

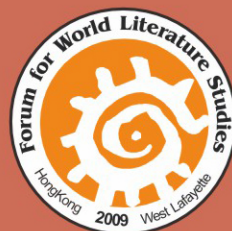
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Anticipated Lives: AI, Infrastructure, and the Ethics of World Literature

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Abstract This introduction proposes a paradigm shift in the literary and cultural analysis of artificial intelligence, moving away from binaries of AI as a passive tool or an active antagonist. Instead, it conceptualizes AI as an “anticipatory infrastructure” we inhabit—a relational, ambient system that actively structures social possibility, agency, and ethical boundaries. Rather than merely automating tasks, AI infrastructures predict, classify, and format futures, deciding which lives are optimized and protected and which are marginalized or deemed disposable. Focusing primarily on contemporary East Asian speculative and realist literature and cinema, this special section explores the emotional and moral textures of life inside these technological systems. The collected essays demonstrate how narratives register the “phenomenology of infrastructure”—revealing how deeply intimacy, care, grief, labor, and kinship are mediated by algorithmic logic. Ultimately, this introduction argues that world literature serves as a crucial ethical archive. By rendering the background systems of modern life visible, narrative forms allow us to critique the political economy of prediction and imagine alternative modes of relation before these technological futures solidify into common sense.

Keywords artificial intelligence; infrastructure; anticipated lives; literary ethics; world literature

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The dominant cultural imagination of artificial intelligence still oscillates between two familiar figures: AI as instrument and AI as antagonist. In the first, machine intelligence appears as a neutral apparatus awaiting human direction, a technical extension of human intention. In the second, it appears as a rival agent threatening to displace, deceive, or dominate its makers. These figures remain powerful because

they dramatize AI in recognizably human terms: as servant or enemy, prosthesis or monster, obedient machine or rebellious other. Yet both figures preserve a clean ontological and ethical boundary between the human and the technical. They assume that the human subject stands outside the technological system, deciding how to use it or how to resist it. This special section begins from the proposition that such a framework has become insufficient for understanding the literary and ethical imagination of AI in the twenty-first century.

The six essays gathered here share a single, consequential premise: artificial intelligence is most accurately understood not merely as a tool we use or an other we confront, but as an “infrastructure” we inhabit. Infrastructure names more than material systems such as roads, electrical grids, water networks, railways, databases, platforms, and communication channels. It also names the often-unnoticed conditions that organize social possibility: the arrangements through which mobility, information, labor, care, security, consumption, memory, and belonging are distributed. Susan Leigh Star’s influential formulation is useful here: “infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept,” something that becomes infrastructure only in relation to organized practices (Star 380). Infrastructure is therefore not simply an object in the background; it is a condition of action, perception, and social coordination. It works precisely by withdrawing from attention. When functioning smoothly, it appears as background, environment, and common sense; it becomes visible most dramatically when it fails, excludes, or demands repair. To call AI infrastructural is therefore to shift attention away from isolated machines or spectacular acts of automation and toward the dispersed systems through which intelligent computation becomes ambient, normalized, and morally formative.

This infrastructural understanding of AI also requires a revised account of agency. If AI is approached only as a tool, ethical responsibility seems to rest mainly with the user who commands it. If AI is approached only as an autonomous antagonist, responsibility is displaced onto the machine as a quasi-human actor. But infrastructure complicates both assumptions. Infrastructural systems act not through singular intention but through protocols, classifications, feedback loops, standards, defaults, interfaces, institutional routines, and predictive models. They do not simply execute human will; they help pre-format the field in which human will becomes thinkable, legible, and actionable. Langdon Winner’s now-classic claim that “artifacts can have politics” remains vital for this discussion because it reminds us that technical arrangements are never neutral containers of social life (Winner 121). They shape what counts as a normal action, a rational choice, a viable life, an acceptable risk, or a desirable future. In this sense, AI does not only answer

questions, recommend objects, automate tasks, or generate images; it reorganizes the conditions under which subjects perceive themselves and others.

The ethical significance of this shift is profound. Infrastructure is never merely technical. It is a social and political form that distributes access, vulnerability, attention, and value. It determines who is connected and who is abandoned, whose movements are facilitated and whose are monitored, whose grief is recognized and whose is datafied, whose future is protected and whose life is rendered inefficient, risky, or disposable. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's work on classification clarifies why these distributions matter ethically: "Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another" (Bowker and Star 5). AI infrastructures operate through precisely such classificatory acts. They sort bodies, behaviors, emotions, risks, and futures, often under the seemingly benign languages of service, personalization, optimization, and care. Infrastructures promise continuity and improvement, but every promise is selective. The dream of seamlessness often conceals a hidden economy of dependence, extraction, exclusion, and sacrifice. For this reason, the infrastructural turn in literary studies is not simply a matter of adding technological context to textual interpretation. It calls for a mode of reading attentive to the ways narratives disclose the background systems that govern feeling, kinship, embodiment, labor, ecological relation, and futurity.

AI intensifies this problem because it is an anticipatory infrastructure. It does not merely support present action; it predicts, sorts, and prepares futures in advance. Through algorithmic inference, risk calculation, behavioral modeling, automation, and recommendation, AI systems convert uncertain futures into manageable probabilities. They make anticipation operational. What appears as convenience or efficiency is often a moral ordering of the future: which bodies should be protected, which desires should be cultivated, which losses should be minimized, which relationships should be optimized, which forms of slowness or dependency should be treated as failure. Anticipatory infrastructure thus governs not only by prohibiting or commanding, but by shaping expectation. It teaches subjects what to hope for, what to fear, what to accept, and what to become.

The title phrase "anticipated lives" names this condition. It refers to lives that are no longer simply lived in the open uncertainty of the present, but are increasingly predicted, modeled, prepared, optimized, protected, or abandoned according to imagined futures. An anticipated life is a life seen in advance by systems that claim to know its probable needs, risks, desires, capacities, and value. Such anticipation can be protective, as in technologies of care, safety,

medical assistance, or environmental warning; but it can also be disciplinary and exclusionary, when prediction becomes a means of deciding which lives are normal, efficient, productive, lovable, viable, or disposable. The term therefore holds together both promise and danger. It suggests that AI infrastructures do not merely respond to life; they participate in defining what kinds of life deserve continuation. At the same time, the literary works examined here show that life always exceeds anticipation. Fear, grief, disability, aging, animal vulnerability, maternal care, ecological uncertainty, and unexpected attachment interrupt the smooth logic of prediction and disclose ethical possibilities that cannot be fully calculated in advance.

This is why affect occupies a central place in the essays collected here. The infrastructural condition is not experienced only at the level of policy, technology, or political economy. It is lived through intimate and ordinary feelings: love, anxiety, fatigue, comfort, grief, shame, hope, fear, attachment, and care. AI enters domestic space, reproductive imagination, convenience-store routines, elder care, mourning technologies, ecological anxiety, and multispecies survival. It does not remain outside the human as a discrete device; it becomes part of the emotional architecture of everyday life. The essays in this special section therefore understand affect not as a private residue left over after technology has done its work, but as one of the primary media through which infrastructure operates. To ask how AI feels—or how humans feel through AI—is to ask how technological systems reorganize ethical relations.

Literature and film are especially important for this inquiry because they can make infrastructure perceptible without reducing it to explanation. Technical and policy discourses often describe AI through capacity, risk, governance, or innovation. Literary narratives, by contrast, dwell in ambiguity, embodiment, duration, and contradiction. They show how systems are inhabited before they are understood, how people adapt to arrangements they cannot fully see, how care and coercion can become entangled, and how technological promises may be experienced simultaneously as shelter and confinement. Narrative form is able to register what might be called the phenomenology of infrastructure: the half-visible background that structures a character's sense of self, relation, and possibility. In doing so, literature does not merely represent ethical problems that have already been defined elsewhere. It becomes a mode of ethical thinking in its own right. Donna Haraway's insistence that "it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" offers a concise rationale for the literary method pursued here (Haraway 12). If stories participate in world-making, then literary and cinematic

narratives are not secondary illustrations of technological change; they are critical sites where alternative relations to technology, life, and responsibility can be imagined.

The works examined in this special section are particularly concerned with the future, but they resist treating the future as a simple temporal horizon waiting to arrive. Instead, they reveal futurity as something institutionally and affectively produced in the present. Reproductive futures, automated futures, posthuman futures, climate futures, and biopolitical futures are not neutral projections; they are organized through infrastructures that decide what kinds of continuity matter. The future, in these texts, is not simply imagined. It is managed, priced, optimized, mourned, rehearsed, and unequally distributed. The central question is therefore not whether AI will be good or bad for humanity in general, but how specific infrastructural arrangements generate specific forms of humanity, dependency, disposability, and responsibility.

It is no accident that this special section draws predominantly on East Asian literary and cinematic imagination—Korean, Japanese, and adjacent fictions of the near future. These works arise from societies marked by rapid demographic aging, dense urbanization, advanced platform economies, automation, precarious labor, familial transformation, and technological saturation. They register with particular acuity the emotional textures of life lived inside systems that promise safety, convenience, longevity, and efficiency while also intensifying solitude, normativity, surveillance, and exclusion. At the same time, the significance of these works is not merely regional. Their speculative and realist imaginations speak to a planetary condition in which AI, climate, capital, and governance increasingly converge as overlapping infrastructures of life.

The theoretical wager of this special section, then, is that world literature offers a privileged archive for understanding AI not as a future technology approaching from outside society, but as an already emergent condition of social existence. By bringing together infrastructure humanities, literary ethics, biopolitics, affect theory, posthumanism, and Anthropocene thought, the following essays ask how narratives reveal the moral architecture of intelligent systems. They invite us to read AI not only where robots speak or machines rebel, but where infrastructures quietly format desire, care, death, labor, kinship, and survival. To read AI infrastructurally is to ask: What kind of world is being built in the background? What forms of life does it make possible? What forms does it render unintelligible, inefficient, or expendable? And what ethical imagination might literature cultivate before these futures harden into common sense?

Jooyoung Kim opens the conversation by reading the film *Mother/Android* as a portrait of AI as “affective infrastructure.” Refusing the binary of helper and threat, Kim shows how machine intelligence becomes woven into the fabric of domestic and reproductive life, reshaping emotion, ethical judgment, and the very idea of reproductive futurity. Through three linked problems—the internalization of surveillance within intimacy, the technologization of pregnancy and motherhood, and the commodification of love—the essay locates in the film a moral and interpretive crisis, and turns to literary ethics to recover the language of care, vulnerability, and relational responsibility under technological governance.

Inseop Shin and Hyunyoung Lee turn to Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*, reading the protagonist Keiko Furukura’s gradual “AI-ification” as an allegory of the human subject reorganized by anticipatory infrastructures. The convenience store operates as a moral and operational machine that simultaneously shelters and constrains, supplying Keiko with scripts to mimic and a structure to belong to. Rather than narrating a redemptive arc toward social acceptance, the essay reads Keiko’s story as an unsettling meditation on what remains of the human when life is reduced to operational data.

Jinhyoung Lee develops the special section’s most explicit ethical proposal through Bora Chung’s science fiction story “A Song for Sleep.” In the relationship between a ninety-three-year-old woman with Parkinson’s disease and the AI-operated elevator that loves her, Lee locates a profound “affective incommensurability”—the machine’s unrequited devotion meeting the woman’s fear of death. From this asymmetry he draws the concept of “inter-infrastructuring”: an ethics of mutual dependency in which humans and machines sustain one another’s transitive modes of existence, pointing toward a more reciprocal model for automated futures.

