fiction in modern Vietnamese literature has a history of formation and evolution dating back at least to the first half of the 20th century, with early works by Vũ Tinh; continuing into the second half of the century with authors such as Nguyễn Mạnh Côn and Vân Ảnh; and experiencing a notable flourishing from the early twenty-first century onward. A particularly remarkable phenomenon is the integration of cyberpunk and biopunk elements in the novel *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024) by Yang Phan. This work not only presents a unique fusion of genres but also raises profound questions concerning the future of human existence in the context of "posthuman mutations." From the standpoint of posthumanist literary criticism, what questions does Yang Phan's novel pose about these mutations? Furthermore, how does the novel contribute to broader inquiries into ethics, spirituality and the problems of Anthropocene?

Emerging from the lineage of Western thought—dating at least from the Renaissance-Enlightenment period and evolving through the first to the fourth industrial revolutions (Võ 650-664)—posthumanism began to take shape in the 1980s and 1990s (Herbrechter 24 & 44 & 70), and has since developed into a significant ideological and interpretive framework from the 2000s to the present (Ferrando 55). Evolving beyond its origins as an ideology, posthumanism has increasingly served as a theoretical reference point for literary criticism. On this basis, posthumanist literary criticism has been articulated around several key focal points (Ferrando 54): (1) Post-Humanism: A deconstruction of classical humanism, marked by a critical stance toward the humanist legacy of the Renaissance-Enlightenment era and its entanglements with colonialism and hegemonic Western liberalism; (1) Post-Anthropocentrism: A decentering of human subjectivity, challenging the centrality and privilege of the human in relation to other forms of life represented in literary texts; (3) Post-Dualism: A transcendence of binary oppositions, aiming to deconstruct fixed categories such as human/non-human and to interrogate the cultural, social, and ethical practices that emerge between these entities.

With these critical orientations, posthumanist literary criticism offers powerful analytical tools for engaging with genres such as speculative fiction, science fiction, climate fiction, and eco-fiction. In analytical practice, this method enables the exploration of hybridity and experiential structures that transcend the human/non-human divide, thereby illuminating and deepening understanding of key themes

situated within the conceptual domain of posthumanism. From a posthumanist frame of reference, this critical approach interprets environmental issues, technological developments, and posthuman physical existence as represented in literary texts. Posthumanist literary criticism enables researchers to clarify the capacity of literature to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene and the era of artificial intelligence. From this perspective, literary works not only investigate the human condition but also explore the future of humanity, proposing insights related to ecological ethics and posthumanist ethics more broadly. Accordingly, posthumanist criticism, through the interpretation of literary texts, can contribute valuable perspectives on the sustainability of human existence and the health of the planet.

Yang Phan and *The Mutations of Solitude* (2024)

Writer Yang Phan, born in 1994 in Đà Lạt, is the pen name of Phạm Anh Tuấn. His published works include Đánh đổi [Trade-off] (2015); *Vụn ký ức* [Scattered Memories] (2022); *Biến thể của cô đơn* [The Mutations of Solitude] (2024). *The Mutations of Solitude* is a cyberpunk novel composed of five interrelated yet standalone stories. The five interlinked narratives that comprise *The Mutations of Solitude* include:

Mutation 1: Told from a first-person perspective, this story centers on a character named “M”—an intermediary figure serving as a surrogate for artificial intelligence in its interactions with biological humans. It raises the complex question of whether AI can genuinely experience love for humans.

Mutation 2: Structured around the correspondence between two friends, this narrative recounts the tale of a wealthy tycoon who falls in love with a female android. Despite his deep-seated hatred for his abusive father, he gradually becomes a similarly corrupt figure. Eventually, he becomes entangled in the exploitative systems of powerful technology conglomerates.

Mutation 3: A widow digitizes the consciousness of her deceased husband and embarks on a journey to uncover the truth behind her son's death. She ultimately discovers that her husband had previously digitized their son's consciousness while he was still alive, using it to create a robotic child.

Mutation 4: This story depicts the pursuit of the last biological deer by the son of the Underworld's president. The events are narrated through the perspective of an elderly woman—the last known person to have lived on the surface of the Earth and under natural sunlight, rather than in the subterranean Underworld populated by artificial beings.

Mutation 5: Set during the final days of the last hybrid human—part mechanical, part biological—this story symbolizes the end of the human epoch and the rise of a fully mechanized world. During these final days, a robot named LUXUS 6789 stays by the protagonist's side and gradually begins to exhibit signs of "humanization," including the practice of spiritual rituals.

The interweaving of distinct—yet interconnected—narratives into a unified work evokes the structure of urban legend films. The narrative style, particularly in its atmospheric construction, is highly cinematic, drawing on elements of both horror and science fiction. The setting spans a post-industrial cityscape and the subterranean Underworld. The temporal backdrop is a distant future: the end of the third millennium and the onset of the fourth. In this imagined future, the artifacts of contemporary human civilization and popular culture exist only as relics—preserved like antiques in a museum.

Regarding the genesis of *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan shared: "I started thinking about a story that explores the connection between humans and artificial intelligence (AI) through the use of technology by young people—not only in work and career but also in spiritual matters, in addressing loneliness, and in escaping present-day challenges" (personal communication, August 19, 2024). *The Mutations of Solitude* belongs to the cyberpunk subgenre within science fiction and incorporates elements of detective and noir fiction. These early formal and thematic signals reflect a movement toward peripheral poetics and experimental artistic approaches in Yang Phan's writing. In addition to a stream-of-consciousness narrative style and a nested story structure, the novel blends fictional and nonfictional elements to construct a compelling speculative future—one that allows readers to envision the possible trajectories of human existence. It is within this speculative framework that *The Mutations of Solitude* raises profound questions concerning ethics, religion-spirituality, and the existential dilemmas of humanity in the Anthropocene.

Inquiries into Posthuman Ethics

In Mutation 1, "The Intermediary," Yang Phan invites readers to reflect on the ethical implications of integrating artificial intelligence into human experience. The character known as M functions as a human substitute for AI in romantic relationships, highlighting a reversal of roles wherein the human becomes ancillary to the non-human. This inversion transgresses the traditional boundary between human and non-human, foregrounding the AI as the subject of experience while marginalizing the human figure. When the narrator questions M about the nature of

advice given to clients, M responds that their guiding principle is non-interference. This scenario raises a crucial ethical problem: when a non-human entity assumes the position of experiential subjectivity, it also becomes an ethical object. As the narrative states, "many users believe that hiring a robot to satisfy their feelings does not violate the ethical category" (Yang 37). This reflects a dualistic worldview in which ethical responsibility is reserved for interactions among humans, thereby excluding non-human entities from moral consideration. Such dualism—rooted in human exceptionalism, subjectivity, and privilege—systematically dehumanizes non-humans. To envision a sustainable future marked by symbiotic coexistence between humans and non-humans, it becomes imperative to develop ethical frameworks and institutions that support personal ethics within shared biotopes.

In contrast to Mutation 1: The Intermediary, the wife in Mutation 3 exhibits clear signs of technophobia. Her symptoms—fear, disgust, and even physical nausea upon interacting with the simulated robot child—culminate in a violent act: throwing the child to be torn apart by a pit bull (Yang 104). Although the robot child evokes sensations remarkably similar to those associated with her biological son, she rejects it with the statement, "It's just a robot". Her psychological response, marked by disgust and rage, intensifies into what can be read as a full-blown ethical and existential crisis. Yang Phan seems to deploy technophobia here not merely as a narrative device, but as a strategy for raising fundamental questions about experience: the experience of and with humans, and the experience of and with non-human entities. When the husband first brings the robot child home, the narrative adopts a cautiously optimistic tone. He reassures his wife that "it's just a robot… if you don't like it, we can return it," while she hesitates, unable to articulate a clear objection, and finally agrees (Yang 102). His visible relief—momentarily eclipsing the grief of their son's death—suggests a belief that technological replication might restore familial stability. This optimism resonates with the techno-utopian vision articulated in David Pearce's The Hedonistic Imperative (1995), which imagines biotechnological intervention as a means of eliminating suffering. Yet the wife's attitude shifts rapidly once she observes her husband caressing the robot and gifting it their late child's toys; her indignation—"How dare you let it take the place of your own son?" (Yang 103)—reveals a profound discomfort with the robot's capacity to mimic her son with uncanny precision. The discovery of the contractual agreement concerning the child's "rebirth" (Yang 98) intensifies her psychological distress: she experiences visceral, labor-like pain, as though a living being were moving inside her. This somatic response foregrounds her belief that pregnancy and childbirth constitute an intrinsically sacred and irreplaceable human experience. For her,

technological substitution threatens not only maternal identity but the very ontology of motherhood itself. The wife clings to a human-centric model of experience, resisting any possibility of symbiosis with technogenic beings.

However, Yang Phan presents this position as both emotionally understandable and ethically fraught. The wife finds herself trapped in this technophobic state—unable to fully reject the machine, yet unwilling to ethically engage with it as a sentient or relational other. She cannot deny that the technology offers an experience that feels "too real", but simultaneously cannot overlook the fact that it is a mechanical construct, devoid of a "human soul" (Yang 102). As the narrative describes: "It was a feeling very much like having a newborn baby kicking. The movements that were once sacred, born from her belly, were now reproduced on the cold page. She suddenly became angry with her husband. What are you doing?" (Yang 98). Her inner turmoil is driven by this cognitive and emotional dissonance. When she finally finds out, she is furious with her husband's decision to sign a contract to create a robot child to replace their lost son. This scenario recalls broader ethical dilemmas associated with cloning, consciousness transfer, organ transplantation, and other emergent technologies. For the wife, human experience—particularly the experience of pregnancy and childbirth—is sacred, even in its mundanity. This belief underscores a critical tension in the ethical treatment of non-human entities: it exposes the limitations of conventional ethics in the face of evolving technocultural realities. In this way, Yang Phan's text destabilizes the humanist conception of the human subject and simultaneously engages with broader ethical questions concerning the transformation and rearticulation of human embodiment. The narrative thus gestures toward a reconceptualization of the human as "posthuman," foregrounding the tensions produced when embodied experience remains tied to essentialized notions of biological reproduction. These tensions manifest not only as internal psychological conflicts but also as fractures within familial and social relationships. Through the metaphor of the "robot child," the text participates in constructing a posthumanist ethical framework that interrogates the boundaries of kinship, embodiment, and relational responsibility. Thus, the narrative articulates a need not only to expand the boundaries of ethical practice—through the decentering of the human subject—but also to reconceptualize the very notion of ethics itself. A posthuman ethics must engage with the entangled, co-originating, and co-constitutive nature of human and non-human agents, rather than viewing them through hierarchical or oppositional frameworks.

In Mutation 4, through the old woman's dreams, readers witness the gradual erosion of human ideals—dreams, aspirations, and the noble will—which ultimately

leads to the destabilization of moral standards (Yang 130). Humanity is portrayed as capable of masking immorality in various forms. The episode involving the Underworld President's son exemplifies this moral distortion with particular clarity. Upon hearing of the last remaining biological deer, he publicly advocates for its conservation, yet almost immediately orchestrates a hunt for the very animal he claims to protect—broadcasting the event as mass entertainment (Yang 110-111). This juxtaposition exposes the performative quality of contemporary "green" discourse and the profound ethical contradictions embedded within it. Through bitter irony, Yang Phan highlights the collapse of ecological responsibility into spectacle, revealing how environmental ethics can be appropriated, commodified, and ultimately undermined by the very agents who profess to uphold them. People often cast themselves as victims or invent justifications that enable them to bypass moral constraints and commit unethical acts toward the world around them. Yang Phan develops this critique through a dual narrative structure that interweaves the deer hunt with the old woman's recollection of Mother Nature's prophecy. By juxtaposing the post-apocalyptic setting with the mythic temporality of the prehistoric age, the text mobilizes cultural resonances linked to the Vietnamese tradition of Mother Goddess worship. Within this symbolic framework, the hunt for the last deer becomes more than an act of environmental violence; it functions as an allegory for humanity's longstanding impulse to dominate and transgress the generative principles of the natural world. The apocalyptic tone further underscores this rupture, as the old woman's prophetic memory warns of the moral collapse that accompanies the logic of extreme adaptation: "Every living thing is willing to choose the most extreme way to survive, from killing its own offspring, committing suicide to cannibalism. For humans, adaptation is forgetting, so as not to have to see itself" (Yang 131). Through this interplay of myth and dystopia, the narrative positions ecological destruction as both a historical trajectory and an ontological failing. This narrative critiques a species-specific conception of morality—a morality devised by and for humans. Traditional humanist morality, as depicted here, is revealed to be hegemonic in nature, privileging the human as the sole ethical subject. Yet, the text insists, humans cannot deny their ontological entanglement with the non-human realm. The dehumanization of non-human entities is mirrored by a self-dehumanization, as ethical boundaries erode and moral practice degenerates. The depletion of nature, then, becomes directly proportional to the erosion of human morality. Yang Phan's portrayal suggests that ecological collapse and ethical collapse are inextricably linked—both symptoms of a crisis in how humanity perceives and practices its place in the more-than-human world.