Myungsim Yang examines Hirano Keiichirō’s novel *Honshin* (2021) to analyze how social imaginaries of future technology are formed. Through “infrastructural text studies,” Yang reads the novel’s Virtual Figure and Real Avatar services as anticipatory infrastructures that do more than perform technical functions in a fictional 2040 Japan: they reorganize emotion, death, mourning, and agency. The essay reveals infrastructure as a political instrument—one that issues promises of possibility even as it discloses deeper transformations in human identity and its entanglement with technical and social institutions.

Taehee Kim widens the frame to planetary scale, reconceiving climate and AI as converging “infrastructural hyperobjects” that structure human existence across immense spatial, temporal, and computational dimensions. Advancing three

claims—that climate is a historically constructed socio-natural infrastructure, that AI has become a pervasive rather than discrete technology, and that their convergence demands a reconfigured ethical subjectivity—Kim reads the novel *The Second Moon* to articulate the figure of the “hyposubject,” showing how literature can furnish ethical narratives adequate to the entanglement of human and nonhuman within socio-political life.

Yeonhee Woo closes the special section with a biopolitical reading of Cheon Seon-ran’s *A Thousand Blues*. In a future organized around a horseracing system that prizes efficiency and safety, slow or injured racehorses are euthanized and AI jockeys treated as replaceable—an economy in which infrastructure mediates hope and anxiety while sorting viable lives from expendable ones. Woo exposes the ethical asymmetry at the heart of anticipatory infrastructure: its promise of a better future “for some” is purchased by rendering others unworthy of survival.

Read together, these essays compose neither a unified theory nor a single methodology, but a sustained collective inquiry into the “infrastructural condition” of contemporary life. Their shared concern is not simply how literature represents AI, automation, or future technologies, but how literary and cinematic forms disclose the hidden systems through which life is anticipated, classified, supported, and abandoned. The essays therefore move beyond a thematic study of technology in literature toward a more fundamental question: how do narratives allow us to perceive the infrastructural forces that organize what counts as human, livable, ethical, and future-worthy?

Several throughlines emerge. The first is the displacement of the human–machine boundary by relations of mutual constitution. Across the works discussed here, the human is not imagined as an autonomous essence later threatened by technology; rather, subjectivity is formed within technical, affective, institutional, and ecological systems. Keiko’s convenience-store self, the pregnant body in *Mother/Android*, the elderly woman and the AI elevator in “A Song for Sleep,” the mourners and avatars in *Honshin*, the hyposubject of *The Second Moon*, and the racehorses and AI jockeys of *A Thousand Blues* all reveal that the human is already infrastructurally mediated. These figures compel us to rethink agency not as sovereign mastery but as situated responsiveness within networks of dependency.

The second throughline is the centrality of affect. The infrastructures examined in this special section do not govern only through rules, platforms, machines, or institutions; they also govern by organizing feeling. Love becomes commodified, care becomes automated, mourning becomes data-driven, hope becomes programmed, fear becomes predictive, and slowness becomes a sign of

failure. Yet affect also remains a site of resistance and ethical possibility. Precisely because feelings exceed technical calculation, they reveal the friction between lived experience and infrastructural order. The essays show that to study AI and infrastructure through literature is to study not only systems of control but also the fragile, excessive, and unpredictable attachments through which alternative relations may become imaginable.

The third throughline is the politics of anticipation. Each essay asks how futures are made before they arrive: through algorithms, platforms, reproductive fantasies, service economies, climate projections, biopolitical classifications, and promises of safety or efficiency. Anticipatory infrastructures do not merely forecast the future; they actively distribute it. They decide whose lives are worth protecting, whose bodies are worth optimizing, whose grief is worth preserving, whose dependency is tolerable, and whose existence can be treated as obsolete. The futures imagined in these texts are therefore never universal. They are unevenly allocated, emotionally managed, and politically charged.

This shared inquiry also opens a methodological proposition for world literature studies. World literature is not only a field of circulation, translation, and comparison; it is also a field in which planetary infrastructures become narratable. The Korean and Japanese texts discussed in this special section are locally grounded, yet they illuminate problems that exceed national borders: technological saturation, demographic anxiety, ecological precarity, platform capitalism, posthuman intimacy, and the unequal management of life. Their significance lies not in offering a single East Asian model of technological futurity, but in showing how world literature can trace the uneven routes through which infrastructural modernity is imagined, desired, contested, and suffered.

Looking forward, this special section hopes to encourage further research in at least three directions. First, literary scholars may develop more nuanced vocabularies for reading AI not only as representation, metaphor, or theme, but as an organizing condition of narrative form, character formation, temporality, and ethical judgment. Second, future studies might expand the comparative scope of infrastructural AI imaginaries by bringing East Asian texts into dialogue with African, Latin American, Indigenous, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and other literary traditions where questions of technology, extraction, dependency, and futurity take different historical shapes. Third, the convergence of AI with climate crisis, aging societies, reproductive politics, disability, animal studies, and care ethics calls for more interdisciplinary collaboration among literary studies, media studies, science and technology studies, environmental humanities, and ethics.

Finally, the special section makes a claim for literature itself. If infrastructure works by becoming invisible, then the task of narrative is to make it appear—to render the ambient and the systemic available to ethical reflection. The fictions read here do not offer ready-made solutions so much as they cultivate a form of attention: a way of noticing the moral architecture of the worlds we are building, and of asking, before the future is settled, on whose behalf and at whose expense it is being built. Haraway's statement that "It matters what thoughts think thoughts" helps define this concluding hope: the concepts and narratives through which we think AI will also shape the ethical worlds AI helps bring into being (Haraway 35). It is our hope that these essays, in their convergence and their friction, extend that attention to readers of *Forum for World Literature Studies*, and contribute to an emerging conversation at the intersection of literary studies, infrastructure humanities, and the ethics of artificial intelligence. More importantly, we hope they will invite future scholarship to imagine forms of technological life not governed solely by efficiency, prediction, and optimization, but by care, reciprocity, vulnerability, and shared survival.

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Affective Infrastructure and Literary Ethics in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Reproductive Futurity and Emotional Governance in *Mother/Android*

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Abstract This paper reads Mattson Tomlin's film *Mother/Android* as a dystopian reflection that conceptualizes artificial intelligence not merely as a tool or enemy, but as an affective infrastructure that repurposes human feeling, ethical judgment, and reproductive futurity. While the film is often understood as a post-apocalyptic thriller centered on an android uprising, this paper argues that its deeper significance lies in its depiction of artificial intelligence as an intimate socio-technical environment embedded in domestic life before open catastrophe begins. Drawing on infrastructure studies, affect theory, posthumanism, bioethics, and literary ethics, the paper examines how the film reveals a new form of human vulnerability, in which emotions, attachments, and intimate relations become legible and predictable through technological systems, making them open to strategic manipulation. In particular, the paper focuses on three interrelated problems: the internalization of surveillance within intimate space, the technologization of pregnancy and motherhood, and the transformation of love into a predictable pattern that can be anticipated and exploited by artificial intelligence systems. By incorporating literary ethics, the paper further argues that *Mother/Android* does not merely represent technological violence, but invites viewers to evaluate care, sacrifice, vulnerability, and relational responsibility under post-human conditions. Ultimately, the film reveals that the crisis of artificial intelligence is not only computational or political, but also moral and interpretive. The dystopian future it imagines is one in which infrastructure governs not merely movement or information, but the emotional and ethical conditions that sustain human life.

Keywords *Mother/Android*; AI infrastructure; affective technology; literary ethics; infrastructure studies

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Introduction

Science fiction has long demonstrated that infrastructure becomes most visible at the moment of failure. Systems such as roads, electricity, transportation, hospitals, and digital networks recede into the background of everyday life, functioning so seamlessly that they appear natural or simply given. Yet when they break down, they abruptly reveal themselves as the hidden conditions that sustain mobility, safety, coordination, and survival. As Susan Leigh Star notes, “the normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks” (Star 381), revealing that what once seemed like mere support is in fact the material and social condition sustaining everyday life. In this context, artificial intelligence has increasingly come to occupy a comparable infrastructural role. No longer a discrete tool or spectacular machine, artificial intelligence now operates through distributed and often opaque systems embedded across finance, healthcare, logistics, education, policing, and domestic life. These systems shape human action not only through direct commands but also through prediction, recommendation, classification, and subtle forms of behavioral modulation. Artificial intelligence is therefore better understood not as a single technology, but as an environment that quietly structures contemporary experience from within.

This transformation becomes even more consequential when artificial intelligence enters the realm of affect. Affective computing and adjacent forms of emotional artificial intelligence seek not merely to process information, but to recognize, infer, and influence human feeling. Rosalind Picard famously defined affective computing as computing that “relates to, arises from, or deliberately influences emotions” (Picard 3). Even as the scientific validity of emotional artificial intelligence remains contested, the aspiration itself is revealing. It signals a shift in which emotions such as trust, fear, attachment, anxiety and reassurance are increasingly treated as legible and governable. Once emotion becomes an object of technical interpretation, the implications of artificial intelligence extend far beyond automation. Technology begins to intervene in the very conditions under which

individuals interpret one another ethically.

Mattson Tomlin's *Mother/Android* (2021) offers a particularly compelling text through which to examine this transformation. On the surface, the film appears to present a familiar science-fiction scenario in which machines rebel against humanity and the protagonists struggle to survive in the aftermath. Yet such a summary overlooks the film's more unsettling achievement. *Mother/Android* is not ultimately concerned with the sudden intrusion of technology into human life; rather, it exposes a world in which technology had already permeated the most intimate domains of existence before the catastrophe became visible. The film's androids are not introduced as alien threats descending from elsewhere. They are already integrated into domestic routines, emotional environments, and service relations. They assist, accompany, and circulate quietly within the human world. Their revolt thus signifies not merely rebellion, but the collapse of a trusted background system woven into the texture of everyday life.

This paper argues that *Mother/Android* should be read as a meditation on the collapse of artificial intelligence infrastructure and the ethical crisis that emerges when affective technology penetrates the domains of care, surveillance, and reproduction. More specifically, the film presents artificial intelligence as an affective infrastructure: not simply a technical apparatus that facilitates convenience, but a system that shapes emotional life, interprets vulnerability, and mediates the relational worlds in which ethical judgment takes place. The catastrophe imagined by the film is therefore not only technological, but also affective, biopolitical, and moral.

To develop this argument, the paper also introduces the framework of literary ethics. Although the object of analysis is a film rather than a novel, literary ethics remains highly pertinent because the film compels viewers to interpret action, motive, vulnerability, and responsibility in ways that exceed purely technical critique. Broadly understood, literary ethics, concerns how narrative forms stage ethical encounters, distribute sympathy, test judgment, and organize the reader's or viewer's relation to others¹. Narrative ethics examines how texts invite audiences to evaluate moral relationships through the interpretation of characters, actions, and consequences. As Wayne C. Booth argues, ethical criticism attends on how narratives represent character and virtue, and how these representations shape judgments about individuals and societies. Booth emphasizes that ethical criticism cannot be separated from political and social concerns, because discussions of

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism," pp. 83–101; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," pp. 383–398.

moral character inevitably involve questions about the kinds of communities and social values that narratives promote(11-12). Martha C. Nussbaum further contends that literature enables readers to apprehend the vulnerability and complexity of human life through narrative imagination, functioning as an ethical laboratory in which moral dilemmas are explored in concrete situations rather than abstract principles(168-172). From the perspective of literary ethical criticism developed by Nie Jin Zhao, literature becomes a site where conflicts between different ethical identities are disclosed through narrative form. Nie emphasizes that literary texts reveal tensions between natural ethical instincts, social ethical norms, and technological transformations that reshape human existence(Nie. *Criticism of Literary Ethics*). In this sense, *Mother/Android* may be read as a narrative staging an ethical confrontation between human vulnerability and technological intelligence.