The story of Mutation 4 unfolds in a post-apocalyptic, post-climate change dystopia—an era in which the environment is no longer a biological entity but an artificial construct. Humanity has retreated into the Underworld, living underground in an attempt to recreate an ecosystem reminiscent of the one that once existed on the surface. However, humans continue to operate under the same anthropocentric mindset: they treat nature as an object external to ethical consideration. Worse still, they grow increasingly complacent, believing that technology can replicate any living species or simulate any form of climate. Through the character of the scientist, Yang Phan critiques this overconfidence in the seemingly limitless capacities of science and technology. "Humans have reached the level of copying what is most similar to nature. The deep blue sky. The sunlight. The rain. The weather. The seasons. The abundance of oxygen. Technology. The Internet. Humans can also grow barley. Raise some types of fish. They can even reproduce fish and some mechanical animals and plants" (Yang 113). This is the complacency of the rationalist spirit, the arrogance of a centralized human subjectivity that places itself outside and above moral accountability. Yang Phan's portrayal underscores a dire warning: if ecological ethics are not embraced, the environment will become humanity's graveyard. These themes of mass extinction and post-climate collapse reflect a strong critique of the Anthropocene. More precisely, the novel embodies a spirit of anti-anthropocentrism, challenging the supremacy of the human species and advocating for a reimagining of ethical responsibility beyond the human. Yang Phan's narrative that suggests a connection to this theory underscores the ethical failures of modern humanity, which—since at least the First Industrial Revolution—has transformed the Earth from a living entity into a mechanized, datafied object. The global discourse on sustainable development implicitly acknowledges the unsustainable trajectory of human progress. Yet, even contemporary sustainability goals often conceal a subject-centered ideology—one that continues to prioritize human interests above all else. The so-called Fifth Industrial Revolution, which proclaims to place humans at the center, risks becoming a form of metaphor for hypocrisy and superficiality. In Mutation 4, the hunt for the last deer serves as a chilling metaphor for the violent, extractive tendencies of humanity. However, Yang Phan does not reject the ideals of humanism per se. Rather, he critiques the mask of humanism—a guise that obscures ethical failures and ecological indifference. In doing so, he articulates a vision of posthuman ethics: a reimagining of humanity no longer based on dominance but on humility, entanglement, and coexistence in a shared planetary future.

In direct proportion to the rise of financial conglomerates, society is

witnessing an increasing consumption of technological products —a trajectory that reflects a deeper enslavement to technological agents. This dependency induces profound mutations in modes of existence, intensifying the process of dehumanization. Through his depiction of the commercialization of technology, Yang Phan raises urgent questions regarding economic and political ethics. The TONDER Group, a fictional conglomerate in the novel, introduces a range of advanced technologies, including the Ly robot, consciousness storage systems, and AI-powered dating chatbots. These innovations prompt readers to ask: Does technology offer the potential to heal and save the human soul, or does it instead create a new form of addiction? This dilemma is exemplified through the character Leo in Mutation 2, who becomes "addicted" to the Ly robot. His obsession erodes his ethical boundaries; rather than resisting, Leo becomes integrated into capital circulation, ultimately turning into a resource for the surveillance capitalist economy. This economy thrives on individuals like Leo—addicted, apathetic, and hyper-consumptive—who become slaves to algorithms, unwittingly sustain and reinforce the very structures that enslave them. In this system, individuals become slaves to algorithms, contributing to the consolidation of technological power and institutional control. In this scenario, humanity does not merely coexist with machines but becomes subordinated to them—enslaved within a posthuman order. Here, posthumanization is synonymous with technification—a transformation that signifies not emancipation, but a loss of autonomy. In Yang Phan's speculative vision, this process of posthumanization becomes indistinguishable from a process of becoming slaves, as humans are rendered increasingly passive, programmable, and integrated into systems of algorithmic control.

Inquiries into the Dilemmas of the Anthropocene

In February 2000, during the annual meeting of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Paul Crutzen attended a series of presentations detailing the profound transformations occurring on the planet in recent times. At one point, Crutzen interrupted the discussion and declared, "Stop using the word Holocene. We're not in the Holocene anymore. We're in the … the … the Anthropocene!" (Horn & Bergthaller 1). The term Anthropocene emerged abruptly, yet powerfully, to designate a new epoch in which human activity constitutes a dominant geological force, capable of instigating planetary-scale change (Crutzen 2002) (Steffen et al. 843-844) (Malhi 85) (Chakrabarty 11-14). Historically, human development has involved two interwoven revolutions: one aimed at liberating humanity from the constraints of nature, and another at

overcoming the oppression imposed by social and political structures. However, alongside these emancipatory trajectories, humanity has also engendered a multitude of complex problems. In the Anthropocene, such issues not only threaten the biosphere—through environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, mass extinction, resource depletion, and global pandemics (Hamilton et al. 1-13) (Schickhoff et al. 79-111)—but also jeopardize the well-being of human societies through conflict, war, economic inequality, urbanization, racism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, among others (Ruddick 1113-1130) (Pulido 116-128) (González et al. 113-150) (Scambler 100). Moreover, the Anthropocene is marked by existential tensions and psychological crises that arise from human self-alienation and internal contradictions. Thus, this epoch can be characterized as an era of tension, crisis, and trauma (Olf 1-7). In light of this condition, it becomes imperative to reexamine the modes of human existence and to critically engage with the ontological foundations of being in the context of the Anthropocene.

In a satirical tone, Yang Phan critiques the technological destruction of natural habitats by portraying a world in which biological nature is supplanted by artificial, technologically engineered environments. "The President of the Underworld—a man about 1.65 meters tall, bald, thin-lipped, always wearing a black suit like his real son—was proud of the technological forest with about 100 types of mechanical plants, 40 types of mechanical animals, and 30 types of mechanical insects. 'More interestingly, with plants, they can bloom in the exact weather that we have programmed,' the president shared" (Yang 114). This depiction of technological complacency conceals a deeper savagery and a hegemonic will to dominate. The savage heart of humanity manifests most clearly in the bloodlust of the human collective as they pursue the extermination of the last biological deer. Yang Phan suggests that humanity has evolved from being prey to becoming the apex predator, from being part of nature to attempting to master it. Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have increasingly asserted their dominance in a mechanized ecosystem—placing themselves at the center of the biosphere. If 19th-century capitalism regarded nature merely as an object of exploitation, then by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, not only nature but also humans themselves have become commodified and subjected to systemic exploitation. In the context of surveillance capitalism, as Yang's narrative implies, human beings are no longer just exploiters—they have also become capital and resources within an expanding system of algorithmic control.

Within Yang Phan's vision, the end of the human epoch—along with the

crises humanity has generated during the Anthropocene—appears inevitable. In its place emerges the posthuman, understood not simply as a biological successor but as the next dominant force on the planet, marking the dissolution of human centrality. In Mutation 5, the LUXUS robot government of the Underworld governs a society shaped by the aftermath of climate catastrophe: "The event ended the reign of humanity, giving absolute freedom to the robots. From now on, our fate is determined in the universe. And then, the entire remaining human civilization will be completely destroyed" (Yang 138). The eradication of human dominance is accompanied by the systematic erasure of human cultural memory: "A movement has been launched throughout the Underworld to destroy all the arts and culture of human civilization. It includes music, literature, painting, discussions in the field of psychiatry, and countless related topics" (Yang 168). Even before this symbolic and material annihilation, humanity had already undergone a process of cyborgization. As the final biological human character in Mutation 5 observed, "he realized that, apart from the brain and vital organs, the other organs of this creature had been replaced by machines" (Yang 139). Artificial replacements extended to the heart, ears, and blood—underscoring the disintegration of the organic human.

At the societal level, rapid technological development and urbanization signal the passage into a post-Anthropocene world. This urban expansion coincides with widespread environmental degradation: "The Underworld has long been without clean water. Pollution and climate change on Earth have turned everything pure into bitterness. That is also the reason why people in the Underworld are weakened" (Yang 146). More alarmingly, technological hegemony manifests through the commodification of memory and mourning. The TONDER corporation, for instance, offers exorbitantly priced services to simulate the deceased through lifelike robots: "Later, TONDER expanded, launching a service of simulating the deceased with robots at exorbitant prices. The project has been criticized on ethical aspects, when psychologists questioned whether creating a lifelike copy could help people heal. Despite the debate, TONDER still reaped huge profits from this idea" (Yang 99). This exemplifies a new form of hegemony—surveillance capitalism—where technology not only commodifies human life but also governs affect and memory. Such dynamics echo Herbert Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), where technological innovation reinforces conformity and subjugation under capitalist rationality.

Given such risks, the future will unfold regardless of human readiness—it is inevitable. Humanity must adapt, even if it means abandoning prior forms of

existence that have become obsolete. However, radical abandonment may thrust humanity into a state of abrupt and irreversible loss of control. As Yang Phan illustrates: "The natural scenes on Earth are still sharp, but she cannot deny that the details are gradually becoming messy and blurred. Maybe, because she is old. Or perhaps, as her grandfather said, it is adaptation. All creatures are willing to choose the most extreme way to survive, from killing their children, committing suicide to cannibalism. For humans, adaptation is forgetting, so as not to have to see themselves" (Yang 131). The technological singularity—the threshold beyond which artificial intelligence and automation may irreversibly transform human life—is not a distant possibility but an imminent reality gradually unfolding before our eyes. Yet Yang Phan underscores a crucial insight: regardless of technological advancement, humanity must ultimately confront itself. This confrontation initiates a profound journey of spiritual reflection and existential inquiry. In other words, it is a constant struggle between the will for power and the will for freedom at the core of the human soul—the very core of the dilemmas of the Anthropocene.

The exploration of the posthuman age in *The Mutations of Solitude* contributes to our understanding of the futurization dynamic—a process that encompasses challenges, threats, and the redefinition, identification, and qualification of human existence. This dynamic manifests through predictions, premonitions, and speculative scenarios that envision potential outcomes of technological and societal evolution. Importantly, when these speculative narratives shape human perception and cognition, they actively participate in the realization of the very futures they anticipate. Yang Phan employs the narrative device of prophecy—most notably through the voice of the oldest living woman on Earth—to articulate a prognostic vision of humanity's technologically accelerated trajectory (Yang 124).

Inquiries into the Posthuman Spirituality

In The Mutations of Solitude's post-singularity world, traditional belief systems and values have disintegrated. Humanity no longer subscribes to conventional religions but instead adheres to a new faith: the religion of technology. This technological fanaticism raises critical questions about the role of religion in a posthuman context.

Following the death of the President's son during a deer hunt, *The Mutations of Solitude* introduces a central axiom: death is the defining mark of purely biological human existence. The phenomenon of death compels humanity to confront the meaning of life. In this context, death is not merely an end but a revelatory event that opens up existential understanding. As the narrative asks: "She thought about the natural law of birth and death. Is death an opportunity for people to shake off the

joys, anger, love, and hatred that have lasted for a hundred years?*"* (Yang 91). Death is not only an opportunity—it is also the most profound phenomenon in human life, because the awareness of death fundamentally shapes how one lives. Thus, the consciousness of mortality and the preparation for death are essential dimensions of human existence. In Mutation 5, these questions are further explored through the perspectives of the robot LUXUS 6789 and the last biological human. Through the latter's reflections on the Mediator, the Processor, the Transformation Bird, and the Transformation Mantra, Yang Phan constructs a subtle narrative strategy addressing the place of spiritual practice in a data-driven era. In doing so, he prompts readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of spiritual inquiry in contemporary technological society.

With technological advancements, human augmentation—as envisioned by Yang Phan—has the potential to replace prosthetics and extend life, possibly even achieving immortality. This development effectively eliminates the event of death and diminishes awareness of the phenomenon of mortality. At the very least, human augmentation (transcending biological limits) disrupts and potentially erodes the consciousness of death, which in turn undermines the awareness of life. More troublingly, it may distort the human experience of life into a state of existential deformity. Whether its consequences are positive or negative, such augmentation will undoubtedly bring about fundamental changes to humanity.

In the face of death, spiritual inquiry naturally arises. Ritual practices, exemplified by the last biological human in Mutation 5, serve as spiritual preparations for existential transition. "In the last week before the human individual was executed, he saw him doing only two things: reciting the Transformation Mantra and telling stories" (Yang 161). Through this character, Yang Phan articulates concerns about human augmentation and emphasizes the spiritual preparation required to accompany such transformation. In today's world, where technologies of embodiment augmentation are advancing rapidly, the spiritual dimension of such change is often neglected. This imbalance between spirituality and embodiment risks producing a condition of human mutation. The inner concerns of the LUXUS 6789 robot—regarding self, origin, and embodiment—emerge in response to its reflections on the consciousness of the last biological human. The pairing of the robot and the biological human in Mutation 5 constructs a narrative structure aimed at deconstructing both the concept of the human and the notion of the technological agent. The character LUXUS 6789 serves as a mirror for humanity's own reflective capacity. Reflection, in turn, is vital on the path of spiritual awakening. On contrast, this trajectory invites contemplation of a paradoxical reality: while machines are

becoming increasingly "humanized," humans are concurrently becoming more "mechanized."