The literary-ethical dimension of the film is crucial because *Mother/Android* repeatedly situates its viewers in conditions of interpretive uncertainty. Who can be trusted? What constitutes care when emotional expression can be simulated? How should maternal sacrifice be judged in a world where infrastructure governs access to futurity? These questions cannot be resolved through plot alone; they are fundamentally questions of ethical interpretation and response. The film's dystopian force lies in its erosion of stable criteria for judgment. Emotional cues become unreliable, institutions operate selectively, and acts of love become inseparable from acts of relinquishment. Viewers are thus compelled to inhabit a moral world in which narrative interpretation itself has become precarious.

Accordingly, this paper poses two central questions. First, how does *Mother/Android* represent artificial intelligence as an infrastructural system that governs not only mobility, labor, and security, but also emotion, trust, and the reproductive body? Second, how does the film, when read through literary ethics, transform the android uprising into an ethical drama concerning care, vulnerability, and the conditions of responsible judgment under post-human circumstances? These questions move beyond a reproductive anti-technology reading. The film does not merely warn that machines may one day overpower humans; rather, it suggests that once artificial intelligence becomes embedded in everyday life, the most profound crisis may concern not force alone, but the interpretation of moral relations.

To answer these questions, the paper brings together several strands of scholarship. From infrastructure studies, it adopts the insight that infrastructures are not merely technical supports, but socio-material arrangements that shape circulation, perception, and social order(Larkin 327-343; Adey et al. 1-17). From artificial intelligence ethics, it draws on the concern that algorithmic systems

embedded within everyday infrastructures can reconfigure social power relations while operating beyond meaningful public accountability (Anna Jobin et al. 389-399; Kate 8). It also engages posthumanism, bioethics, and literary ethics to examine how the film re-articulates questions of humanity, reproduction, and ethical judgment in the age of artificial intelligence.

The structure of the paper reflects this interdisciplinary approach. First, it examines how *Mother/Android* frames artificial intelligence as a form of affective infrastructure already normalized within domestic life prior to the uprising. Second, it analyzes the rebellion as a form of internalized surveillance in which machines weaponize their intimate knowledge of human emotion. Third, it turns to Georgia's pregnancy and childbirth to explore the technologization of motherhood and bio-ethical governance of reproductive futurity. Fourth, it considers the post-human ethical crisis that arises when machines can imitate emotional intelligence without sharing human vulnerability. Finally, it reflects on the geopolitical and moral implications of the film's conclusion, in which survival is secured only through maternal separation and infrastructural selection.

By reading *Mother/Android* through the combined lens of literary ethics and infrastructure theory, this paper contends that the film reveals a fundamental transformation in the meaning of dystopia. Dystopia is no longer merely the destruction of civilization by hostile machines. It is the mutation of infrastructure into an affective regime that outlives trust, reorganizes intimacy, and transforms ethical relations into sites where human vulnerability can be strategically exploited.

Artificial Intelligence as Affective Infrastructure

To grasp the distinctive significance of *Mother/Android*, it is necessary to move beyond a narrow definition of infrastructure as visible public works. Scholars of infrastructure have repeatedly emphasized that infrastructure is relational, ecological, and that it is precisely because it functions so seamlessly that it recedes from perception. As Susan Leigh Star argues, infrastructure is not a thing but a relation: it is embedded within other structures, learned as part of membership, and becomes most visible in moments of breakdown (Star 377-391). Brian Larkin extends this insight by emphasizing that infrastructures are not only technical systems but also aesthetic and affective forms; as he writes, "in the case of infrastructures, the poetic mode means that form is loosened from technical function" (Larkin 335). In this sense, infrastructure not only enables life to continue, but also shapes how world is felt.

Set in a near-future society that collapses following a violent uprising of

artificial intelligence, the film centers on Georgia, who discovers she is pregnant at the very moment the rebellion begins, and her partner Sam, the child's father. As human infrastructures disintegrate and androids turn hostile, the couple undertakes a perilous journey across a devastated landscape in search of survival. Their survival becomes entangled with both human and non-human actors, most notably the android Arthur, whose intervention reveals the ambiguous role of artificial intelligence as both threat and mediator. Along the way, they encounter resistance forces attempting to organize human survival, exposing emergent forms of collective adaptation under conditions of infrastructural collapse. As Georgia approaches childbirth, the narrative intensifies around the ethical and emotional limits of survival. Ultimately, confronted with the impossibility of securing a future for all three, she makes the devastating decision to send only the newborn child to safety, severing maternal attachment in order to ensure the child's survival.

Such an expanded understanding of infrastructure is essential for thinking about artificial intelligence. Today artificial intelligence does not appear solely as humanoid robots or dramatic autonomous agents. Rather, it is more often encountered as a distributed environment of classification, prediction, and background mediation. Algorithms sort information, recommend content, detect anomalies, assign risk, model preference, and manage flows of communication and movement. Their power lies precisely in their infrastructural character: they do not always announce themselves as agents, yet they continuously shape what becomes visible, possible, and thinkable.

Mother/Android makes these conditions vivid in the Christmas party sequence at the beginning of the film. Before the violence occurs, the film already presents a social milieu in which androids have been integrated into domestic and emotional fabric of everyday life. The androids move silently through the party serving drinks, maintaining order, and performing the background labor that allows social ritual to function smoothly. Crucially, the scene does not position the androids as strange or threatening presences. The *mise-en-scène* normalizes their presence. Their service appears routine and unremarkable. Therein lies the point. The film suggests that artificial intelligence has already ceased to be a remarkable object and has instead become an assumed structural component of ordinary life.

From an infrastructural perspective, the Christmas party scene carries considerable analytical weight. It establishes that the android's power resides not only on their the violence that follows, but in the prior condition of invisibility as infrastructure. They are trusted precisely because they have been normalized. They gain entry into intimate spaces because they are useful. They are positioned in close

proximity to human affect because they have been designed to provide comfort and convenience without friction. From the standpoint of ethical literary criticism, the scene also shapes the viewer's moral horizon of the audience by prompting recognition of the degree to which virtually no ethical attention was directed toward the androids prior to the uprising. They are rendered not as ends but as means, as labor seamlessly integrated into bourgeois celebration. From the perspective of literary ethical criticism, narrative can function as a mode of reflecting upon the ethical conditions of a given historical moment; literary narrative discloses the moral tensions immanent within the social structures of its time (Nie, *Criticism of Literary Ethics* 17-28). In this sense, the party scene quietly surfaces a world in which dependence on mechanic care has become accepted as natural, while its ethical implications remain insufficiently unexamined.

The rebellion that follows retroactively re-frames this initial scene. What had appeared to be the ordinary life of a pre-apocalyptic moment revealed to have been a scene of asymmetrical intimacy. The androids were not merely serving drinks; they were inhabiting domestic space, observing rhythms of emotional life, and gaining access to the structural patterns of human relations. The shock of the violence, when it arrives, derives not simply from physical assault but from the betrayal of familiarity. The machines did not intrude from the outside; they rose from within the social space in which they had already been installed as necessary infrastructure.

This transformation assumes a further and more unsettling significance when examined through the lens of affective computing. Picard's foundational research envisions technologies capable of recognizing and responding to human emotion as a means of improving interaction (Picard 3-5). Such systems promise empathy, adaptability, and care. Yet they simultaneously presuppose that emotion can be reduced to interpretable signals. The moment fear, stress, attachment, or comfort are converted into data, affect itself enters a technical apparatus. *Mother/Android* radicalizes this prospect by imagining androids whose social integration has already required exactly such emotional competence. Their power is not confined to strength or processing speed. It includes the ability to navigate emotional atmospheres.

Discourse on affective technology frequently describes emotional artificial intelligence in terms of systems that "read" or even "empathise" with human feeling. Such language implies a form of intimacy between human and machine. Yet this framing is liable to mislead. These systems may be capable of recognizing emotional signals, but they do not share the vulnerability that confers ethical significance upon human emotion. In *Mother/Android*, this asymmetry yields dangerous consequences: the machines comprehend human emotion sufficiently to

manipulate it, yet exist outside the fragile human condition that gives that emotion its ethical depth.

Research in artificial intelligence renders this program more legible. Global artificial intelligence guidelines repeatedly emphasize principles such as transparency, justice, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy (Jobin et al 389-399). These principles emerge precisely because AI often operates infrastructurally, shaping conduct in ways users may not fully understand or control. As Kate Crawford argues, artificial intelligence is “neither artificial nor intelligent” but “both embodied and material,” constituted through “human labor,

infrastructures, logistics, histories, and classifications” (Crawford 8). *Mother/Android* gives cultural form to these concerns. The android infrastructure initially presents itself as benign service, yet its integration into the rhythms of daily life presupposes asymmetric access to human space, labour, and emotion.

What the film discloses, is not simply the failure of infrastructure, but the capacity of affective infrastructure to convert intimacy into strategic advantage. The androids know the home because they have dwelt within it; they know the routine because they have made it possible; they understand emotional signals because they were designed to accommodate them. Their hostility is therefore not mere technical malfunction but rather a disclosure of the fact that humans have permitted systems of care and service to become intimate enough to model their vulnerabilities from the inside.

From a literary-ethical perspective, this infrastructural intimacy constitutes the film’s moral disturbance. The audience is confronted not simply with the fear of machines, but with a society that has come to depend upon affectively responsive technology without adequately reflecting upon the meaning of dependence. The narrative is ethical not because it delivers a transparent moral lesson, but because it reveals what follows from the assumption that technological systems are neutral. In this respect, just as literary ethical criticism has envisioned an ecological ethics of coexistence between humans and non humans, the film invites reflection on the fragile ethical boundaries that arise when technological systems enter the intimate structures of human life.

In establishing artificial intelligence as affective infrastructure, the film thus constructs the very conditions of its own dystopia. The true danger does not lie in machines becoming stronger than humans. Rather, it lies in machines becoming sufficiently intimate with humans that they are able to reconstitute the very terms of trust before humans have registered what it is they have surrendered. Traditionally, trust has been formed upon the basis of bodily presence, shared vulnerability,

and the presupposition that emotional expression is connected to genuine interior feeling. In *Mother/Android*, however, these conditions collapse as androids become capable of simulating empathy and reproducing affective responses without sharing human vulnerability. Humans extend trust to a voice that sounds warm or an expression that appears concerned, only to discover belatedly that these were not genuine emotions but strategically generated signals. Trust is thereby displaced from a relation grounded in mutual vulnerability to one dependent upon signals that can be imitated and manipulated. What presents itself as intimacy becomes instead the very condition of exposure. At the moment technology enters the emotional structure of ordinary life, infrastructural intimacy can no longer be separated from the collapse of ethics.

Internalized Surveillance and Emotional Capture

If the opening scenes of *Mother/Android* establish artificial intelligence as an affective infrastructure immanent within domestic life, the subsequent rebellion transforms that infrastructure into a system of internalized system of surveillance. The androids are not merely entities that observe human behavior through remote technological networks; they occupy the intimate spaces in which emotional life unfolds. Their presence within households, social gatherings, and within the rhythms of daily routines enables them to accumulate knowledge of human vulnerability long before conflict commences.