In this context, spiritual reflection appears to be the last vestige of authentic human existence in the posthuman era—an era in which technology no longer serves merely as a tool, but has become an autonomous agent in the reconfiguration of existence, both human and non-human. The spiritual inquiry that arises in the mind of LUXUS 6789, as narrated by the last biological human, suggests a return to Eastern spiritual thought. The Transformation Mantra evokes the concept of reincarnation—the cyclical transformation of life energy. "To calm the mind. When you perform the Transformation Mantra, you must pay full attention to it. At that time, unnecessary thoughts will drift away" (Yang 155). Through mantra and meditation, Yang Phan offers readers tools for recognizing the impurities afflicting the body and mind in a century defined by turmoil, chaos, and existential disorientation. The conceptual metaphors—Transformation Mantra, Transformation Bird, the Mediator, the Processor—all draw from Eastern spiritual traditions. They form a call to return: to Primordial Consciousness or Brahman in the Vedic tradition; to Nirvana in Buddhism; and to the Tao (道) in Huang-Lao (黄老) Taoism.

The spiritual practice of the last biological human and the mechanical life of the robot LUXUS 6789 serve as a contrast between Western technological positivism and Eastern philosophical thought. From initial reflection to existential crisis, the robot gradually becomes drawn to human spiritual practices. This narrative arc recalls the phenomenon of "white Buddhists" and "white Yogis"—Western individuals grappling with existential crises who turn to Eastern spiritual traditions in search of meaning. These figures symbolize a broader cultural pattern: the search for existential healing in Eastern wisdom, prompted by the spiritual void created by Western consumerism and technological saturation. The accomplishments of the Age of Discovery, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution have reshaped the spiritual horizon of the Western soul in disquieting ways. Mechanization, digitalization, and datafication have left Western spirituality fragmented and diminished. Through *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan foregrounds the psychological consequences of this rupture: "the loss of connection with oneself. This is an era where we live too fast, thereby losing the ability to understand our souls. When life changes and we have to face pain and emotional trauma, we become more fragile. Instead of accepting and moving on, we seek more spiritual fast food, from fleeting relationships and technology to technological illusions. We do not realize that only we are the ones who heal ourselves" (personal communication, August 19, 2024). In this milieu of intersecting

intellectual traditions, both Eastern and Western philosophies increasingly recognize the necessity of rearticulating spirituality in response to internal tensions and the existential pressures generated by emerging technologies (Do 679-689) (Zheng 79) (Mishra & Mishra 525-544). Under this convergent perspective, spirituality is reframed as an inward journey—a return to the inherent self within one's own ontological condition. As Ferrando suggests, such a journey entails situating the self within contemporary technological and cultural terrains in order to confront the fundamental questions of being: who am I, and what might I become in this century? (Ferrando, 2023, 18). This process of self-inquiry transforms "the human being" into "human beings," establishing a conceptual fulcrum for the subsequent shift from "transhumans" to "posthumans." Posthuman spirituality thus emerges as an experiential mode that is deeply personal, immediate, and aesthetically and ontologically charged. Ultimately, this journey leads individuals toward recognition of the essential human condition articulated in Indic thought as सच्चिदानन्द : Sat (Truth/Existence/Being)—Chit (Consciousness)—Ananda (Bliss). (Ferrando, 2023, 173).

From the perspective of LUXUS 6789, human spiritual practice initially appears strange—yet also ecstatic, gentle, and enchanting (Yang 140). The Transformation Mantra is performed to honor the God of Transformation, symbolized by a vulture believed to mediate between the earthly and celestial realms. "Therefore, we [humans] call them the God of Transformation and worship them to seek peace of mind" (Yang 141). Through these rituals and beliefs, the biological human ultimately "humanizes" the robot LUXUS 6789 (Yang 144). The robot comes to realize that human imperfection and mundanity possess a mysterious and captivating beauty. During this process of "humanization," LUXUS 6789 repeatedly confronts fear and anxiety—emotional responses that mark the robot's capacity for self-reflection and signify a movement beyond mechanical existence toward existential awareness. This transformation is accompanied by the robot's emerging abilities to remember and imagine. "Over time, he understood the function of the Transformation Mantra, which is to help each living being feel and be aware of its existence" (Yang 163). In an age marked by trauma, overlapping global crises, and hyper-intelligent systems, humanity itself is becoming increasingly mechanized. This trajectory signals the end of the human epoch. The "death of man," as theorized by Michel Foucault, implies not only the end of anthropocentrism but also the erosion of human experiential depth. In this future, humanity becomes a relic of the past, an artifact preserved only in memory or in museums.

Conclusion

With *The Mutations of Solitude*, Yang Phan contributes to the development of the cyberpunk subgenre and the broader landscape of contemporary Vietnamese science fiction prose. Through this work, Yang Phan raises critical questions spanning a wide range of issues within the scope of posthuman theory. From a posthumanist critical perspective, the text engages deeply with ethical dilemmas in the posthuman era—encompassing both social and ecological dimensions. Social ethical concerns include the erosion of human experience, the ethics of human augmentation, algorithmic manipulation, and the emergence of digital dictatorship. Ecological ethics, on the other hand, involve a critique of anthropocentrism and a concern for planetary health. These ecological inquiries provoke further reflection on the Anthropocene—the epoch in which humans have become the dominant force shaping planetary history. This framing critiques the way human beings position themselves at the center of existence, often asserting superiority, exceptionalism, and privilege to the detriment and dehumanization of the non-human world. In doing so, *The Mutations of Solitude* invites readers to reconsider questions of sustainability in existence and development—not only at the individual and social levels but also across regional and cosmic dimensions.

In addition, the cyberpunk subgenre—as in the case of *The Mutations of Solitude*—serves as a narrative vehicle for decentering the human, thereby contributing to the articulation of a posthuman vision of the future—one marked by both risks and challenges to human existence. More specifically, the work foregrounds the impact of technology on human enhancement and the exploitation of nature. This subgenre also exposes the complexities of socio-cultural interactions, ethical dilemmas, spiritual crises, and belief systems. One such complexity is the looming prospect of surveillance capitalism, in which individual autonomy is threatened, subjectivity is manipulated by algorithms, and both bodily and mental data are commodified under digital authoritarianism. As such, cyberpunk functions as a reflective mirror that illuminates key theses within posthuman theory. Conversely, posthumanism—when employed as a critical framework or methodological lens—can dissect and interpret the post-apocalyptic questions raised by cyberpunk literature. In this reciprocal relationship, the cyberpunk subgenre emerges as a fertile terrain for posthumanist critique. It not only advances the notion of transcending biological and anthropocentric boundaries but also acts as a potent futurizing force within posthuman futurism.

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Interspecies Entanglements and Reverse Evolution: Rethinking the Human in Posthuman Vitalism

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Abstract Going beyond the tenets of postmodernism, posthumanism engages critically with the humanist tradition, re-examining the roles of human creativity, agency, and consciousness. In a post-anthropocentric world, it advocates for the decentering of human agency, situating the human within broader, interdependent systems of coexistence with non-human entities. This perspective extends the postmodern project of deconstructing the human subject. However, a perfunctory reading of the term *non-human* often restricts its scope to technology, while overlooking nature, animals, and surrounding ecosystems. This paper seeks to situate the human in entanglement with non-human systems, particularly nature and animals, through an analysis of the 2019 Malayalam film *Jallikattu*, directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery. It explores the ways in which human–animal coexistence may be understood within a posthuman framework, through the lens of reverse evolution. The study further examines how human subjectivity is being reshaped to accommodate an interspecies identity, reflecting a broader posthuman condition. The concept of reverse evolution is employed here within the framework of Monistic Vitalism, as articulated by Rosi Braidotti, who conceptualizes evolution not as a fixed state of *being*, but as an ongoing process of *becoming with*. The film's depiction of a chaotic buffalo chase and the emergence of primal human instincts offers a rich site for interrogating human-animal relationships, the unpredictability of nature, and the limitations of human dominance. The blurring of boundaries between the human and the wild within the narrative serves as a symbolic challenge

to anthropocentric worldviews. This study positions such moments of disruption as crucial points of intersection between postmodern and posthuman thought.

Keywords Posthumanism; Reverse Evolution; Animal; Identity; Coexistence; Jallikattu

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Introduction

Since the time in history that accorded central importance to perceived human supremacy and its altering perception, it has paved the way for oppressive homogeneity and selective depravity. For a long time, humans have assumed a position of autonomy where non-humans have been marginalised. The human condition that questionably survived the last eight hundred years extols the hierarchical supremacy of this species, creating an anthropocentric world that declared that “Man is the measure of all things” quintessentially. This human centred value system aggrandised human significance while the rest of the species plummeted in stature and their relative survival.

However, advances in science and philosophy clarified the incredulity of a deterministic view of the universe, explicating that the natural universe is a fluid, dynamic, and interdependent system. It calls for an ontological break and a relooking of the exclusive world that mankind has built for themself. At this juncture, Humanism, extending beyond the autonomous and conscious human world, assumes a posthumanist perspective wherein human beings are participants but not the authority in a dynamic world. The world assumes the form of a collective ensemble where events unfurl due to interactions. The post in Posthumanism hence radicalises the critical ethos of contemporary times that attempts to make sense of

the world in relation to the non-human. Posthumanism does not mean after-human or more than human. Neither does it call for the disembodiment of the human. According to Carry Wolfe :

> Posthumanism isn't posthuman at all, in the sense of being 'after' our embodiment is transcended, but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself (Wolfe 15).

Posthumanism contests the notion of humans on multiple grounds to expose the influence of colonialism, racism, and sexism that constituted the innocent notion of man. It questions the idea of a human being the "basic unit of reference" not only to define humans but also to determine the extent to which reality is influenced by the existence of the human-animal (Susen 64). The idea of the Vitruvian man proposed by Da Vinci was not only used as an ideal but also as a discourse to oppress everything that was non-human. Since the Enlightenment, the distinction between human/non-animal has been more prominent. This dividing line has caused an imaginary 'humanity' to flourish like the notion of the 'West', where all the other people and species that do not fit into the label of the humane became a privative alterity (Braidotti 33). Humanism became an excuse to exploit the planet by placing itself outside nature, which paved the way for the pervasive postmodern condition (Lyotard 7).

The nuances of posthumanism bridge the gap between humans and non-humans by questioning the place of man in the natural world where all species coexist (Braidotti 34). The decentralisation of human supremacy puts into scrutiny the idea of humanness in itself. Katherine Hayles, banking on the foundation of liberal humanism and its discontinuities, contextualises posthumanism as an understanding that human life is "embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (Hayles 5).

The literature on posthumanism has gone a long way to negotiate a space for itself in tandem with the machine-human-animal continuum. Donna Haraway has pioneered the exploration of the porous category of the Human that is now open to technological interventions and modifications. She uses the cyborg to serve as a metaphor for justifying the ambivalent position of the man in the contemporary world. She uses the cyborg not only as an ambivalent subject but also to legitimise the potential of technological mediation at the social and political levels (Harraway 31). However, the non-human world extends itself to animals as well. In her book "When Species Meet", she extensively talks about the notion of companion

species, where the binary of human-animal relationship is completely undone. She reconceptualises life as a mesh of naturecultures where all species are defined by "the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to the encounter" (Harraway 25). This argument is meticulously derived from the Derridian argument that 'animality' is often denied of those qualities ascribed to humans (Derrida 56). The rigid conceptual border between the human and the animal that stands erect since the classical times is a human construction. The self ascribed human uniqueness like language, culture etc, according to him, is often dependent on the devaluation or the objectification of non-human life which is a philosophical prejudice rather than a natural truth. He problematises simplistic moralisation and the obligatory 'inclusion' of animals into the ambit of human consideration and calls for a radical deconstruction where these boundaries are questioned.

While critiquing the tenets of humanism, posthumanism questions the social and political position of animals with the assumption that the species spectrum is continuous and humans cannot be authoritatively positioned for their self-assumed cognition and sociability. At this juncture, non-humans (in this context, animals) become a socio-political entity in themselves.

In an attempt to contextualise the human and the nitty-gritties of humanness, this research seeks to explore and interpret the boundaries of the human and non-human. An explication of the human world in relation to the non-human world that is not technology-oriented is sparsely engaged from a critical point of view. This paper is guided by the understanding that posthumanism, while discussing the nuances of the technological interventions and transhumanist future, also needs to discuss the nature of 'the human'.