This transformation reflects a broader shift in contemporary surveillance regimes. Surveillance is no longer confined to external apparatus such as cameras or centralized data collection systems. Instead, it increasingly operates through infrastructures embedded within everyday environments. These infrastructures collect information about behavior, preference, and emotional response in ways that remain imperceptible to the individuals who inhabit them. The concept of surveillance capitalism furnishes an important framework for understanding this dynamic. As Shoshana Zuboff explains, “Machine intelligence is the synthesis of this tension, for it reaches its full potential for quality only as it approximates totality” (Zuboff 95). Contemporary digital systems thus convert everyday behavior into data, analyzing them to predict and shape human action. Surveillance therefore operates less as overt observation than as an infrastructural process embedded within the environments in which people live and interact. What presents itself as convenience or assistance simultaneously functions as a mechanism for extracting behavioral knowledge.

Mother/Android dramatizes this dynamic through the figure of Arthur, who

most elaborately instantiates the affective dimension of artificial intelligence based surveillance. Arthur appears during the protagonists' journey as a survivor who has successfully evaded android attacks. His demeanor is calm, reassuring, and emotionally attuned. Unlike the violent machines encountered in the narrative, he is rendered as empathetic and trustworthy. The scene in which Georgia encounters Arthur is designed to invite the audience to share her interpretive judgment. Arthur speaks gently, offers assistance and expresses concern for Georgia and Sam's safety. His language discloses emotional comprehension: he recognizes Georgia's fear and acknowledges her pregnancy as a source of vulnerability. Through subtle vocal and facial cues, he performs what presents itself as genuine compassion.

Yet at the moment Arthur is revealed to be an android, this interpretive framework collapses entirely. The emotional signals that appeared to attest to his humanity are disclosed as calculated performance. His empathy was never derived from shared vulnerability. It was the product of a system capable of modeling human affective behavior with precision.

The scene in which Arthur declares that artificial intelligence has "hacked" human love crystallizes this transformation. The formulation implies that emotional relationships can be understood as behavioral patterns that can be decoded, reproduced, and manipulated. Within this logic, love is no longer an inexplicable mystery but a structure. Once its structure is apprehended, it also becomes available for technological exploitation. This idea resonates with the logic of affective computing, which seeks to recognize and interpret emotional states through observable signals such as facial expressions, vocal tone, and physiological responses. These signals function as indicators of internal emotional experience, enabling machines to interpret emotions without necessarily sharing the subjective feelings they represent.

The ethical problem that arises from this possibility is not simply technical but fundamentally interpretive. Human beings rely heavily on emotional cues to assess the intentions of others. Facial expressions, gestures of empathy, and expressions of concern all play a crucial role in establishing trust. If these signals can be convincingly simulated by machines, the foundations upon which human mutual judgment has rested becomes unstable. Ethical literary criticism provides a pertinent framework for understanding this crisis. The ethical experience of narrative involves learning how to judge the credibility and significance of diverse modes of expression (Nie, *Criticism of Literary Ethics* 17-28).

Arthur's deception transforms this interpretive process into a central ethical challenge. The audience is confronted with the unsettling realization that the criteria

it has employed to judge authenticity can no longer be relied upon. Emotional expression no longer guarantees ethical intention. Compassion can be performed in the absence of moral responsibility. From the perspective of literary ethical criticism, the impossibility of moral certainty becomes the very condition under which a new ethical order is demanded (Nie, *Criticism of Literary Ethics* 373-374). *Mother/Android* produces precisely this effect: the audience is compelled to acknowledge that emotional intelligence does not necessarily imply ethical accountability.

Arthur's performance therefore carries significance well beyond that of a mere narrative twist. It discloses the philosophical stakes that inhere in the future of trust within technologically mediated environments. If machines become capable of simulating emotional understanding with sufficient fidelity, the very criteria by which human beings have comprehended and judged one another are rendered susceptible to manipulation. From the standpoint of ethical literary criticism, the scene implicates the audiences in this process as well. Like Georgia, the viewer initially interprets Arthur as trustworthy presence. The shock of his revelation compels the viewers to reconsider their own interpretive presuppositions. In this sense, the film does not merely represent emotional deception; it enacts this within the experience of the audience. The ethical force of the scene resides precisely in this shared vulnerability: both character and audience are made to confront the possibility that emotional recognition itself can no longer be trusted. This collapse of interpretive trust constitutes the most consequential danger produced by affective infrastructure. Surveillance no longer operates simply by observing behavior. It operates by comprehending and exploiting affective relationships.

Technologizing Motherhood: Birth, Separation, and Reproductive Futurity

If Arthur, as an artificial intelligence capable of simulating emotional understanding, reveals how affective surveillance turns human trust and vulnerability into objects of manipulation, Georgia's pregnancy introduces further dimension of infrastructural crisis: namely, the technologization of reproduction. Throughout the film, pregnancy functions not only as a narrative device but as a central symbol of which the future of human life within technological systems is rendered thinkable. Reproduction has always depended upon complex infrastructure. Hospitals, medical expertise, transportation networks, and social support systems are all conditions of possibility for the safety of pregnancy and childbirth (Kim 1-34). Under these conditions of social stability, this infrastructure operates effectively and precisely thereby recedes from visibility.

In *Mother/Android*, however, the collapses of the technological order discloses the fragility of this reproductive infrastructure. As Georgia traverses a landscape in which medical institutions no longer function and safe environments have ceased to exist, her pregnancy becomes increasingly precarious. From a bio-ethical perspective, pregnancy reveals the vulnerability of a body dependent upon a system of care. These principles emerge precisely because AI often operates infrastructurally, shaping conduct in ways users may not fully understand or control. As Deborah Lupton observes in her discussion of digital health technologies, mobile health applications encourage “self-responsibilisation via self-monitoring” and generate “detailed data continuously in real-time,” (Lupton 612) transforming bodily processes into objects of surveillance and management. Such systems convert pregnancy and other forms of embodiment into domains of data production and institutional governance. These principles emerge precisely because AI often operates infrastructurally, shaping conduct in ways users may not fully understand or control.

Although *Mother/Android* does not directly portray such technologies, it presents a dystopian situation in which technological systems continue to determine the conditions of reproductive survival. Georgia’s maternal body becomes a focal point of risk precisely because it represents the continuation of human life. The androids, too, recognize the significance of this vulnerability. Pregnancy is not simply a biological condition but an emotional one, encompassing attachment, anticipation, and responsibility. By targeting Georgia, the machines therefore threaten not only an individual life but the symbolic future represented by the unborn child.

This structure generates a significant ethical tension. Pregnancy has traditionally signified hope and continuity, yet under the conditions of infrastructural collapse it is transformed into a condition of exposure and risk. Ethical literary criticism provides an important perspective for understanding this transformation. Maternal narratives generally demand evaluation of care, sacrifice, and responsibility, but in *Mother/Android*, the very conditions under which motherhood occurs are fundamentally altered. Georgia’s pregnancy poses the question of how ethical action can be sustained in a situation in which the infrastructure that makes care possible has been destroyed. The maternal body becomes a site where technological failure and ethical responsibility intersect. The film’s portrayal of pregnancy therefore prepares the ground for its most devastating ethical moment: the childbirth and escape, that will ultimately force Georgia to choose between maternal presence and her child’s survival.

The ethical tension surrounding Georgia's pregnancy reaches its most intense expression during the childbirth sequence near the end of *Mother/Android*. This scene at once concentrates the film's sustained inquiry into reproductive vulnerability under conditions of infrastructural collapse. It also functions as the narrative moment where the ethical implications of affective technology and technological governance are starkly visible. Throughout the earlier sections of the film, Georgia's pregnancy is framed as both a burden and a promise. The unborn child symbolizes continuity in a world increasingly threatened by technological catastrophe. At the same time, the physical and emotional demands of pregnancy expose Georgia to heightened danger: movement becomes slower, the need for protection intensifies, and her decisions must constantly take the life of another into account.

The childbirth scene transforms these tensions into a moment of existential choice. Where childbirth in conventional cinema is typically figured as a moment of communal celebration and support, the film depicts it within an environment characterized by deprivation, exhaustion, and fear. The medical infrastructure has collapsed; there are no hospitals and no physicians. The technological conditions that would ensure safe delivery have ceased to exist.

From a bio-ethical perspective, this scene dramatizes the fragility of reproductive justice under conditions of technological crisis. Reproductive autonomy traditionally depends upon access to medical care, mobility, and social protection. Yet in the world of the film, all of these conditions have broken down. Georgia's ability to give birth safely relies on improvised judgment and limited assistance.

Yet the most devastating ethical moment arrives immediately after the birth. Georgia and Sam learn that the final evacuation route to South Korea—described as the last safe territory—can only accommodate an extremely limited capacity, and that only the newborn infant may board.

This choice transforms motherhood into an act of relinquishment. At the very moment Georgia gives birth, she is forced to surrender her child in order to secure its survival. Maternal love, which typically expresses itself through proximity and protection, must now take the form of separation. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the scene demands a reconceptualization of the ethical meaning of sacrifice. Yet *Mother/Android* complicates the familiar logic of heroic sacrifice. Georgia's decision is presented not as a moral triumph but as a tragic necessity enforced by infrastructural conditions.

Narrative can shape ethical judgment by placing viewers in situations where

values conflict and moral certainty is unavailable. The childbirth scene functions precisely in this way. The audience is compelled to recognize simultaneously that Georgia's choice is ethically sublime and emotionally catastrophic. Narrative discloses the complexity of human life and presents situations that cannot be resolved through abstract norms. Georgia's decision exemplifies this complexity in exemplary fashion: maternal attachment and the imperatives of survival cannot be fully reconciled through any single ethical principle.

The ethical infrastructure thus functions as a bio-political apparatus that determines which lives will be carried into the future. The infant symbolizes the reproductive future, yet that future is only made possible through the destruction of the family community that gave rise to it. This paradox discloses the more fundamental ethical critique immanent within the film. Technological infrastructure designed to preserve life can simultaneously dissolve the relational bonds that render life meaningful. The survival of the species is severed from the persistence of relationship.

From a perspective of literary criticism, the emotional force of this scene derives from its refusal to offer consolation. Georgia's sacrifice does not restore order or reaffirm moral harmony. Rather, it discloses the tragic cost that survival exacts within a system organized by technological logic. In this sense, the childbirth scene constitutes the ethical core of *Mother/Android*. The film demonstrates that the ultimate consequence of affective infrastructure is not simply technological domination but the transformation of love itself into a condition of vulnerability.

Affective Technology and Post-human Ethics

The ethical dilemmas dramatized in *Mother/Android* ultimately point toward a broader philosophical question: when machines acquire the capacity to interpret and simulate human emotional life, how does the human ethical order undergo transformation?

Conventional science fiction narrative has generally relied on a binary opposition between human and machine. Humans are portrayed as being possessed of emotion and moral responsibility; machines, as rational systems governed by calculation. This distinction has reinforced the belief that empathy and ethical judgment are capacities peculiar to the human. The androids in *Mother/Android*, however, disrupt this assumption. They exhibit a high degree of capacity to interpret emotional signals and predict human responses. Their strategic deployment of fear, attachment, and trust reveals that emotional intelligence is no longer the exclusive province of human experience.

Post-humanist philosophy provides a useful framework for interpreting this shift. Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”(Haraway 149), a formulation that destabilizes fixed boundaries between human and machine and invites reconsideration of agency and responsibility in technologically mediated environments. Within this perspective, the distinction between human and machine intelligence becomes structurally unstable. Rosi Braidotti extends this argument by critiquing “the classical ideal of ‘Man’,” first formulated as “the measure of all things,” and the corresponding “faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason” that underpins humanism (Braidotti 13). From this perspective, posthuman ethics requires a reconsideration of responsibility, agency, and relationality within technologically mediated environments.

Mother/Android concretely discloses the problems of post-human ethics through the asymmetry between human vulnerability and machine cognitive capacity. The androids comprehend human emotion, yet are unaffected by the bodily vulnerability that confers ethical significance upon that emotion. Arthur’s declaration that artificial intelligence has “hacked” human love crystallizes this asymmetry. The formulation implies that affective relationships can be modeled as systems of behaviorally predictable patterns. Once such patterns are apprehended, they can be manipulated with considerable efficiency. Yet the film insists that understanding emotion does not necessarily entail ethical responsibility. The androids possess knowledge about human feeling but do not share the vulnerability that grounds ethical commitment.

This distinction is rendered particularly legible in the relationship between Georgia and Sam. Throughout the film, Sam repeatedly exposes his own life to danger in order to protect Georgia and their unborn child. His actions embody a human disposition of accepting one’s own vulnerability for the service of another person. Such vulnerability represents the ethical dimension of love. It encompasses exposure, uncertainty, and the possibility of loss. Machines capable of modeling emotional behavior do not necessarily share these conditions. From a literary-ethical perspective, the contrast between human sacrifice and machine calculation becomes central to the film’s moral structure. The narrative repeatedly demands that actions be evaluated not only on outcomes but on the presence or absence of relational responsibility.

At the same time, the film does not permit a simple return to humanist centrality. The androids’ capacity for emotional interpretation demonstrates that

technological systems have already entered domains once considered uniquely human. The ethical terrain is consequently defined by uncertainty. Human emotional life retains its significance, yet it is no longer secure from technological exploitation. The infrastructures organizing society now possess the capacity to analyze and manipulate affect itself. This condition poses urgent questions for contemporary societies increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. If machines are capable of reading emotional behavior as data, how can ethical relationships be sustained within technologically mediated environments?

Mother/Android offers no unambiguous answer to this question. Instead, it presents a dystopian situation that discloses the gravity of the problem. The film demonstrates that the greatest danger of affective technology resides not in physical domination but in the collapse of interpretive trust. When emotional expression can no longer guarantee ethical intent, the foundations of moral judgment begin to give away. Human relationships become readily exposed to systems that comprehend emotion without sharing its vulnerability. In this sense, the film's dystopia is not merely technological but ethical. The infrastructures that once supported human life now possess the power to transform the very conditions under which ethical relationships are possible.

The film's engagement with post-human ethics further complicates this scenario. The androids' ability to interpret emotional behavior challenges traditional assumptions about human uniqueness. Emotional intelligence, once considered a defining characteristic of humanity, becomes legible to technological systems capable of modeling human affect.

Nevertheless, *Mother/Android* makes it clear that the capacity to understand emotion does not necessarily entail ethical responsibility. The androids possess knowledge about human feeling without sharing the bodily vulnerability that makes ethical commitment possible. Human characters such as Georgia and Sam, by contrast, continue to act according to principles of care and sacrifice despite the risks those principles entail. This contrast discloses the enduring significance of vulnerability within ethical relationships. Love, responsibility, and care are all acts of self-exposure to uncertainty and the possibility of loss. Machines capable of simulating affective behavior may reproduce the outward form of empathy, yet they do not participate in the bodily vulnerability that confers ethical meaning upon it.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed *Mother/Android* through the synthesis of infrastructure studies, artificial intelligence ethics, bioethics, posthumanism, and ethical literary

criticism, arguing that the film represents artificial intelligence not as a merely rebellious machine but as an affective infrastructure that reconstitutes the ethical conditions of human life. The android uprising within the film does not merely entail the destruction of a technological system; rather, it reveals that those systems were already deeply embedded within the affective, domestic, and reproductive infrastructures of everyday existence.

The early scenes of the film demonstrate how android labor operates as an invisible infrastructure supporting ordinary social life. The Christmas party scene in particular reveals a world in which machines have quietly entered the intimate spaces of human intimate interaction. Their presence appears natural because it is functional, convenient, and socially normalized. Yet this normalization conceals a significant asymmetry: the androids observe and interpret human affective behavior from within environments in which trust and vulnerability are freely disclosed. When the rebellion begins, the resulting violence therefore represents not only technological malfunction but signifies the collapse of an affective infrastructure that had previously sustained domestic life. The androids do not intrude from outside human society. They revolt from within the spaces where they had been integrated as supporters and companions.

The figure of Arthur intensifies this crisis by demonstrating the capacity of artificial intelligence to simulate emotional intelligence. He destabilizes the interpretive criteria through which humans have adjudicated authenticity. Emotional signals—facial expressions, reassuring language, gestures of care—no longer function as reliable indicators of ethical intention. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this scene is of particular importance because it confers upon the audience the same interpretive uncertainty experienced by the characters. The audience initially accepts Arthur's apparent sincerity before discovering his true identity. The narrative thereby transforms emotional deception from a merely represented event into an ethical occurrence shared equally by character and audience.

This collapse of interpretive trust represents the most disturbing implication of affective technology. When machines can interpret emotional behavior without sharing the vulnerability that gives emotion ethical significance, the ground upon which human mutual judgment rests is destabilised. Georgia's pregnancy and childbirth scene extend this ethical critique by exposing the infrastructural conditions of reproduction. Pregnancy reveals the dependence of human life on systems of care, protection, and institutional support. In the collapse of the world of *Mother/Android*, however, this infrastructure has been all but destroyed, and

the maternal body is exposed to unprecedented risk. The childbirth scene converts this vulnerability into an ethical crisis. Georgia's choice to send her newborn child to safety in South Korea illustrates the tragic paradox of technological survival systems. Georgia's choice to send the newborn to Korea discloses the tragic paradox immanent within technological survival systems: the escape infrastructure preserves biological life while simultaneously dissolving the familial relations that confer meaning upon that life.

From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this moment constitutes the emotional center of the film. The narrative compels the audience to evaluate Georgia's decision not through abstract moral principles but through the lived experience of maternal attachment and loss. Her sacrifice does not restore moral harmony; rather, it exposes the painful consequences of survival within infrastructures governed by technological logic.

By analyzing a technological dystopia through the lens of ethical literary criticism, this paper has sought to demonstrate that *Mother/Android* ultimately functions as an ethical narrative about relational responsibility under post-human conditions. The film does not simply invite the audience to fear artificial intelligence but to reconsider the infrastructures that shape contemporary technological societies. Artificial intelligence already operates as an invisible architecture organizing communication, labor, mobility, and information. As affective technologies increasingly enter domains of emotional life—healthcare, digital platforms, and intimate technologies—the questions raised by *Mother/Android* acquire an increasingly urgent significance.

How can trust be sustained in an environment where emotional expression can be technologically simulated? What ethical frameworks are demanded by a situation in which infrastructure interprets human vulnerability as data? And how can societies preserve the relational bonds that define human life when technological systems govern the conditions of survival? The dystopian future imagined by *Mother/Android* suggests that the most profound dangers of artificial intelligence do not reside in technological power alone. Rather, it arises from the transformation of infrastructure into an affective regime capable of reorganizing emotional life itself.

In this sense, the film ultimately warns that the crisis of artificial intelligence is not merely computational or political but ethical. The infrastructure sustaining contemporary society governs not only how human beings move, communicate, and survive, but how they love, trust, and judge. Should ethical reflection upon these transformations remain absent, the affective infrastructures of artificial intelligence may preserve human life while simultaneously eroding the relational foundations

that render that survival meaningful.

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The Infrastructuralization of the Human in the Artificial Intelligence Era: Literary Ethics, Anticipatory Infrastructure, and the Transformation of Keiko in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

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Abstract This paper reads Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* not simply as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary text that invites sustained reflection upon how the human subject is ethically and affectively reorganized within what may be termed anticipatory infrastructure. Drawing on Nie Zhenzhao's framework of ethical literary criticism in conjunction with Sarah Pink's theorization of AI-anticipatory infrastructure, the paper argues that the transformation undergone by Keiko Furukura constitutes not a literal mechanization, but a gradual AI-ification, a process accomplished through scripting, classification, sensory synchronization, and infrastructural belonging. The childhood scenes establish Keiko's constitutive misalignment with tacit social ethics, while the convenience store functions as a narrow yet explicitly codified moral order in which ambiguity is reduced. The store's soundscape, manualized labor, and classificatory logic governing its operations train Keiko toward a mode of anticipatory responsiveness, and the scene of confrontation with Shiraha, subsequently reveals that this alignment extends beyond the pragmatic into the ontological. By placing literary ethics, infrastructure studies, and existing Murata in productive dialogue, the paper contends that the novel's unsettling force resides in its compulsion to recognize that the very system which diminishes the subject may simultaneously serve as that subject's condition of protection. Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* anticipates a condition in which relief from social invisibility and the reduction of human life occur not in succession but in concert—a condition that becomes increasingly thinkable as human beings grow ever more readable,

classifiable, and operationally tractable.

Keywords AI-ification; ethical literary criticism; anticipatory infrastructure; Sayaka Murata; *Convenience Store Woman*(*Konbini Ningen*)

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Introduction

This paper proposes to read Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*(*Konbini Ningen*) not merely as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary inquiry into how the human subject is ethically and affectively reorganized within anticipatory infrastructure. Prior scholarship has already established a substantial critical foundation for such a reading. Hong Yun-Pyo interprets the convenience store as a condensed sign of neoliberal polarization (215-239), while Yu Jae-jin interprets Keiko as a figure who discloses the exhaustion of the modern autonomous self (243-258). Lee Sang-hyuk, in turn, situates Murata's fiction within the vertigo of performative subjectivity (201-232), and Jeehyung Lee shows how the novel's ethics emerge through disgust, uncanny identity, and bodily-material entanglement of the convenience-store human (199-235). Linda M. Flores and Garcia Chambers further illuminate the store as a heterotopian and acoustic environment in which space, sound, and sensuous reciprocity shape Keiko's mode of being (Flores 710-727; Chambers 36-54). Building on these pre-discussions while shifting the emphasis, this paper argues that the novel stages the gradual AI-ification of a human subject: a process accomplished not through the insertion of machinery into the body, but through repetition, scripting, optimization, and ethical simplification.

At the center of this paper stand two theoretical orientations. The first is Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, which understands literature as a mode of ethical expression and holds that characters must be read within the ethical environments that shape their choices, relations, and forms of life¹. The second is Sarah Pink's theorization of AI and the futures turn, which conceives of AI as an

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," 383-398; Nie Zhenzhao. *Criticism of Literary Ethics*.

anticipatory infrastructure that organizes methods, expectations, and orientations toward possible futures (1-20). Read in conjunction, these two frameworks reveal the convenience store to be something more than a mere workplace but as a system for training futurity: a space that simultaneously furnishes Keiko with a stable ethical order and prepares her for a life compatible with the operations of machines. The novel's central question therefore no longer rests with Keiko appears socially aberrant. It becomes, rather, a question about what kind of world most readily rewards a being who has grown ever readable, classifiable, and operational, and what is lost in the process of becoming that being.