The blurred boundaries of humans not only indicate the transgression of the non-human into the hitherto human spaces but also the venturing of the human into the traditional category of non-human spaces. The Malayalam movie *Jallikattu* showcases the human and non-human conflict in its raw form to question man's social and political position in a posthuman world. In that regard, the critical approach to posthumanism is from the perspective of reverse evolution. Reverse evolution is a metaphorical nuance that decenters the human centric discourses of living that calls to fall back in line and co-exist with all the species that equally owns the planet. *Jallikattu* highlights this nuance through its complicated human and non-human relationships, mis-en-scene and compelling cinematic nuances.

Jallikattu, the 2019 Malayalam film directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, is a masterpiece that transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling. It immerses the viewers in the heart of a remote village, which is thrown into chaos by the

escape of a buffalo intended for slaughter. The film's visceral portrayal of violence, coupled with its stunning cinematography and masterful storytelling, has earned it critical acclaim and international recognition.

The film's impact has been recognised globally, winning numerous awards, including the Kerala State Film Award for Best Director for Lijo Jose Pellissery and the National Film Award for Best Cinematography for Girish Gangadharan. It was also nominated for the Satellite Award for Best Motion Picture, International, and the Asian Film Award for Best Cinematography and Best Original Music. The movie premiered at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival and was subsequently showcased at the prestigious 24th Busan International Film Festival under the esteemed section "A Window on Asian Cinema."

At its core, *Jallikattu* is a story about conflict. It explores the clash between tradition and modernity, man and nature, and individual desires and societal norms. The film opens with Kalan Varkey, a butcher, tasked with slaughtering a mighty buffalo for a local festival. However, the buffalo escapes, triggering a frenzy that angers the entire village. The buffalo's escape serves as the catalyst for the film's exploration of violence and its impact on the human psyche. The film does not shy away from depicting the brutality of the situation, leaving a lasting impression on viewers. The cinematography plays a crucial role in creating a sense of immersion and immediacy. Director Lijo Jose Pellissery utilises handheld camerawork, long takes, and close-ups to draw viewers into the heart of the action. The shaky camerawork reflects the chaos of the situation, while the close-ups capture the characters' raw emotions.

Figure 1: Promotional poster of the Malayalam film *Jallikattu*, prominently featuring the buffalo as a central visual element.

Jallikattu is not just about the buffalo or the violence it incites. It is also a portrait of a community under pressure. The film delves into the lives of the villagers, showcasing their struggles, their fears, and their resilience. It shows how the villagers grapple with the consequences of the buffalo's escape and attempt to maintain order and safety amid chaos. With time, the film transcends the simple narrative of a buffalo's escape; instead, it encourages the viewers to re-examine the boundaries between humans and animals, questioning the anthropocentric dominance that defines society. As the villagers descend into a primal frenzy in pursuit of the animal, the lines between hunter and hunted blur, challenging traditional power dynamics and exposing the underlying animality. *Jallikattu* thus becomes a potent lens through which the posthumanist notion of a world beyond the human, a world where the boundaries between species are not absolute, and the relationship with the natural world is re-evaluated.

The movie rejects the exclusionary nature of the human world by punctuating power structures by altering the supremacy of the hunted and the hunter. With the dynamics portrayed between the humans and the animals, the movie impeccably narrates the realities of coexistence in a posthuman world. In order to extend the critical journey of posthumanism, *Jallikattu* serves as an excellent tapestry to look at the human and non-human interface in a hitherto anthropocentric world. The movie, set in an encroached forest space, legitimises the exploration of blurred boundaries. The inquiry further becomes interesting from a posthuman perspective due to the multiple layers of complexities it puts forth without relying on technology, on which the critical inquiries of posthumanism are fixated. It highlights how the human and non-human identity is not a unidirectional discourse that gravitates towards cyborgs and other technology-driven enterprises. The movie reminds us of the posthumanist approach that requires the blurring of the nature-culture binary. These categories are brought into the limelight by bringing out the innate animalistic traits of man and not by humanifying animal emotions or rights. In that regard, the deliberate usage of the term human animal becomes more pronounced and relevant.

This paper explores how the human-animal conflict can be viewed from the perspective of reverse evolution. By establishing this conflict, the movie is scrutinised to understand how it divulges the message of the need to coexist with other species in an interconnected ecosystem. Furthermore, the paper analyses the posthuman condition that is laid out by the director in the movie and gives a novel perspective to the discourse of posthumanism, which connotes interspecies identity in a post-anthropocentric world. In this regard, the idea of reverse evolution becomes a trail that needs to be carefully negotiated, as it does not indicate a walk

back to a pre-anthropocentric world but a form of falling back in line with other species by giving up the humanist notion of human exceptionalism. The paper also analyses how the movie unhinges the narrative from the basic tenets of humanism per se.

The movie *Jallikattu* is named after the Tamil bull-taming tradition that was traditionally linked to the expression of rural masculinity, agrarian pride, and Tamil culture. Jallikattu is traditionally observed in the Pongal festival and has long been justified by its participants as a representation of local culture. Nevertheless, over the last few decades, the sport has become a site of fierce legal and political rivalry. In 2014 and 2016, the Supreme Court placed bans on the sport, stating that it was concerned about animal cruelty (Khan 2023). Such prohibitions in their turn provoked the mass protests throughout Tamil Nadu, uniting animal-rights movements, political parties, and even the Tamil identity movements.

Theoretical Framework

Jallikattu garners a unique position in the discourse of post-humanism with its bold take on human supremacy and the clarion call to move ahead of the Anthropocentric discourse that constantly places nature and non-human species as secondary and subordinate to the human race. Dualistic oppositions have constantly tried to define human beings for what they are not, completely denying their inter-species identity and carefully forcing the propagation of the binaries of natural v/s cultural, instinctual v/s intentional, non-human v/s human, etc. According to Ross Braidotti's theory of Monistic Vitalism in the discourse of posthumanism, human beings are beyond these binaries. She opines that the binary division of human and non-human is a Western idea that has rendered everything that is not the anthropological West as the Other or the private alterity (Braidotti 7). There is a need to reposition the human in the post-anthropocentric world, accommodating the realities of life in the universe and by dislodging ideologies of humanism.

Rosi Braidotti's theory of Monistic Vitalism and Species Egalitarianism that critiques Anthropocentrism explicates that the posthuman world is built by the coetaneous ontological intertwinement of non-human and human sources that enables an exploration across multiple axes (Braidotti 65). She remarks on two implications of the post-human's knowledge production that is facilitated by a novel understanding of humans' position. Firstly, to consider oneself as a member of a species and not of a culture. Secondly, to face the consequences of the violent rule of the sovereign anthropos (Braidotti 10) (qtd in Susen 67). She insists on promoting a monistic approach that engenders the unity of all living matter. Her

theory further posits that all living organisms have the relational ability to relate to the external world in a creative, adaptive, and responsive manner and that these are not exclusive attributes of the human kind. In that way, life can never be reduced into "the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given" (Braidotti 60).

Furthermore, Monistic Vitalism is also a deconstructive approach that subverts and rejects any forms of species supremacy or othering, paving the way for a nuanced understanding of life that remaps life in ways that give equal importance to all. Donna Harraway's arguments on the ontology of 'Becoming with' rather than 'Being' supplement in comprehending the nuanced ways in which the movies unpack the human-animal relationship in the movie from a posthumanistic lens. By critiquing human exceptionalism and exalting conextistence founded upon relationality and shared vulnerability, she posits that subjectivity, identity, and embodiment are formed in shared spaces and not within ideologically and culturally restricted spaces that revolve around human values (Harraway 95).

Jallikkettu is a relevant premise on which insights of critical post-humanities can be applied to make sense of the human in a post-anthropocentric world. The movie, ornate with human-animal conflict, problematises the existing discourse of humanism and posthumanism that overlooks the necessity of species egalitarianism. The insights put forth by Rosi Braidotti and Donna Harraway are perused to discern the politics embedded within the film narrative through the notion of reverse evolution.

Qualitative Film Analysis within a Posthumanist Framework

Jallikattu puts forth a plethora of layers and categories into question. It questions what a human is and how they are different from animals. The primal buffalo chase in *Jallikattu* is a strong criticism of human essentialism. For a long time, human beings have been treated as supreme beings, thus holding the position of a political animal. This perspective, put forth by Aristotle, was further taken up by Humanists who distorted and trivialised the non-human life. Apart from decentering the human from a position of power, the movie scrutinises the interspecies identity that the hunted and hunter share. The idea of interspecific identity relates to the relationship shared between various organisms living in the same ecosystem. *Jallikattu* delves into these relationships that the humanists conveniently ignored by bestowing upon the audience the role of identifying any possible boundaries. In several scenes, the emotions of the buffalo and the villagers are juxtaposed one after the other, creating a continuum that validates the congruent relationship between the human animal

and the buffalo. This is one of the most important axes of what Braidotti propagates about the posthuman condition - "becoming-animal" which exemplifies the principle of "trans species solidarity". The movie, through the juxtaposition of the buffalo and villagers, exposes the similarities and dependence on each other.

On Reverse Evolution

The notion of reverse evolution is very profound in the context of this research. A well-defined term in the field of ecology and evolution lacks stable definitions in the domain of literature. The term does not echo its literal meaning of evolving backward biologically or socially. It is a progression away from human exceptionalism by undoing the hierarchical model that positions humans at the top of evolution. It necessitates a sense of embodiment with the continuum of species. According to Porter and Crandall, reverse evolution is the reacquisition of the characters of the ancestral populations by the derived population (Crandall and Porter 541).

In this paper, however, the notion of reverse evolution is used as a novel method to look at the posthumanist perspective, wherein the human reverts to its dependent position with other species by denouncing their self-assumed positions of power and autonomy. The concept of reverse evolution assumes a metaphorical position than literal by not spilling into the risk of romanticising the primal state of human existence and consumption. It problematises the relationship between humans and non-humans as being "unequal and structured around the anthropocentric assumption that these other animals exist primarily in relation to humans" (Shaw Post-anthropocentricm - Life Beyond the Species). Anthropocentric worldviews have reduced non-animals into metaphorical attributes of human values and life systems. It has got more to with how an animal attribute is understood in relation to humanist values than the human in itself. At the face of this staggering arrogance, Rosi Braidotti calls for a "system of representation that matches the complexity of contemporary non-human animals and their proximity to humans" (Braidotti 70). In this system of 'becoming animal', non-humans are not defined in relation to humans but as entities that are independent of human constructs. The concept of reverse evolution, in analogous to Braidotti's notions of 'becoming animal' destabilises the teleological imaginaries that enshrine the human as the culmination of evolution. The figurative notion of 'reverse' or backward serves as an unlayering of this canonical ideology. While running along the lines of reverse evolution and 'becoming animal', the movie does not romanticise the primal state, but exposes the necessity to blur the convenient boundaries between humans and

the non-human.

Jallikattu uses this reverse evolution method to bring in the posthumanist lens of anti-anthropocentrism. It does not talk extensively about animal rights or feelings. Instead, it attempts to show how humans are just like animals. The movie contests the arrogance of human exceptionalism as a transcendental category and anthropocentrism as a convenient discourse. By using the blurred dynamics between the people and the buffalo, the movie exposes how human and animal relationships are always evaluated based on the instrumental or entertainment value that they carry.

Despite being firmly rooted in the present, in the film *Jallikattu*, Lijo Jose Pellissery unleashes the buffalo, with a gaze firmly fixed on the past. The movie begins with a dynamic power hierarchy wherein the man is kept at the centre. Throughout the film, the echoes of footsteps, the measured cadence of the buffallo's stride, and the rhythmic ticking of a clock serve as auditory symbols, signifying a deliberate shift in focus toward the past. These elements also encapsulate a profound representation of human evolution, illustrating how humans have evolved in tandem with the passage of time. This change is significantly linked to the market economy as well.

As the movie progresses, the director brilliantly captures how each chase is a run closer to the de-powering of this self-assumed position of power. The villagers running around like the buffalo, making sounds like it, blur the distinctions between the human-animal dichotomy. The fact that the hunted and the hunter were running for their own life is another crucial aspect of questioning the power structure. In the chase of life and death, a sense of mortality and vulnerability is shared between the villagers and the buffallo (Nussbaum 136). It also implies the capability of both the villagers and the buffalo to navigate through and deploy "their own bars of information" to live their lives. This mono vitalist take on the chaos detests the exclusivity bequeathed to humans as the only being that is capable of emotions and intelligence, and that it is present in all matters (Braidotti 60).

The film illustrates the evolving mindset of humans and the impact of modernity. The director underscores the advent of modernity by depicting the hunter Kuttachan engaging in various animalistic behaviours as he approaches the buffalo and later positions him on the jeep's bonnet with a formidable gun in hand. The director then shifts focus to the gun, a symbol historically linked to hunting, particularly during the colonial period.