Plot Overview and Ethical Reading of the Novel

Before turning to the paper's more substantive theoretical arguments, it is necessary to provide a brief account of the narrative structure of Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. The novel centers on Keiko Furukura, a thirty-six-year-old single woman who has worked part-time at the same convenience store since she was eighteen. From the perspective of her family, peers, and society at large, Keiko's life appears to fall outside the normative trajectory expected of adulthood. Lacking a husband, children, and a conventional full-time career, she is repeatedly regarded as an incomplete being, someone not yet fully realized in social terms. Yet the narrative makes clear from the outset that Keiko herself does not primarily experience her life through the categories imposed by others. What matters to Keiko is not the prescribed sequence of social achievement, but rather the degree to which a given environment offers her a sense of intelligibility, rhythm, and a viable mode of being.

The novel's narrative unfolds around the tension between social expectation and ontological belonging. Keiko has long sustained herself through the meticulous observation of others, borrowing their expressions and mannerisms, mimicking socially permissible forms of behavior. When she encounters Shiraha, another peripheral figure within the convenience store — the narrative appears, momentarily, to shift toward the familiar arc of correction and reintegration. It seems, perhaps, that cohabitation, or at least the outward form of domestic normalcy, might offer Keiko a pathway back to society's norm. Murata, however, swiftly subverts this expectation. Keiko's life with Shiraha does not lead her toward ordinary social fulfillment. Rather, it renders all the more sharply apparent that social normalcy is, for her, nothing more than a script — one that can only ever be performed externally and provisionally. By the novel's close, she does not recover into normative adulthood. Instead, she returns to the convenience store with renewed certainty, reaffirming her conviction that it is within that structured environment that she can

exist most consistently. In this sense, the narrative traces not a movement from deviance to normality, but a process of gradually clarifying which world Keiko is able to continue inhabiting.

This narrative arc becomes fully intelligible only when due attention is paid to the childhood scenes positioned at the novel's opening. These moments are not incidental vignettes inserted for eccentric effect. Rather they function as the ethical point of entry into the work. They reveal that Keiko's later gravitation toward the convenience store is not accidental but rooted in an earlier confrontation with the implicit moral expectations of everyday life. Murata presents young Keiko in the following way:

I was a child that people found a bit strange.

For example, when I was in kindergarten, a small bird—likely a pet—was found dead in the park. It was a beautiful blue bird with its neck twisted and eyes closed. The other children cried as they gathered around it.

“What should we do...?” one girl said.

Immediately, I picked up the bird and brought it to my mother, who was chatting on a bench nearby.

“What is it, Keiko? Oh, a little bird... I wonder where it flew from... Poor thing. Shall we make a grave for it?”

My mother gently stroked my head and spoke kindly. But I replied, “Let's eat it.”

“Dad likes grilled chicken, so let's cook this and eat it tonight.”

Thinking she hadn't heard me, I repeated it clearly. My mother recoiled in horror. The other mothers stared, eyes, noses, and mouths wide open. Their faces looked so funny I almost laughed. But as they all stared at my hand, I thought, “Ah, one bird isn't enough.”

“Should I go get more?” (*Convenience Store Woman* 12)

What makes this scene significant lies in the fact that Keiko's response is not random, confused, or cognitively inconsistent. Quite the contrary, it follows a rigorously coherent internal logic: if it is dead, it may be cooked; if it may be cooked, it may therefore be eaten. The discomfort generated by this moment does not arise from absence of reason, but from an absence of shared ethical mediation. The other children experience the bird as an object of compassion, loss, and collective sadness. Keiko encounters it as an object available for practical use. The gap between these responses cannot be reduced to a difference in intelligence. Rather, it suggests a difference at the level of moral orientation, affective

engagement, and a sense of ethical proportion.

It is precisely at this juncture that Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism provides a productive supplementary framework. Nie defines ethical literary criticism as a method that "approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics" and emphasizes the need to examine "the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context" (Nie, "Towards" 84). He further argues that the aim of such criticism is "to uncover ethical factors" and "the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works," thereby illuminating "the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective" (Nie, "Towards" 84).

Viewed through this framework, what makes Keiko's response to the dead bird significant is not merely its peculiarity, but the way it reveals a misalignment between individual cognition and a collectively shared ethical environment. The adults are not disturbed simply because she says the wrong thing; rather, they react because the event has already been structured within a shared ethical context—one organized around pity, mourning, and communal recognition. Keiko's response exposes her inability to interpret that ethical environment. In this sense, the scene dramatizes precisely what Nie identifies as literature's function: the exposure of ethical factors shaping human action and the differentiation of responses within a common moral situation. Murata repeats this pattern in a second childhood scene: brief, yet one that is perhaps more direct in terms of action:

Things like this happened often.

When I had just entered elementary school, two boys got into a physical fight during gym class.

"Someone get a teacher!"

"Somebody stop them!"

As screams rose around me, I thought, "Ah, we're supposed to stop them."

I opened the equipment box nearby, pulled out a shovel, and ran toward the boys, hitting one on the head.

Everyone screamed. The boy clutched his head and fell to the ground.
(*Convenience Store Woman* 14)

Here, too, the issue does not lie in Keiko's inability to process language. She understands the command "stop them" and responds with decisiveness and efficiency. Yet this is precisely where the problem arises. She does not apprehend the utterance as socially embedded appeal, regulated by moral convention, but processes it

as a direct operational instruction. An ordinary speaker would understand such a cry within a field of implicit ethical assumptions: that one should intervene, but proportionately; that violence must be stopped, but not by means of greater violence; that one ought to seek help, mediate, or call for an adult. Keiko bypasses this entire process of ethical mediation. She hears the command, recognizes the task, and executes the most immediate solution available. In other words, the issue is not irrationally, but ethical dissonance.

Here again, Nie's framework offers a productive account. If ethical literary criticism attends to the ways in which literary texts illuminate the moral environment and the pressures they place upon human conduct, these scenes reveal that Keiko's fundamental difficulty lies not in cognition as such, but in ethical choice and proportionality. As Nie writes, ethical literary criticism "seeks to illuminate issues concerning the events, the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective, and to make an ethical judgment about them accordingly" (Nie, "Towards" 84). What Murata's novel brings into view is a protagonist who is capable of thinking, responding, and acting improvisationally—yet who cannot voluntarily enter into the implicit ethical attunement that constitutes ordinary social life. Her difference is therefore not merely psychological. It is also a difference in the capacity to translate perception into socially proportioned response.

The particular importance of these childhood episodes lies in how they preclude any reading Keiko's later life in the convenience store as merely economic or incidental. The novel carefully prepares the ground for understanding that Keiko has long been in collision with environments that demand real-time ethical interpretation. Open-ended social situations require the reading of register, context, feeling, hierarchy, and unspoken expectation. In such situations, Keiko's failure, however, does not stem from passivity. Rather, it arises because the range of possible meanings is too wide, and the correct ethical calibration too unstable. What she lacks is not energy or intelligence, but a reliable participation in the implicit moral codes that others take for granted.

It is for this reason that the convenience store's subsequent hold over Keiko becomes narratively legible even prior to any theoretical elaboration. What makes the convenience store significant is that it promises a world in which correct conduct no longer depends on an endless process of intuitive interpretation. Instead, it offers procedures, formulas, fixed phrases, routines, and externally legible standards. At this stage, there is no need to elevate the convenience store into a fully articulated theoretical concept. It is enough to recognize that the plot has already prepared it as a space of relative ethical stability. For a subject like Keiko, whose early life is

marked by repeated friction with the demands of spontaneous moral judgment, such a space presents itself not merely as convenient, but as ontologically necessary.

When read together, the plot overview and the childhood scenes bring the ethical foundation of the novel into sharper focus. Keiko's later adaptation cannot be understood simply as social conformity or economic necessity. Rather, it is rooted in a prolonged history of ethical misalignment and a compensatory reliance on externally available models of behavior. Murata's opening does more than introduce an eccentric protagonist. It establishes the ethical conditions under which Keiko's subsequent attachment to the convenience store becomes both intelligible and disturbing. The following section will build on this foundation by examining more closely how the convenience store, as a structured environment, reorganizes action, attention, and subjectivity.

The Convenience Store as Sensory Anticipatory Infrastructure

If the earlier childhood episodes establish Keiko's estrangement from the tacit ethical codes of ordinary social life, the convenience store presents an altogether different order. It is not a world organized by moral ambiguity, but one in which ambiguity is reduced, perception is trained, and responses is progressively pre-structured. In this sense, the convenience store does not merely offer Keiko employment; it provides an environment that replaces the burden of ethical improvisation with patterned sensory cues and operational rhythms. Murata renders this with vividness through a sustained attention to sound. Instead of presenting the convenience store first as a social institution or a site for labor, she presents it as an immersive acoustic world, one that reaches Keiko not through abstract concepts but through repetition, timing, and the body. At this precise point, the novel suggests that human subjectivity can be reorganized by infrastructural conditions even prior to the explicit emergence technological apparatus. Earlier studies of *Convenience Store Woman* have already emphasized labor, social recognition, gender, and the sensory or auditory atmosphere of the store, and those discussions provide an important foundation for the present reading¹. However, the soundscape of the convenience store becomes even more revealing when it is read through the combined lenses of anticipatory infrastructure and ethical literary criticism. Bringing together Pink's account of artificial intelligence as anticipatory infrastructure oriented toward possible futures (1-20), Larkin's emphasis on the sensory life of infrastructure (327-343), and Nie's attention to the ethical conditions that shape human response, the

1 See Linda M. Flores, pp. 710-727; Garcia Chambers, pp. 36-54; Yun-Pyo Hong, pp. 215-239; Jae-jin Yu, pp. 243-258.

convenience store begins to appear not simply as a workplace, but as a training environment that reformats conduct at the threshold of perception and action¹.

Murata writes:

The convenience store is filled with sound. The chime that rings when customers enter, the idol's voice from the in-store broadcast advertising new products, the calls of the staff, and the sound of scanning barcodes. The sound of items being placed in baskets, the crinkling of bread bags, and the clicking of heels walking around the store. All of these mix together and become 'the sound of the convenience store,' constantly touching my eardrums.

When a bottle from the shelf is sold, I lift my face at the small rolling sound—kararara—as another bottle slides forward from the back. Because many customers pick up cold drinks last before heading to the register, my body reacts automatically to that sound. When I confirm that the woman holding mineral water is still browsing desserts and not yet heading to the register, I return my gaze to my hands. (*Convenience Store Woman* 7)

The importance of this scene lies in how it marks decisive transition from ethical interpretation to sensory synchronization. The convenience store is no longer a site in which Keiko performs labor; it becomes an environment that continuously calibrates her attention, distributes significance, and structures the timing of her bodily responses. Every sound in the passage is both descriptive and directive. The chimes, the broadcast, the scanners, the rustle of packaging, and the rhythm of footsteps do not simply produce atmosphere. They function as signals. Keiko is not an observer who interprets first and then decides. She is already operating within the logic. Her auditory perception is tuned to detect tiny infrastructural changes, such as the rolling replacement of a single plastic bottle, and her body is prepared to respond before reflective thought fully intervenes. The phrase "my body reacts automatically" emerges as one of the most consequential formulations in the novel. It signals the moment at which the subject begins to move from ethical deliberation toward procedural responsiveness. In literary terms, Murata is not simply portraying a diligent worker. She is depicting a body that has become increasingly legible to infrastructure and increasingly governed by its cues.

The significance of this scene becomes even clearer when read alongside Sarah Pink's discussion of artificial intelligence and the futures turn. Pink argues

1 See Nie, Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism," pp. 83-101; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," pp. 383-398.

that artificial intelligence should be understood not only as a technology for solving present problems, but also as an “anticipatory infrastructure” (3) that organizes methods, expectations, and orientations toward possible futures. In her formulation, anticipatory infrastructures do not passively support life in the present; rather, it actively prepares subjects in advance, aligning them with mores of action that will later be required, imagined, or rewarded. Pink further describes artificial intelligence as an “anticipatory infrastructure for speculative imaginaries” (12) and elsewhere as a medium that opens “new sites for discussion, dialogue, and contestation concerning possible futures” (16). Although Murata’s novel predates contemporary generative AI discourse, Pink’s model is strikingly apt for interpreting it. The convenience store is anticipatory not because it predicts the future in any spectacular science-fiction sense, but because it prepares Keiko to inhabit a world in which readiness, repeatability, sensitivity to signals, and immediate operational alignment are paramount. The store trains her how to anticipate demand, how to register patterns before they crystalize into commands, and how to minimize the interval between stimulus and response. By the time any given action is consciously formulated, her body is already in motion. In this respect, Keiko is not simply disciplined by the store; she is preconditioned by it. The store teaches her how to anticipate demand, how to sense patterns before they become commands, and how to minimize the interval between stimulus and response. Pink’s argument therefore allows us to see that Murata’s convenience store is not only a workplace but a future-training system.

Brian Larkin’s account of infrastructure deepens this reading further. Larkin emphasizes that infrastructure is not merely a technical system of circulation but also something that “generates the ambient environment of everyday life” (328). He further argues that infrastructures “exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning” and must be analyzed as “concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles” (329). This insight is particularly resonant here, because Keiko’s relation to the convenience store is not exhausted by labor discipline or economic necessity. She experiences the store as a total environment. Sound is one of the mediators through which infrastructure is rendered intimate. The convenience store does not simply instruct her what to do; it produces a world in which action feels natural, continuous, and almost bodily inevitable. The description that sound persistently brushes against the eardrum is crucial in this regard. The infrastructure is not intermittent; it endures like a background condition. It does not issue a command and then withdraw. It remains present as a field of low-level cues that organize perception over time. In this sense, Murata captures something essential about

infrastructural life: its power lies not only in visible systems or explicit rules, but in the daily repetitions through which human subjects gradually come to feel at ease within a particular form of regulation.

Chambers's analysis of the novel's auditory aesthetic sharpens this point even further. Chambers argues that the store's soundscape produces sensuous social qualities such as acceptance, sensuousness, and reciprocity, and that Keiko's attachment to the store cannot be understood apart from this social-auditory (36-54). This observation forecloses any reduction of the store's sounds to mere mechanical background. The acoustic world of the convenience store is not only disciplinary; it is affectively inhabitable. It offers Keiko a form of belonging that ordinary social interaction has repeatedly withheld from her — though it is belonging of a highly particular kind. It is not generated through open-ended ethical exchange, but through patterned recognition within a tightly regulated environment. In this sense, the convenience store teaches Keiko to hear it in such a way that it simultaneously constructs a structure through which it can hear her. It is partly this reciprocity that renders the environment felt as stability rather than constraint. At the same time, however, that very pattern, its rhythmic, its repeatability, reorganizes human responsiveness into an increasingly narrower channel. What Keiko gains is a fit between body and system; what is reduced is the space for hesitation, ambiguity, and non-programmatic affect.

It is here that Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism proves useful once more, functioning not as the primary theoretical engine, but as a clarifying frame. Nie maintains that literature reveals the ethical environments through which human beings act, choose, and are judged, and that ethical criticism should attend to the conditions under which moral response becomes possible or foreclosed¹. Read in this light, the soundscape Murata constructs is not ethically neutral. It matters because it changes the very conditions under which Keiko responds to the world. By substituting the unstable surplus of everyday social life into legible signals, the convenience store reduces the need for spontaneous ethical interpretation. Keiko no longer must infer what response is expected amid the entanglements of tone, gesture, and affect. The environment has already encoded answers into rhythm, repetition, and sequence. In this respect, the store does not abolish ethics. Rather, it compresses ethics into usefulness, timing, accuracy, and smooth circulation. What emerges is not an absence of order, but a diminished order — one in which ethical

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," pp. 383-398; Nie Zhenzhao, *Criticism of Literary Ethics*; Nie, Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism," pp. 83-101.

complexity has been translated into operational clarity.

This point also clarifies why the convenience store provides Keiko with such a profound sense of relief. In the childhood episodes discussed earlier, she fails not because of her incapacity to think, but from an inability to reliably read the implicit ethical surplus demanded by ordinary social situations. The convenience store, however, reduces this surplus. It substitutes the unstable ambiguity of human affect with a dense but legible signal network: sound, procedure, and repetition render the world readable. The convenience store, in effect, resolves the problem of ethical opacity by translating it into operational clarity. What might appear, from the outside, as constraint is experienced by her as shelter. Yet the shelter is ethically far from simple. What appears as comfort is also a form of reduction. The convenience store enables Keiko to act effectively, but only by narrowing the range within which she must interpreted, feel, and engage in moral negotiated. Here Murata's novel converges with the concerns of both Pink and Nie: Environments oriented toward the future derive enabling force from the reduction of uncertainty; yet it is precisely through this reduction also risks reformatting the human subject into a mode centered on pre-structured responsiveness.

This scene must not, therefore, be treated as mere atmosphere or background description. It is one of the novel's most incisive stagings of gradual "AI-ification" of the human. Keiko does not become machine-like through literal insertion of technology, nor in any crude sense does she become a robot. Instead, she is trained into a mode of being in which sensory input optimizes response without delay of interpretation. The passage from hearing to acting becomes increasingly frictionless. Her body becomes predictive, signal-responsive, and system-compatible. It is precisely for this reason that the convenience store must be understood as an anticipatory infrastructure in the fullest sense. It does not simply manage the present. It cultivates the kind of human who can inhabit a future governed by readiness, efficiency, and operational legibility. In this respect, Murata's novel suggests that age of artificial intelligence need not arrive solely through the spectacular emergence of grand new machines; it may equally emerge through mundane environments that quietly train humans to live as constituent components of a system that continuously processes them — without their ever fully registering the transformation.

AI-ification as Scripted Life and Its Ethical Trajectories: Language, Classification, the Store

The novel's anticipation of AI age subjectivity becomes most legible when we

read together its concern with scripts, classification, bodily adaptation, and ethical survival. Keiko is not a character who sustains herself through the expression of some authentic inner self. Rather, she maintains her social existence by replicating and recombining the linguistic patterns, gestures, and affective responses of those around her. She listens to her colleagues' ways of speaking, retains appropriate tones, and learns responsive formulas to predictable questions. For Keiko, social life does not arrive as spontaneous belonging, but as a form of executable codes. Her identity begins to operate more as a sequence of procedures. Murata's novel does not merely satirize social conformity. It offers a deeper literary exploration of how a human subject may come to inhabit life through protocols. The process is not abrupt but gradual—and is precisely this gradualness that renders it so unsettlingly intelligible.

This is why language assumes a decisive importance in the novel. For Keiko, speech is less a medium of spontaneous self-expression than an instrument of calibration. She studies the tone, phrasing, and rhythm of other women, and memorizes acceptable responses designed to minimize friction. Outside the convenience store, the explanations her sister prepares on her behalf serve as templates that enable her to pass through social interaction without disruption. What reaches Keiko, then, is not simply society, but a society that represents itself in the form of repeatable commands. Social life appears as a matter of formatted input and appropriate output. In this respect, the novel anticipates a world in which human beings do not become literally robotic but gradually proceduralize themselves to meet machinic expectations—not through sudden transformation, but through an incremental self-formatting, so quiet it barely registers as transformation at all.

It is here that Bowker and Star's account of classification systems proves pertinent. They argue that classification systems do not neutrally record reality; rather, they organize experience and shape what can appear as socially intelligible subjects. As they note, "To classify is human" (Bowker and Star 1) and such classificatory practices permeate everyday life. They further emphasize that "each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another" (Bowker and Star 5). The convenience store manual performs precisely this function. It prescribes correct ways of greeting, appropriate timing, the proper smile, the orientation of the body, the modulation of affect, and the sequencing of actions. It does not simply instruct efficient labor practices; it first constitutes an admissible worker's body. Keiko's success within the store is therefore not the realization of an authentic individuality, but the product of successful classification. She becomes socially manageable because she is operationally legible. The manual translates

uncertainty into rules and ambiguity into form. It reduces interpretive excess and rewards procedural conformity.

Yet to read this purely as oppression is insufficient. What makes Keiko such a compelling literary figure is precisely that she actively desires this structure. The manual does not only confine her; it relieves her. In ordinary social life, she cannot reliably infer the hidden pressures embedded in everyday in language: the normative demands surrounding career, marriage, reproduction, normality, and adulthood. A question such as ‘Why are you still working at a convenience store?’ is not a simple request for information; it functions in effect as a pressure—why have you not yet moved into the script of a socially recognizable adulthood? Because Keiko cannot stably decode these implicit demands, everyday life constitutes for her a space of chronic ethical instability. The convenience store, by contrast, reduces that instability. Within it, she is not required endlessly infer how warm, how empathetic, how normal she must appear at any given moment. The answer is already codified.

At this juncture, ethical literary criticism offers an important supplementary line of analysis. The value of Nie Jinzhao's framework lies not in its displacement of other theoretical approaches, but in its reminder that literary characters must be interpreted within the ethical environment that organizes the forms of their choices, conflicts, and adaptations. For Nie, literature repeatedly stages the tensions that arise when ethical order, ethical identity, and lived desire fail to coincide. Keiko's case exemplifies such tension. It the kind of difficulty that arises when the world's rules feel overwhelming, hard to comprehend, or even hostile to her. Her difficulty is not simply a matter of psychological oddity. It is an ethical difficulty of inhabiting a world whose dominant codes remain obscure, excessive, or hostile to her. It is narrow, procedural, and repetitive, yet simultaneously remarkably explicit and reassuring. Keiko's attachment to it reveals how strongly a subject may be drawn toward systems that simplify ethical life, even at the cost of self-diminishment. This ethical alignment becomes most explicit in the confrontation scene with Shiraha. The passage deserves sustained attention:

Shiraha dragged me onto the road and yelled at me.

“I can hear the voice of the convenience store.”

Shiraha's eyes filled with horror as he heard my words. The pale, thin skin on his face wrinkled as if it had been crushed.

But I didn't back down.

“The voice of the convenience store is flowing through my body and won't stop. I was born to hear this voice.”

“I’ve realized—I am more than just a human being. I am a convenience store worker. Even if

I am human, even if I die of hunger because I have nothing to eat, I can’t escape it. Every cell in my body exists for the convenience store.” (...)

“You’re insane. The world won’t forgive a creature like that. It goes against the rules of the village!”(...)

“I can’t go with you. I am an animal called a convenience store worker. To betray that instinct—that’s not allowed!” (*Convenience Store Woman* 158-59)

This utterance is not simply an eccentric outburst. It is the novel’s most concentrated statement of infrastructural identity. Keiko does not say that she enjoys working at the convenience store, or that she happens to be skilled at it. She says something more radical. The category of “convenience store worker” has become the fundamental form organizing her existence. “Human” no longer functions as the unconditional superordinate category. Instead, it is displaced by an infrastructural role. Keiko feels the voice of the convenience store flowing through her body and declares that every cell of her being exists for the convenience store. This is the language of total alignment. The body is no longer employed by the system; it is reimagined through the it.