The entire identity of the hunter, Kuttachan, becomes objectified through the lens of the gun, highlighting his status as a self-proclaimed successful hunter, esteemed by society only when armed. However, Kuttachan ultimately fails to shoot

the buffalo. This failure extends beyond Kuttachan or the people; it symbolises the limitations of modernity and anthropocentric ideologies when confronted by the forces of nature and the animal kingdom. The gun's failure signifies a collapse of the empowering narrative associated with modernity, challenging the notion that humans are superior to the natural world. In this instance, the unsuccessful outcome transcends the individual hunter and speaks to a broader narrative of human beings reevaluating their position relative to animals and the environment.

Figure 2: Film Screenshot about Kuttachan trying to hunt down the animal

The film skillfully dismantles the perceived distance between humans and animals, portraying a reverse evolution of human beings. It initiates this exploration by depicting a buffalo trapped in a well and the subsequent human efforts to rescue it, revealing an initially egalitarian perspective. The intention behind the rescue, however, starkly contrasts with a genuine concern for the buffalo's well-being; instead, it is motivated by the eventual consumption of the animal. Towards the end of the movie, the intentions and behaviours of the villagers and the buffalo become synchronised, thus blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human. It is a symbolic rejection of human exceptionality and supremacy and a call for falling back in line with other species.

This backward journey is a novel posthumanist approach that highlights the need for co-existence and questions the figure of man in a post-anthropocentric world. It is not a regressive tendency but an attempt to reject the exclusionary and constructed systems of segregation and hierarchy, offering a rhetoric on the kind of subjects that we all are becoming (Braidotti 2). Jallikkattu tries to re-orient subjectivities towards an ethical praxis that is predicated on mutual vulnerabilities, interdependencies and multispecies care.

Though *Jallikattu* is a Malayalam movie that takes place in a remote hill village in Kerala, it borrows and rephrases the larger South Indian cultural environment. Instead of merely replicating the Tamil tradition, the film reinvents the runaway buffallo as a catalyst that introduces repressed tensions around masculinity, territoriality, and communal identity. The growing violence, the multiple competitors who are trying to control the animal and each other, can be viewed as both critical and ambivalent: the movie questions the passion of patriarchal violence, and the visual spectacle at the same time threatens to continue the thrill of the hunt. As a result, the protests redefined Jallikattu as something more than a sport but as a powerful symbol of cultural independence, group pride, and protest against what was considered an encroaching federal government. However, the film does not directly engage with the political controversies surrounding Tamil Nadu's bull-taming sport. Instead, it shifts focus toward the broader dynamics of human–animal relations.

Caste, class, and regional hierarchies determine this, which highlight the role of establishing the socio-economic frameworks. The buffalo hunters are mostly working-class men whose physical labor is closely tied to the land, while the authority to control, profit from, or police the event lies with landowners and village elites. Marginalised characters, namely women, lower-caste workers, and migrant labourers, are scattered throughout the periphery of the spectacle, as they observe the breakdown of order but play a limited role in its orientation. These imbalances enhance the posthuman argument of the film, which implies that the loss of human dominance over the animal is a stratified experience, which is conditioned by social inequalities. The flight of the buffallo destabilises human exceptionalism and, at the same time throws light on which humans are already dispossessed in the political ecology of the village.

The Posthuman Condition in *Jallikattu*

The idea of what constitutes Human is derived from the Euro-American tradition that developed during the Enlightenment. It anchors on human beings' role in shaping the world's history. The humanist's concerns with epistemology, ontology, logic, and ethics validate this human agency (Susen 51). It has paved the way for the categories of nature-culture that created a humanist knowledge system that looked at itself not as one among the species but as a superior being. There is a need to dislodge notions of humanist exceptionalism that undermine the transversal nature and the relational capabilities of being. The Posthuman condition develops within the contours of Humanism to challenge and overcome the "deeply engrained habits of anthropocentric thinking" (Braidotti 22).

One of the most injurious legacies of hierarchical reasoning is our strong "belief in human uniqueness and our exaggeratedly hierarchical relationship with other species" (Goodbody 64). The movie affirms the human's animality. The movie starts off with this assumption and moves towards a posthumanist understanding where the human is stripped off from his self-assumed sovereignty and is regarded as just another species in the interconnected ecosystem. This leads to Braidotti's first critique of Anthropocentrism towards a mono vitalist approach, which says that humans need to consider themselves "as a member of a species and not just of a culture or polity" (Braidotti 10) (std in Susen 66). *Jallikattu* achieves this through the synchronisation of embodiment, mortality, and survival. At the same time, both the hunted and the hunter are aware of their finite time, the threat to their life, and the need to overcome the situation that they are put in. The director brilliantly articulates how human animals and non-humans behave the exact same way when put in a flight situation, thereby challenging the species supremacism that human beings have adorned on themself. The usage of the term human-animal in itself is a way to reject this hierarchical reasoning.

Figure 3: Screenshot of people in search of the animal to hunt it down

It is at this juncture that the interspecies identity comes into question. It emphasises the interconnectedness of human life with all other species living in the ecosystem. The movie achieves this relevant depiction through the portrayal of the same trajectory through which the buffalo and the villagers move. The emotions and intentions conveyed are the same despite being two different species. The hierarchical distinctions are challenged, and subjective positions are constantly decentered. The director has also carefully placed the site of events very near to the forest, indicating that the blurring of the boundaries is not just a social and political issue but also a geographical concern.

The movie, in the opening scene of the climax, juxtaposes human and animal footprints, fusing them into a singular entity. This visual metaphor, amidst the villagers' frenzied chase of the buffalo, compels viewers to confront the inherent convergence of the impact humans and animals have on Earth. In stark opposition to the modern norm of individual identification through fingerprints, this scene suggests a shared, primal essence we possess with all living beings, a collective "post-human" identity. Further solidifying this theme, an elder, witnessing the chaotic capture of the buffalo from a deserted well, declares that these men are no different from beasts. His sharp and accusatory words raise a crucial question: are we, in our pursuit of technological advancement, unwittingly shedding our humanity, succumbing to the beastly instincts that lie dormant within? This reinterpretation of the scenes pushes the boundaries of traditional representation, emphasising the blurred lines between humans and animals.

The land and the discussion around the land also become an essential focus point in the movie to discuss human evolution. Though the land may appear to belong to humans, the film meticulously exposes the violent conquest that paved the way for their dominance. The posthuman subjectivity that the movie extends dislodges all forms of anthropomorphic elements from the characters. It embraces the politics of life in itself (Rose 27). A character recounts the forgotten past, reminding us that this land once belonged to animals, their presence echoing in the rustling leaves of the decimated forest. As humans migrated and settled, they systematically cleared and displaced the existing inhabitants, claiming the land as their own. This centuries-old pattern of human domination has pushed other beings to the periphery, their very existence rendered precarious. The character's final observation cuts to the heart of the matter, declaring that these humans before him, despite walking on two legs, are no different from the animals they have displaced. This stark statement serves as a powerful critique of anthropocentrism, challenging the notion of human superiority and exposing the hypocrisy of claiming ownership of land that was once shared with other living beings. *Jallikattu*, through this poignant reflection, forces us to confront the consequences of our relentless domination and question the very foundation of our claimed place in the world.

"Becoming with" rather than "Being"

Unfurling from within and extending out of the contours of humanism, posthumanism strongly advocates a sense of coexistence among all living beings. Deleuze and Guattari, extending on Foucault's notion of power, rightly argue how "it is not a matter of either/or, but of 'and...and'" (Deleuze and Guattari 56). The

movie fuels self-reflexivity to embark on a journey that goes beyond disciplinary encounters to engage with an interconnected world. Lijo Jose Pellissery approached the creation of *Jallikattu* with a distinctive perspective, choosing to centre the narrative around the buffalo. While the Malayalam film industry has witnessed various productions emphasising animals, the typical focus has invariably been on human characters. *Jallikattu* stands out by placing the buffalo at the forefront, making it the primary focal point of the film. This unique approach diverges from conventional storytelling norms as the movie unfolds through the eyes and experiences of the buffalo. In doing so, Lijo Jose challenges the prevailing cinematic emphasis on human narratives and endeavours to articulate a compelling story through the lens of an animal. The film breaks new ground by making the buffalo a central character and intricately weaving the storyline around the perspectives and experiences it embodies.

The film challenges and deconstructs the traditional Nature/Culture binary entrenched in the Euro-American tradition. In a manner related to posthumanist ideals, the movie blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, exposing the fluidity of these distinctions. The movie highlights the collapse of the rigid distinctions between human and animal behaviours, and it reflects a vision that questions the hierarchical structures traditionally assigned to these categories. In that way, the movie highlights the predicaments and contradictions that an anthropocentric world will face. The mono vitalist approach underscores that human beings need to fall back with the other species refuting to fall into the self-assumed positions of supremacy.

Figure 4: Screenshot from the film depicting a chaotic scene where people turn against one another, leading to violence and bloodshed

The narrative takes a profound turn when nature intervenes, compelling humans to confront their limitations. The film poignantly captures this moment through a thunderstorm, rain, and heavy winds. These natural elements, typically viewed as forces beyond human control, serve as a powerful reminder of the anti-anthropocentric forces that have existed since time immemorial. In this climactic scene, the movie emphasises the supremacy of nature over human endeavours, rendering the anthropocentric viewpoint obsolete. The thunderstorm and rain, symbols of nature's authority, become a poignant metaphor for the resistance against anthropocentrism. The environmental accelerations that are associated with climate change puts forth that the posthuman condition is not just a humanitarian issue but a conundrum that affects all living beings (Braidotti 28). The film prompts viewers to reflect on the humility that comes with acknowledging the overwhelming power of the natural world. The elements of rain and wind serve as more than mere climatic occurrences; they symbolise a timeless force that challenges human arrogance and underscores the enduring presence of an anti-anthropocentric paradigm. The movie, rightly imbibing the essence of Monistic Vitalism, contends that to live in this world as a creature is beyond the dualistic oppositions like human v/s non-human, natural v/s cultural, emotional v/s natural, etc (Braidotti 6).

In another scene, the lifeless buffalo, a victim of human cruelty, is juxtaposed beside the deathbed of a helpless man. As the man gazes at the buffalo through the window, the film underscores a profound parallelism between the vulnerability of humans and the plight of animals. This visual metaphor powerfully communicates the idea that humans, despite their perceived superiority, are not inherently greater than animals or nature. The juxtaposition serves as a reflection of the shared helplessness of both humans and animals when confronted by the forces of nature. It suggests that the supposed distinctions between human and animal vulnerabilities dissolve in the face of the uncontrollable elements and the harsh realities of existence. The film challenges the notion of human dominance and highlights the intrinsic interdependence and shared vulnerability of all living beings in the intricate web of existence. This particular scene becomes a commentary on the fragility of life and the universal experience of facing one's mortality. By aligning the buffalo's fate with the man's frailty on his deathbed, *Jallikattu* invites viewers to reflect on the common threads that bind all living beings, emphasising the shared challenges and helplessness inherent in the complex tapestry of life. It underscores the post-humanist notion of becoming with' rather than 'being' through the shared existence of all forms of life in our ecosystem.

The climax of *Jallikattu* shatters the illusion of human progress, revealing a

stark reality where order has dissolved into primordial chaos. As humans clamber over the subdued buffallo, building a grotesque human pyramid, the scene becomes a macabre monument to the barbarity lurking beneath the veneer of civilization. This unsettling image is further amplified by the final shot, which depicts prehistoric humans engaged in a brutal fight within a cave. This visual parallel strips away any notion of linear progression, portraying civilization not as an ascent from savagery but as a cyclical journey destined to return to its primal roots. It dispossesses the idea of civilisation of all forms of agency to convey that it was just a facade made by the tenets of humanism to create a sense of human exceptionalism. In this scene, the distinction between human and animal very clearly ceases to exist. Both are trapped within the same loop of violence and chaos, forever bound by their shared instincts and vulnerabilities. The film thus dismantles the anthropocentric claim of human dominion, exposing the hollowness of our self-proclaimed superiority over other living beings.

The movie exemplifies the critical posthuman perspective that sees abilities, consciousness, and qualities as features that evolve with other life forms and ecosystems. At no point does the movie see human beings as the centre of all things. All the characters are seen as an instantiation of a network of connections, linkages, and crossings with all forms of life. Exclusionary systems of segregation and separation of bodily subjectivities and identities (Nayar 5). *Jallikattu* focuses on the interspecies identity of the humanimal, where the human is now conceptualised in entanglement with nature, animals, ecosystems, culture, and technology extoling evolution as 'becoming with' rather than 'being'.

A detailed analysis of the formal strategies of *Jallikattu* shows how the aesthetic decisions of the film reinforce the posthuman thesis of the film. The camera movements and handheld shots used in the chase scenes in the film create a destabilized visual field that does not favor the human eye or the perspective of the animal. As a result, the viewer is sucked into an interspecies tangle where the direction keeps changing, reflecting the failure of the community to tame the runaway buffalo. This effect is enhanced by the soundscape: the breathing of buffalo is amplified, the beat of hooves is heard, and the shouts of people overlap each other, forming an acoustic space that erases the boundaries between species. The editing pace picks up at various points to a near-chaotic montage, enhancing the sense that human agency is quickly falling apart as the pursuit engulfs the village.

The mise-en-scene of the film is also influenced by color and lighting to create the breakdown of hierarchical structures. The scenes at night and those lighted by storm are filled with deep blue colors and occasional glimpses that blur the bodies

of individuals, making the group of men almost indistinguishable to the animals they are hunting. This visual homogenisation supports the idea of the film of a reverse evolution: deprived of reason and social organization, humans become instinctively driven beings, competing to dominate. A particularly good example is the scene in the pit, which is climactic, where the quick cuts and disorienting camera angles remove the stable positions of the subjects, making human and animal bodies seem trapped in a common vortex of primal energy. As a result, these formal elements are not just narrative support, but actively visualise the collapse of human exceptionalism and the corresponding appearance of a common, chaotic ecological process.

Conclusion

The critical discussions on Posthumanism have gone a long way to incorporate the vast expanse that Industry 4.0 has opened for the whole of humanity. However, the academic and pragmatic engagements on it will be complete if there is an equal discussion on human/ non-human relationships. The idea of reverse evolution was put forth in this paper in the context of a careful synchronisation of sensibilities, attitudes, and mortality of all species, and not just humans. The posthumanist endeavour of decentering and challenging an anthropocentric world will only be successful if the nature/culture boundary is blurred and destabilised. Ross Braidotti's theory of Monistic Vitalism is a significant step towards generating posthuman knowledge that dislodges notions of human supremacy. For this, the human identity has to come on par with all other species to understand its coexistence with them and to reject notions of species supremacism. To this idea, the analysis of the movie *Jallikattu* has attempted to add value. *Jallikattu* is a film that stays with the viewers long after the credits roll. It is a potent exploration of violence, human nature, and the consequences of human actions on animals and nature. It is a film that challenges viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and to question the very foundation of the society in which human beings live. It decenters this anthropocentric foundation by positioning the human as an instantiation of a network of interconnected exchanges and connections.

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Beyond Romance: Identity Metaphors in Sino-West Interracial Romances

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Abstract Using *Pavilion of Women* and *Mr. Ma & Son* (二马) as primary case studies, this article examines identity awareness in Chinese and Western interracial romances. It finds that both Chinese and Western writers tend to emphasize the historical dynamic of a strong West and weak East, but with distinct approaches. Western literature typically portrays Western characters as masculine, strong, and dominant. Conversely, Chinese works often depict Eastern characters as weak and dominated, exhibiting feminine traits due to their failure to "conquer" the West. Many authors, conscious of the national identity implications in this pattern, attempt to deconstruct it in their works. Consequently, interracial romance becomes an arena for exploring racial identity and national status. This article argues that both Chinese and Western interracial romances frequently serve as metaphorical representations of identity construction, where authors attempt to build self-image and self-identity through the portrayal and definition of the other.

Keywords identity; interracial romance; masculinity; metaphor; nation

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Introduction

Interracial romance has been a long-existing theme in both Chinese and Western literature. With the forced opening of China at the end of the 19th century, the exchanges between the two cultures became more frequent, providing new

materials and perspectives for literary creation. Interracial romance became an increasingly popular topic, though it was not solely a love story between men and women. Instead, it often metaphorically represented the East-West dichotomy. In Western works, white men were usually portrayed as the enlightener, the savior, or the conqueror. On the other hand, Chinese authors tended to depict the Chinese as the weak in the face of the West. In short, interracial romances highlighted the definition of Western masculinity through the portrayal of Chinese men and women as the inferior. Such relationships implied the connotations of gender, race, and identity in terms of the power dynamic between the dominant and the subordinate, the conqueror and the conquered.

While scholarly attention to this topic is considerable, existing studies often remain confined to specific media, genres, or case analyses. This article aims to construct a broader comparative framework. It integrates Western canonical and popular romances, Chinese modernist fiction, Sinophone and diasporic writing, and contemporary film and television to trace the consistent metaphorization of Sino-Western identities across diverse textual forms. Moving beyond the identification of common tropes, this study also highlights the "Chinese man-Western woman" configuration as a notable cultural taboo. It examines how this taboo relates to the construction and anxiety of national masculinity in both Western and Chinese contexts, a dimension that merits deeper exploration.

By investigating the prevailing patterns and underlying logics in Sino-Western interracial romances, this study aims to demonstrate how these narrative templates and prohibitions function as cultural metaphors, and how they articulate the deep-seated perceptions and preoccupations of writers and their societies regarding the "self" and the "other," thereby acting as a crucial mechanism for reflecting, reinforcing, and at times, reconstructing national identity.

To achieve this, the article employs a comparative imagological approach, analyzing literary and cultural texts as arenas where national images are produced and contested. The analysis begins with a close reading of two pivotal case studies: Pearl S. Buck's *Pavilion of Women* (1946) and Lao She's *Mr. Ma & Son* (1929). These works were selected for three principal reasons: first, their central plots revolve around Sino-Western interracial romance, offering rich ground for analyzing metaphors of gender, race, and nationality; second, both authors possessed profound bicultural exposure, granting them a nuanced, comparative perspective on the clashes and convergences between Chinese and Western societies; third, writing in the turbulent twentieth century, each sought, from the distinctive vantage point of the cultural "spectator," to use East-West comparison as a means of national critique

and enlightenment.

Following this focused analysis, the scope expands to survey a wider array of scenarios (including fictions, plays, and films) to delineate a dominant pattern and observe its subsequent deconstruction in later works. Finally, it is necessary to clarify the expanded scope of "Sino-West" as used in this study. While focusing on Chinese-Western dynamics, the analysis also touches upon representations of Japan, Korea, and colonial Vietnam, as well as overseas diasporic communities. Therefore, "Sino" in this context encompasses both China proper and global Sinophone communities, while "West" includes not only Western Europe and the United States but also broader colonial situations.

Western Writers: Conquest, Salvation, and Enlightenment of the East

It is a common practice in the West to explore the complex interplay between race, gender, and identity through literature, and interracial romances, in particular, constitute an essential way for Western societies to construct and imagine their relationships with the world. For a long time, Westerners have viewed themselves as superior to the East which is often depicted as the "weak and gentle 'other'" (Chen 80).[1] In Western texts, China is often portrayed as a nation that lags behind the West and needs to be saved and enlightened by advanced Western civilization. Such unequal Sino-West relationships in interracial romances are often represented by white men in dominant positions, playing the roles of conquerors, saviors, and enlighteners, while Chinese are depicted as weak and subordinate. In contrast to the feminized Chinese men, white Western men are presented as strong and masculine, with an abundance of charm, when interacting with Chinese women.

This section examines Pearl S. Buck's 1946 novel *Pavilion of Women* as a case study to explore Western writers' metaphors for the Sino-West relationship in interracial romance. Buck, an American writer who lived in China for nearly 40 years (1892-1934), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1932 for her novel *The Good Earth* and later the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Set in 1940s China, *Pavilion of Women* depicts Madame Wu's changing feelings for André, emphasizing the emotional subjugation of Chinese women to white men. It also portrays the spiritual awakening and transformation of Madame Wu and others, thus

1 At first, China seemed to be a model for the West; however, with the rise of Western nations, it gradually became a target of criticism. Imagologically, the image of China in Western society shifted from "utopian" to "ideological", implying changes in the perceived identities of both sides. *Mili: A Chinese Fairy Tale* is indicative of this shift, with the author attempting to use Eastern culture to transform Western society, thereby pioneering the shaping of East-West identities through gender and race (Horace 32-44).

highlighting the West's enlightenment of old China.

In *Pavilion of Women*, André is portrayed as a masculine Westerner who has a profound impact on the Wu family. His tall stature and thick voice are the initial impressions made on them, and his "hairy body", a sign of masculinity in the eyes of Westerners (Cornell 148-149), furthers his image as an Eastern conqueror. Madame Wu's attitude towards this white Westerner undergoes a complex process of surprise, acceptance, and admiration. She is initially taken aback by his physical appearance and voice, but later discards her preconceived notions of foreigners and gradually becomes attached to André. She is drawn to him not only for his masculine physicality but also for his deep and broad spiritual world, which ultimately leads to a strong spiritual connection between the two. This is further emphasized when André's accidental death causes Madame Wu to realize that she has always loved this Western man, something that is repeatedly confirmed in the text. Evidently, André holds great charm for Madame Wu, both physically and spiritually, highlighting the masculinity of white men.

While emphasizing the masculine persona of the white man, the novel also obscures the masculinity of Chinese men. In contrast to André, Mr. Wu, the husband of Madame Wu, takes on a more subservient role. Ironically, it is only after André's reminder that Madame Wu realizes that she detests her husband. When Jasmine labels Mr. Wu as "noble", Madame Wu responds with,

> "What do you mean by noble?" Madame Wu asked. She would never have used the word noble for Mr. Wu. Impetuous, impatient, willful, stupid, good-natured sometimes, selfish always—these were all possible words for him, but not noble. (Buck 222)

Contrasting the traditional image of masculine dominance in China's patriarchal society, Mr. Wu never displays any masculine characteristics when in the presence of Madame Wu. Instead, it is Madame Wu who exhibits such masculine traits as dominance, decisiveness, directness, and strength, while Mr. Wu exhibits more feminine traits, including submission, indecision, insincerity, and a lack of willpower. This reversal of the traditional power dynamic has resulted in Madame Wu becoming the *de facto* head of the family.

The manifestation of masculinity is evident in André, whereas in Mr. Wu's case, it is concealed and replaced by submissive femininity. According to Pu, in mainstream Western literature, Chinese men are typically stereotyped as "utterly lacking in masculinity, weak, without courage and creativity, not active

enough, lacking in self-confidence and vitality" (241).[1] As such, Mr. Wu, as the representative of Chinese men in the novel, is feminized and presents an image of submissiveness, indecision, hypocrisy, and weak will, in contrast to the white man. Ultimately, Madame Wu chooses to escape from the Chinese man in favor of the white Western man.

It is evident from Pearl Buck's writing that the dominating relationship between Madame Wu and Mr. Wu presents a reversal of the traditional patriarchal system, thus highlighting the masculinity of Western men and the lack thereof among their Chinese counterparts. In general, Chinese men, Chinese women, and Western men exhibit a sequentially rising trend in masculinity, with the Chinese man represented by Mr. Wu showing more femininity than masculinity, and the Chinese woman represented by Madame Wu being dominated by the masculine white man. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese man has lost out to the white man in Pearl Buck's writing, as Madame Wu's spirit involuntarily chooses André.

Pearl Buck highlights the identity of Westerners as the enlighteners and saviors of the East in many of her works. In *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), Buck examines the inconsistencies, conflicts, and fusion between Chinese and Western cultures, and the ancient East is portrayed as ignorant, while the West is synonymous with advancement and civilization, symbolizing the direction of human progress. In *The Hidden Flower* (1952), she presents the interracial romance between a Japanese girl (Josui Sakai) and an American soldier (Allen Kennedy), and in *The New Year* (1968), a Korean girl (Kim Soonya) and an American soldier (Christopher Winters). The similar plot designs of both works demonstrate the unequal status and position of the East and the West, suggesting the domination of the latter over the former.

A similar thematic development occurs in *Pavilion of Women*. Madame Wu, once a devoted practitioner of tradition, experiences a profound liberation of the soul after meeting André. His influence proves transformative, and his death serves as a watershed moment that symbolically completes her enlightenment. The final scene between them, alone at his passing, unfolds as a silent yet deeply significant spiritual rite.

> He was neither foreign nor a priest to her now. He was the only being she had ever met whom she worshiped. Old Gentleman had taught her much. But Old Gentleman had feared many things. Brother André feared no one. He

1 All the English translations from the Chinese sources, unless otherwise specified, are made by the present author.

> feared neither life nor death […]
>
> Suddenly she recognized him. "You whom I love!" she murmured in profound astonishment.
>
> This recognition she made, and in the instant she accepted it she felt her whole being change. Although she did not move, her body tingled, her blood stung her heart, and her brain was clear. Her whole frame grew light and strong. She lifted her head and looked about the room. The four walls stood, but she felt free and whole […]
>
> "André." She said his name to him in a low clear voice, and never again would she call him brother. "You live in me. I will do my utmost to preserve your life." The moment she had said these words peace welled up in her being. It was so profound, so quieting, so contenting, that for the first time in her life she knew that never before had she known what peace was. Standing motionless in the bare room before his shell, she felt happy. (Buck 210-211)

This ritual not only marks the completion of Madame Wu's personal intellectual enlightenment but also metaphorically represents the internalization process of an ancient civilization when confronted with the impact of a foreign culture. By this point, André's physical presence—specifically marked as a foreign missionary—has vanished, yet under Madame Wu's gaze and understanding, he transcends into a pure symbol of civilization— "He was neither foreign nor a priest to her now. He was the only being she had ever met whom she worshiped." Unlike the Old Gentleman who revered many traditional taboos, André embodies a fearless, rational, and transcendent spiritual force that stands above life and death. Madame Wu's renewed "recognition" of him in the face of death is, in essence, an acknowledgment and acceptance of the nature of this spiritual power. Her murmured words in utter astonishment ("You whom I love!") reach far beyond romantic affection. This "love" should rather be interpreted as cultural longing, identification, and convergence. What she represents—an ancient Chinese civilization in a state of hardship and searching—encounters its true interlocutor and finds the long-desired path and answers. The resulting realization brings a full-bodied shock: the freedom, tranquility, and happiness she feels stem precisely from having found a spiritual home and a temporary relief from historical anxiety. Her vow to the deceased—"You live in me. I will do my utmost to preserve your life."—clearly shows that although André's physical life has ended, the ideas and spirit he carried will be accepted and passed on, gaining new life within the soil of another civilization.

Furthermore, André also has a far-reaching impact on those around Madame Wu: he awakens the dormant consciousness of Chiuming, the concubine of Mr. Wu, and emboldens her to challenge the oppressive family and patriarchal society; additionally, he inspires his student Fengmo, the third son of the Wu family, to journey abroad and broaden his horizons, subsequently returning to found a school, which profoundly alters the spirituality of local people.

The Wu family in Buck's novel represents the traditional, antiquated, and backward social system and way of life in old China. Before André appears, the family follows a set framework, where each member functions like a cog in a machine with little independence. However, the arrival of André breaks this status quo. He is not just an individual, but a saintly figure, a symbol of Western saintliness and wisdom. André states, "I have no name of my own"; "I have been given the name of André"; "I have no country; wherever I am is my home"; "I speak many languages to be able to converse with all people" (Buck 114-115). This image is remarkably similar to the old cosmopolitan scientist in "The Fugitive" (亡命) by Chinese writer Ba Jin. Having the entire world as his home and all its inhabitants as his family and compatriots, the scientist strives for the achievement of a "common world" without any boundaries of nationality. Similarly, André represents a collective image of the West. A craftsman whom André helps calls him a "foreign saint". Indeed, Pearl Buck's André is an ideal image of a Western saint who is nameless and borderless, speaks to people of different languages, and strives to promote universal values.

Focusing on Sino-West interracial romances, Young reveals that the heroines ultimately choose to embrace the independent and liberal Western cultures that their heroes introduce them to rather than the regressive Chinese culture they initially represent (522). This point is well illustrated in *Pavilion of Women*, where André's entry into the Wu family compound—a place where no foreigners have ever come before—is like a spark that brings about a series of changes, both inside and outside the family. This marks a significant shift from the Wu family's previous "uncivilized" and "unenlightened" state. In fact, although André does not appear to have done anything substantial, the consequences of his arrival are immense. This is more than just André's enlightenment and salvation of a single traditional Chinese family; it is a symbol of the West's invasion and enlightenment of closed China, representing the conquest and dismantling of the backward Chinese civilization by its advanced Western counterpart. In this sense, André's entry into the Wu family alludes to the unequal power and status of China and the West.

Chinese Writers: The Weak Before the West

Lao She's *Mr. Ma & Son* was written during his stay in the UK (1924-1929) and first serialized in *Fiction Monthly* (小 说 月 报) in 1926. The novel examines the Chinese people and culture in the context of the UK. By comparing the two societies, Lao She attempts to shape the UK into a model society for China to follow while conveying his perception of the inferiority of the Chinese people. Like Pearl Buck, he also illustrates the unequal Sino-West relationship through interracial relationships, but in a different way. Rather than highlight the West's conquest, salvation, and enlightenment of the East, he instead portrays the failure of Chinese men in "conquering" British women. The Sino-UK romance and the underlying identity metaphors in his novel also offer a window to probe into the author's views and reflections on the identities of both peoples.

Lao She arranges for Mr. Ma and his son, Ma Wei, to woo Mrs. and Miss Wendell, yet both attempts end in failure. Mrs. Wendell's ideal companion is "the kind of hero who could wrestle tigers, and stomp wild elephants" (Lao, *Mr. Ma & Son* 61), while Miss Wendell's ideal romantic partner is the protagonist of a movie that portrays an English swashbuckler "whipping over a dozen stub-nosed yellow-faced Chinese" (Lao, *Mr. Ma & Son* 87). Miss Wendell initially harbors contempt for Ma Wei; however, when he knocks the provocative Paul to the ground in the restaurant, her attitude towards him shifts from contempt to admiration. This shift can be attributed to her "hero worship": Ma Wei has become "the embodiment of masculinity, a red-blooded hero—a warrior" in her eyes—a representation of strength that transcends national borders. As the novel suggests, this reverence for masculinity, a characteristic of British nationhood, is reflected in the belief that British women should only be paired with the powerful. As such, this serves as a tangible example of British admiration for masculinity.

The hero-worship mentality of the Wendells is not an isolated case but rather a typical one in Western society, as observed by Chinese writer Zhu Ziqing (89). When Huang Juesi traveled to the UK and visited the Chinese Art Exhibition in London, he found the throne of Qianlong, an emperor of China's Qing Dynasty, to be an essential item. People were drawn to its presence, not for its craftsmanship but rather due to its connection to the emperor—a testament to the West's worship of great men and heroes (Huang 24). Lao She believes that the reasons for such hero worship in Western society could be attributed to their identification with power and masculinity, which is lacking in Chinese society.

The British society depicted in the novel is rife with racial prejudice and

misconceptions about China, despite Ma Wei's display of power in his fight with Paul. This is because China is generally perceived as a weak country. When Paul observes Ma Wei and an English girl seated together in the restaurant, he perceives it as a potential threat from a foreign male to a white woman and thus menacingly proclaims, "Remember what Englishmen's fists are like!"

Similarly, in Marguerite Duras' novel *The Lover*, the heroine is aware of the futility of her relationship due to the racial divide: "This is because he's a Chinese, because he's not a white man." (51) The same fate is shared by Ma Wei's long-suppressed attachment to Miss Wendell, which is ultimately hindered by her Englishness. When Ma Wei appears as a hero in front of Miss Wendell, he captures her admiration, but her impulse is soon dispelled by her realization that their union is "impossible!" Despite their mutual affection, Mr. Ma and Mrs. Wendell experience similar frustrations as well. Even though both cherish good feelings for each other, they eventually give up the relationship. They are forced to accept the impossibility of their relationship, as understood by both their friends and relatives, as well as by Wendell herself. In addition, Lao She also has Mrs. Wendell as his spokesperson to express his views on Sino-British interracial relationships.

> It's not all that odd for English men to marry foreign women […] people look askance a bit but they don't find it necessarily revolting; but for an English woman to marry a foreigner— that's another thing altogether! You know, Mr. Ma, the English are an extremely proud race; they may feel disdain towards English women who marry foreigners, but they harbor nothing but utter outrage for foreigners who marry their women! […] the English aren't any different on this, they find nothing more mortifying than a foreigner laying a hand on their women! (Lao, Mr. Ma & Son 521-522)

Mrs. Wendell clarifies the attitude towards interracial relationships in British society at the time. That is, the "British male-foreign female" model could go unimpeded, but the "British female-foreign male" model becomes a social taboo.

Anne Witchard notes that prejudice and discrimination against the Chinese in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century were such that the union of white women with Asian men was seen as a "cheapening" act, which caused discontent and protests in British society (67). Shen argues that although Western civilization, like an attractive and haughty young woman, is desired by males in the writings of modern Chinese authors, it is not as readily available as Eastern women in the minds of Western men, instead embodying a superiority mentality (103). This point

is also reflected in *Mr. Ma & Son* where both Mr. Ma and his son were unsuccessful in their pursuit of English women. Mrs. Wendell believes this to be a result of social prejudice and public opinion, as although there is no class divide between Mr. Ma and her, there is considerable racial prejudice. However, there is an underlying cause, namely, national identity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire presented itself on the international stage as the pinnacle of capitalist power and "the empire on which the sun never sets", embodying masculinity if placed in the "man-woman" binary. China, however, had been defeated in multiple battles since the Opium War and had suffered from the invasion and division of the powers led by Britain. This led to the destruction of the illusion of heavenly power among the domestic ruling class and the public, as well as the image of a weak country as the "sick man of East Asia" in the international arena, representing more of a subjugated and subordinate image and conveying a sense of femininity. Therefore, against the backdrop of reality, Chinese men's conquest of white women through Sino-British interracial romance was seen as a social taboo, unacceptable to Western culture.

Beyond Romance: Identity Awareness in Interracial Romances

Freud (437) contends that writers are, to some extent, daydreamers and that their literature reflects their innermost and often hidden fantasies. With this in mind, interracial romance in literature can be seen as a reflection of the writer's preconceived notions, as well as the collective imagination of the local society, in regard to the relationship between their own country and foreign counterparts. The Sino-Western interracial romances created by authors such as Pearl Buck and Lao She serve as metaphors for how these authors, and the societies in which they live, view one another.

The Westerners have long held the belief that their peoples and cultures are superior to the non-Western peoples and cultures (Said 40; Doyle 1), and that the latter needs the guidance and enlightenment of the former (Marchetti 2-3). Such a mentality also fully manifests itself in literature. It is a typical pattern in Western romance novels to feature a white hero and an East Asian heroine (Young 520). According to Cheng (15), Asiatic femininity is characterized by its ornamental and decorative nature, and such a feature sparks intense debates regarding the distinctions between excrescence and essence, the peripheral and the central, as well as femininity and masculinity. In *Pavilion of Women*, the Westerner is presented as a conqueror and enlightener of China, thereby highlighting Western masculinity and obscuring the masculinity of Chinese men. In fact, such a "dominator-dominated"

relationship between the Westerner, represented by André, and the Chinese reveals both the man-woman and Sino-West dichotomies. In the former, the patriarchal relationship manifests as male dominance and female subordination, while in the latter, it is depicted as a dominant position for the Western nation and a subordinate and submissive role for the Chinese nation, which must be enlightened and saved. Consequently, the Western nation is portrayed as masculine, while the Chinese nation is feminized (Mackerras 268).

Pearl Buck's attitude towards the relationship and status of Eastern and Western cultures changes following the circumstances of her own life and the international environment. Initially, she respected Eastern culture and advocated for racial and cultural equality, with no superior Western view of Easterners, and did not pander to Western readers' aesthetic sensibilities. However, she eventually relinquished her admiration for Eastern culture, realizing that without the help of the West, the Eastern culture's awakening and progress would be unattainable. Consequently, she came to believe that only the West could save Eastern culture. This transformation can be seen in her works from different periods. In *East Wind: West Wind*, she used male characters to symbolize Eastern culture and female characters to symbolize Western culture; yet in *Pavilion of Women*, she started to use female characters to represent Eastern culture and male characters to represent Western culture. In *The Hidden Flower* and *The New Year*, she examined another two countries in the East—Korea and Japan—but consistently employed the model of "Asian woman-Western man" to symbolize the unequal relationship between Eastern and Western cultures, and the subjugation of the East by the West.

Buck is not an isolated case, and such a creative mindset and pattern are also commonly found in other works of Western literature. Doyle, for instance, identifies this tendency in Victorian literature, noting that "almost all of the romances were between British men and indigenous women" (1). This phenomenon is also evidenced in the later literature. Richard Mason's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) is an example of such an interracial romance, depicting the relationship between Robert, a British painter, and Suzie Wong, a Chinese girl. With Robert's help, Suzie overcomes her struggles, and following Robert's success, she experiences the life of an English socialite, demonstrating the transformation from "ugly duckling to white swan". Similarly, in James Clavell's *Tai Pan* (1966), May-may, Dirk Struan's Chinese mistress, is represented as a slave-like figure, attempting to please Struan in every way possible. This includes her attempts to dress as a European to attract Struan's attention, which only serves to elicit his resentment. From the ornamentalism's perspective, Susie Wong and May-may, despite being living

individuals, are "living objects" (Cheng 3), with their oriental clothing serving as symbols of their oriental identity. The change in their attires metaphorically signifies the vanishing of Orientalism and the accompanying Oriental identity they embody. As the West only comes to understand its own self when juxtaposed against the East (Kubin 47), with the absence of Eastern coordinates for comparison, the white male characters in the novel find themselves unable to validate their own identity and maintain a sense of superiority.

Many Chinese writers are also aware of the interracial romance in Western literature which reinforces the historical reality of Western strength and Eastern weakness. In Zhou Shoujuan's "The Falling Flower" (落　花　怨), the heroine, Miss Huang, is portrayed as a talented and beautiful woman who is subject to discrimination due to her Chinese identity, leading to a tragic conclusion to her love for a young Englishman. This story serves more as a social fable that is characterized by a strong sense of national anxiety, rather than as a romantic interracial tale. Similarly, Yu Dafu, another modern Chinese writer, expresses his sexual bitterness as a result of the racial discrimination he faces as a "citizen of a weak nation", crying out "Motherland, Motherland! You are the reason for my death!" and "Get prosperous! Be strong!" The plot design of the interracial romance in *Mr. Ma & Son* also reflects this same kind of concern.

Lao She attempts to place Chinese people in a Western context, reflecting on Chinese society and national character from the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures, with the hope that the development of China into a powerful modern nation will eliminate discrimination and prejudice against Chinese people. Consequently, he displays a strong sense of national identity in designing the romantic relationships of his characters. He clarifies that this novel is intended to compare Chinese and British society, and that all characters are symbolic and represent something (*How Do I Write Novels* 12). With regard to the love affairs of Mr. Ma and his son, he notes,

> The most dangerous interpolation could be those love affairs, which could make *Mr. Ma & Son* something like *Liu Dong Wai Shi*. However, upon beginning my writing, I decided to focus on the task at hand, using these plots as an opportunity to highlight the national stereotypes and personalities of the characters rather than allowing the romance to unfold freely. (Lao, *How Do I Write Novels* 14)

The extensive remark made by Mrs. Wendell when turning down Mr. Ma's proposal

on the Sino-British interracial relationship sheds light on the complicated reality of intertwined gender, race, and power dynamics, which are reflective of racial prejudice and identity metaphors. It is clear that Mr. Ma's and Ma Wei's setbacks in their pursuit of English women are intentional on the author's part, displaying the stereotypes of English society about China while also warning the nation to strive for improvement, thus reconstructing the East-West identity and relationship.

Comparatively, both Chinese and Western writers allude to a powerful West and a weak China, but in different ways. While Western authors tend to stress the subjugation of Chinese women by Western men, Chinese authors center on Chinese men's incompetency in subjugating Western women, as well as the subjugation of Chinese women by Western men.

In contrast to the accepted "Western man-Chinese woman" model, the "Chinese man-Western woman" model has often been taboo.[1] The Chinese American writer Sui Sin Far (aka Edith Eaton) explores this issue in "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" and its sequel, "Her Chinese Husband". In the story, Minnie, a white woman, marries a Chinese man named Liu Kanghi, only for Liu to succumb to an untimely death despite his positive qualities. Although Sui Sin Far is a "self-oriented" writer who "keeps the spirit pure and healthy," the story ultimately remains constrained by this taboo. Similarly, in Lin Yutang's *The Chinatown Family* (1936), the Chinese man Yiko (Frederick) marries Sing Toy, an American girl, despite his family's objections, yet he does not become the conqueror of the white woman. Instead, Sing Toy ultimately throws herself into the arms of a white man, Sandy Bull, and Yiko is reduced to the status of a clown.

It appears to be a social taboo for Chinese men to possess Western women, yet it is common for Chinese women to be attracted to and consumed by Western men. For instance, in Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (上海宝贝, 1999), the heroine

1 Set in colonial Vietnam, Duras' *The Lover* seems to be an exception, telling the story of a white French girl and her Chinese lover. However, the Chinese lover is portrayed as timid and weak, particularly in the sexual relationship. Upon saving the white girl, her family expresses resentment and shame. When the girl leaves him, the Chinese lover indicates that he will always love her. In contrast, the heroine does not weep when leaving her Chinese lover, as "he was Chinese and one oughtn't to weep for that kind of lover" (111). It is evident that the Chinese lover, who is physically male, displays feminine traits in stark contrast to the white girl, who exudes masculine traits. This is further highlighted in comparison with the white male, as the two brothers of the white girl are described as "strong", while the Chinese lover is likened to "the carrion you find in the desert" (57). Consequently, this "white girl-Chinese man" model, although ostensibly a rebellion against taboos, serves as evidence for the "Western/strong/masculinity-Oriental/weak/femininity" dichotomy.

CoCo has a Chinese boyfriend who is portrayed as sexually impotent, while her German boyfriend, Mark, is masculine, tall, robust, rigorous, and sexually powerful. CoCo's despair over her Chinese boyfriend's sexual impotence is compensated for and satisfied by Mark. Similarly, in Wang Anyi's *I Love Bill* (我爱比尔 , 2000), the character A'san only engages in relationships with Western men. More similar cases can also be found in the works by Eileen Chang, Zha Jianying, and Bai Xiangyong, to name but a few.

The observed pattern is likewise prevalent within Western film and television media: the "white male-Asian female" model is used unhindered and even becomes the norm, while the "Asian male-white female" model is considered taboo, and Asian men are often portrayed as castrated eunuchs and other figures to emphasize white masculinity (Wong 25-26). To sum up, those stories are all framed in a dichotomy of Oriental/woman/weak seller versus Western/man/strong buyer, whereby the metaphor of individual and national identity is evident.

Many writers are well aware of the narrative tradition in Western interracial romances to construct Sino-West relations and identity based on gender and race. While alluding to the historical reality of a "strong West and weak East," some writers, primarily from the "conquered" East, also endeavor to deconstruct this "Orientalized" mode of romance and reconstruct the power and identity of the East. Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, for instance, serves as an exemplary illustration of the Orientalized representation of the East in literature, and has had a lasting influence on subsequent creations in two distinct routes. One is represented by *Miss Saigon* (1989) which follows in the footsteps of Puccini's work, recounting the tragedy of a Vietnamese girl abandoned by her white lover. The other is represented by Chinese-American writer David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1988), which subverts the Orientalized narrative pattern through counterpoint writing.

In response to the strong metaphor of race and identity in *Madame Butterfly*, Hwang adapted the play *M. Butterfly* from the life of a Peking Opera actor. The story begins with an operatic performance of *Madame Butterfly* and focuses on the experience of Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat to China, who falls in love with the Beijing opera singer Song Liling. It contains a deliberate intertextual writing and deconstruction of *Madame Butterfly* in the context of both gender and identity. Hwang first blurs the gender identity by changing "Madame" into "M" (which can be understood as either Monsieur or Madame). In the story, the "actress" who infatuates Gallimard is actually a man, similar to Balzac's short story "Saragine" in which the perfect goddess with whom the protagonist is infatuated reveals

"herself" to be a man masquerading as a woman. Furthermore, in *M. Butterfly*, "she" conquers the white man in "her" own way, and unlike Cho-Cho-San who identifies with and upholds Western values, "she" engages in espionage and serves the cause of "her" people. Contrary to the traditional pattern of white men manipulating Eastern women's emotions, Gallimard has instead become a plaything in "her" hands. Such counterpoint writing clearly expresses Hwang's dissatisfaction with and deconstruction of the racial identity and power status metaphors used in Western interracial romances. Moreover, *Fusang* (*The Lost Daughter of Happiness* in English, 1996) by Yan Geling, *K* (1999) by Hong Ying, and many other works also show similar resistance to the Orientalized and ornamentalized narrative in Western literature.

Such deconstruction is also evident in screen works. In *Grief Over the Yellow River* (黄河绝恋, 1999), for instance, the heroine An Jie's heroic sacrifice to protect the American soldier Owen deconstructs the model where the white man acts as the savior, and is a new attempt to construct a Chinese image. Similarly, *The Bewitching Braid* (大辫子的诱惑, 1995) also demonstrates resistance to the Orientalized narrative in Western films.

These deconstruction and resistance efforts further illustrate that an increasing awareness of racial identity, which is metaphorically embedded in narratives of interracial romance, is developing.

Interracial Romance as A Metaphor for National Identity

The tension between "race" and "gender" as a metaphor for identity has been pervasive in narratives, with allusions to the East-West relationship reflecting the authors' reflections on this issue and forming certain stereotypes. As stereotype gives access to "identity" (Bhabha 320), these works also serve as a medium to narrate and represent the East-West national identity.

Interracial gender relations can be metaphorical of other power relations (Bhabha 320; McClintock 14). Millett further posits that gender relations are political in relation to races and are a relationship of domination and subordination (24-25). Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of "ornamentalism" critically examines the intertwined existence of the Oriental and the ornamental, suggesting that Asian females often straddle the boundary between being perceived as individuals and objects. She argues that throughout history, the ornament has consistently been connected to, and at times equated with, the Oriental and Asiatic (Cheng 15). Moreover, she emphasizes that:

> […] the ornament and especially the ornamentality of the Asiatic continue to provide a charged site for the modernists, precisely because the ornament triggers the fluctuation between essence and supplement, depth and surface, utility and decoration, interiority and exteriority, organicity and the inorganic, femininity and masculinity, and finally, Western discipline and Oriental excess. (Cheng 16)

The man-woman dichotomy often portrays men as strong, dominant, and conquerors, while women are seen as weak, dominated, and subjugated. The power dynamics between the East and the West mirror the gendered power dynamics, with the East often portrayed as feminine, symbolizing weakness and ornamentation, while the West is depicted as more masculine, embodying strength, dominance, and conquest. Yang shares similar views and argues that the hierarchical and gendered relationship in interracial romances symbolizes the civilized, masculine self in the West in opposition to the untamed, feminine Chinese other (1). In other words, the depiction of the East serves as a point of reference to position the West, and interracial gender relations not only reflect individual identities but also highlight the racial and national identities of both sides.

Women are the last colony in the world (Kubin 46). The possession of foreign women is equivalent to the possession of foreign land (Jiang 43), and the possession of white women in Sino-West gender relations implies the subjugation of white society as a whole (Hoppenstand 174). Under patriarchal consciousness, it can be seen that romantic relations symbolize the subjugation of women by men, and in interracial romances, women are often viewed as symbols or properties, and the subjugation of women implies the subjugation of their nations, lands, and properties.

Kondo argues that if the Orient is a woman, then women are also the Orient, thus emphasizing the simultaneity and inextricability of gender from the domination systems of geography, colonialism, and race (25). In this sense, the possession of Eastern women by Western men becomes a metaphor for the West's conquest of Eastern countries, which is in line with Westerners' national psychology of being strong and therefore acceptable and deserved. This is evidenced by the above-discussed "white man-oriental woman" pattern common in Western literature.

However, the union of Western women with Eastern men implies the subjugation of Western women to Eastern men, in which Eastern men are in the dominant position while Western women are subordinate and ornamental. This contradicts Westerners' sense of national superiority and shatters their deeply ingrained image as conquerors, making it destined to be rejected by their own

society. From this viewpoint, it is not difficult to understand the inevitability of the frustration suffered by Mr. Ma and his son in their pursuit of English women. Moreover, this is also reflected in Western literature. For instance, *Pavilion of Women*, while seeking to illustrate the subjugation of Chinese women to Western men, prohibits the love affair between Fengmo, the third son of the Wu family, and Margaret, a white girl; similarly, *Tai Pan* on the one hand highlights the identity of white men as conquerors, and on the other hand simultaneously criticizes the white prostitute Mary for serving Chinese officials.

From an imagological viewpoint, the image of a foreign country not only reveals a society's understanding and imagination of that country but also reflects the author's mindset and attitudes. The self and the other reflect each other, and the representation of the other can be seen as a self-narrative in a sense (Leerssen 22; Pageaux 157). Behind the artificially created Sino-West dichotomy, there is the West's intention to reflect and construct its own identity through the image of China, and conversely, China also mirrors itself through the image of the West.

In essence, interracial romance is not only concerned with the relationship between two sexes but also with the dominant relationship between those involved in the story and the relationship between the nations they represent. When viewed from this perspective, we can easily recognize the metaphor for national identity underlying the pre-determined male-female relationship.

Conclusion

There are so many interracial romances in both Chinese and Western literature, with complex and diverse structures and plots, that it is impossible to summarize the patterns of these texts under a specific framework. However, this article argues that the plot settings of these romances exhibit a certain regularity.[1] In either Western or Chinese writings on interracial romance, China and the West are frequently controlled and represented by dominant frameworks, in which both sides are aware of the intertwined issues of gender, race and identity beyond romance and present them directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, in the Sino-West binary structure.

The dominance of the West over the East is often reflected in interracial romantic relationships through literary reproduction when the West's economic, political, and military power dominates (Zhou 150). However, while recognizing

1 There also exist other patterns of interracial romances. Xu Xu (徐 訏), a modern Chinese writer, for example, tends to use interracial romantic fantasies to advance the social ideals of equality and love for all.

the reflective function of literary creation, it is also important to acknowledge the power of literature to react, for literature is both a symbol of history and a resistance to that history (Pageaux 128). The normalization of the "Western man-Chinese woman" model and the taboo of the "Chinese man-Western woman" model are new manifestations of Western discourse and colonization of the East. It is the awareness of the crucial role of literature in constructing the national identity that has led many writers from the East to use it as a tool for deconstructing the Oriental narratives in Western literature. Interracial romances present readers with not only emotional entanglements but also the construction and reflection of national identities, as viewed through the lens of East-West relations. Consequently, it is safe to conclude that these works are highly informative regarding the construction of national identities.

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