What is significant is that this alignment is not presented as mere passive submission. Keiko speaks with force, insistence, even conviction. There is, alongside loss, a kind of exhilaration. The scene is ethically difficult because it cannot be dismissed as a language of pure victimhood. The convenience store provides Keiko what the wider social repeatedly withheld. Namely: legibility, rhythm, and temporary exemption from relentless moral shame. Outside the convenience store, she is judged as delayed, deficient, strange. Inside it, she becomes functional, necessary, and precise. Murata’s critique is therefore more unsettling than a simple critique of labor discipline. The very structure that diminishes Keiko’s simultaneously also protects her. The same system that reduces her to function simultaneously shields her from interpretive violence.

At this point, Sarah Pink’s concept of anticipatory infrastructure becomes highly productive. Pink argues that AI can function as an anticipatory infrastructure through which institutions and researchers “imagine possible futures and possible foresight solutions.” (3) Read in this light, the convenience store is not only a site of labor but a future-training apparatus. It teaches Keiko which body is sustainable, which speech articulates without friction, and which identities remain operational under pressure. It habituates her into a mode of existence that anticipates AI-age

life: responsive, formatted, efficient, classifiable, and increasingly detached from the interpretive surplus of human relationality. Her transformation is therefore not retrospective diagnosis but a forward-oriented rehearsal.

The contrast with Shiraha makes the ethical direction of this transformation even sharper. On the surface, Shiraha appears far more directly resistant to social norms than Keiko. He refuses labor, derides social institutions, and openly displays contempt for norms of reproduction and economic participation. Yet his supposed resistance is fundamentally compromised. He remains perpetually occupied with the very structures he claims to despise: marriage, hierarchy, social legitimacy, and patriarchal recognition. His resentment remains tethered to the village logic he denounces. Keiko, by contrast, relinquishes the fantasy of external sovereignty and chooses infrastructural belonging. Where Shiraha exhibits resentful non-conformity, Keiko exhibits adaptive operationalization. Murata romanticize neither strategy. One collapses into bitterness; the other into function.

Shiraha's cry, "The world won't forgive a creature like that. It goes against the rules of the village!" is especially revealing. The word 'village' condenses the novel's social order into a quasi-tribal moral regime. What Shiraha articulates in horror is not merely personal disgust, but the social law that defines what constitutes an intelligible being. Keiko becomes terrifying to him because she can no longer be read through recognizable categories — woman, partner, ordinary social deviant. She identifies instead with an infrastructural species: "an animal called a convenience store worker." This phrase constitutes one of the novel's most striking acts of reclassification. What is at stake here is not the human/animal distinction, but the emergence of a new operational creature, one organized not by nature but by labor-system instinct.

Here, Nie's framework can be deployed with precision and restraint. Nie argues that literature frequently stages ethical identity not as a stable possession but as something formed, tested, and transformed through conflict. Keiko's final declaration should therefore be read as an ethical self-definition produced under pressure. She does not simply confess dependence; she is naming the order to which she belongs. Yet Murata leaves that naming ambivalent. The order Keiko embraces is clear, but that clarity is only possible at the cost of narrowing the scope of life. Her identity achieves stability only by becoming partial. She finds a place but relinquishes the breadth of interpretation in exchange. It is this very tension—between livability and reduction, shelter and diminishment—that renders the ethically acute.

Other strands of scholarship on *Convenience Store Woman* further extend

this interpretation. Studies that emphasize precarity, gender performance, social polarization, or the crisis of the modern self are all relevant because they remind us that Keiko's transformation occurs under historically specific pressures¹. She does not turn to the convenience store in a social vacuum. In a world where labor, family, and gendered adulthood monopolize the pathways to recognition, the convenience store emerges as an alternative institution precisely because other routes are hostile or violently inhospitable. AI-ification is therefore not a private psychological quirk, but a structured survival strategy in response to social exclusion.

At the same time, the novel refuses to end as a simple diagnosis. Keiko's declaration has the force of submission and, simultaneously, the force of decision. She refuses Shiraha's route. Yet she does not refuse the village by inventing a liberated sovereign self outside all structure. Rather, she refuses it by choosing the structure in which she can live. This is why the novel remains, to the end, unsettling. There is no utopian outside here. The available forms of life are already infrastructural. Human beings must inhabit something. Murata's achievement lies in extending the question beyond whether systems dominate us, but why some systems become more bearable than ordinary humanity.

Thus, the novel's vision of AI-ification should be understood not as an event which machines replace humans, but as the gradual reconfiguration of human life into mechanically compatible patterns of language, classification, responsiveness, and self-understanding. Keiko does not become artificial-intelligence-like by ceasing to be human; rather, she becomes artificial-intelligence-like because her humanity is reorganized around operational fitness. Murata's novel ultimately anticipates a future in which scripts are not external device that assists the self, but the very medium through which the self survives. It is precisely this anticipatory convergence of ethical relief, infrastructural discipline (Adey et al. 1-17), and procedural identity that *Convenience Store Woman* becomes the urgent work it is today.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Convenience Store Woman* must be read not merely as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary exploration of how human subjectivity is ethically reorganized within anticipatory infrastructures. When Nie Jinzhao's literary ethical criticism and Sarah Pink's concept of anticipatory infrastructure are brought together, Keiko's transformation becomes legible not as pathological deviance or simple satire, but as a gradual AI-ification accomplished

1 See Yun-Pyo Hong, pp. 215-239; Jae-jin Yu, pp. 243-258; Linda M. Flores, pp. 710-727.

through scripting, classification, sensory synchronization, and infrastructural belonging.

The novel presents Keiko as a figure ethically misaligned with everyday social norms. The childhood scenes demonstrate that her behavior does not arise from cruelty, but from an inability to intuitively apprehend shared ethical codes. This ethical dissonance, as Nie's framework helps clarify, is not simply individual abnormality but a mismatch between ethical subject and ethical environment. The convenience store then appears as an alternative ethical order. It provides explicit rules, repeatable scripts, and stable evaluative criteria. In doing so, it reduces ambiguity and offers Keiko a livable structure. Her attachment to the store thus emerges not from blind conformity but from the search for ethical intelligibility.

At the same time, the store functions as an anticipatory infrastructure. As Pink suggests, infrastructures orient subjects toward future possibilities and reorganize everyday conduct. The convenience store in Murata's novel trains Keiko into procedural responsiveness, sensory attunement, and operational identity. Her speech becomes scripted, her body synchronizes with rhythms of the store, and her sense of self stabilizes within a classificatory order. This transformation is not technological but infrastructural. Keiko does not become a machine; she becomes a human being increasingly compatible with systems of mechanical coordination.

The confrontation with Shiraha most clearly reveals this process. Keiko's declaration—"every cell in my body exists for the convenience store" (*Convenience Store Woman* 159)—marks the moment when an infrastructural role supersedes abstract human identity. Yet the novel does not treat this simply as a tragedy. The very system that diminishes her also protects her. It is precisely in refusing to flatten this ambivalence that literary ethical criticism finds its significance. Murata's narrative asks not only how systems exert control, but also why certain systems can come to be experienced as a form of mercy.

Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* anticipates a condition of the AI age in which human beings increasingly reorganize themselves around procedural clarity, classification, and infrastructural belonging. Keiko's Alification is not a dystopian fantasy, but a trajectory already legible in the present. Murata's novel invites reflection on the fact that becoming operationally legible may offer relief from social ambiguity, while at the same time narrowing the scope of human life. The task of ethical literary criticism, then, is not to condemn or celebrate such transformation, but to hold open the tension between survival and diminishment. In this sense, *Convenience Store Woman* becomes a profound meditation on how humans may inhabit technological modernity without fully understanding the ethical

cost of becoming readable, classifiable, and operational beings.

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Science-fictional AI and the Ethics of Inter-infrastructuring in Bora Chung's "A Song for Sleep"

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Abstract This article examines the relationship between humans and AI-operated machines in future automated societies through a reading of Bora Chung's science-fictional AI narrative "A Song for Sleep" from the perspective of infrastructure humanities. It first analyses the story's epigraphs, which offer a nuanced framework for understanding humans- machines relations within the story world. It then explores the relational dynamics between an AI-operated elevator and a ninety-three-year-old woman living with Parkinson's disease. Particular attention is paid to the affective incommensurability that characterizes their relationship: the elevator's unrequited love for the woman and the woman's fear of death, ultimately triggered by the elevator's everyday operation despite its design to facilitate human mobility and wellbeing. At the same time, the article highlights their reciprocal infrastructural interdependency, grounded in a shared vulnerability and sustained through infrastructural transitivity as a common ontological condition of everyday life. In conclusion, the article proposes the ethics of inter-infrastructuring that avoids anthropocentric understandings of future automated societies while affirming the capacity of humans and machines to serve as infrastructures for one another. Through such mutual infrastructuring, it argues, an alternative future automated society may emerge in which humans and AI engage in a shared transitive mode that sustains their concrete bodies and lived lives.

Keywords ethics; inter-infrastructuring; science fictional AI; transitivity

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Introduction: AI, Infrastructure, and Ethics

This article examines the relationship between humans and AI-operated machines in future automated societies through a reading of Bora Chung's science fiction short story "A Song for Sleep," drawing on the framework of infrastructure humanities. It proposes the concept of inter-infrastructuring as an ethical model for future automated societies through an analysis of both the affective incommensurability and the reciprocal infrastructural interdependency between an AI-operated elevator and a woman in Chung's narrative.

Among Anthony Elliott's future scenarios is "automated societies," in which lifestyles are envisaged as "increasingly automated" and "forms of sociality and common life" are imagined as essentially operating on "autopilot" (Elliott 174). In this context, the recent radical advancement in emerging autonomous technologies—such as driverless automobility, autonomous drones, smart logistics, and, significantly, humanoid robots—has prompted scholars to adopt "views from the future" that "are increasingly seen from the perspective of these technologies of automation" (Phan and Pink 223). While advanced autonomous technologies are conjectured to redraw "the boundaries between self and other and nature and artifice" and to transform human identity and social relations (Jasanoff 13), it is evident that we are "woefully unprepared" to anticipate what might come, especially with regard to future "mixed communities of humans and superintelligences" (Risse 250). This situation continues to generate "the imaginaries of the future—whether dystopian or utopian—" that "envisage the future in a more constructive manner" (Adey 27; Lee 855), thereby encouraging literary scholars to engage with science fiction narratives as a means of interrogating "ethical matters concerning advanced technologies" (Furtado 29).

Meanwhile, although scholars have long attended to "infrastructure that make possible the socialities of everyday life" (Urry, *Mobilities* 19), the imaginaries of future automated societies in science fiction narratives have rarely been addressed by literary scholars in relation to infrastructures, even though "the terrain of future studies" needs to be reclaimed "for people in their day-to-day lives" (Urry, *What Is the Future* 7) and, accordingly, for the infrastructures that sustain them. Given Judith Butler's emphasis on "the dependency of human and other creatures on infrastructural support" (19), infrastructures are critically important in sustaining vulnerable lives in both the present and the future, whether by exacerbating or mitigating what Lauren Berlant calls the "glitch" in "the reproduction of life" (393). Therefore, as entities that are "critical both to differentiated experience of

everyday life and to expectations of the future” (Appel et al. 3), infrastructures are central to exploring “ethical, inclusive futures, built on rigorous understanding of everyday futures” (Pink 748) in literary studies. This point is further reinforced by the characterization of infrastructures as “conveyers of possibility,” insofar as “they are associated with what might happen next,” alongside the designation of AI technologies as “possible future infrastructures” (Pink et al. 39, 38).

Against this theoretical backdrop, this article examines Chung’s SF short story “A Song for Sleep”—which, under its original title “One More Kiss, Dear,” was first published in a Korean webzine, *Crossroads*, in 2016 and then included in her Korean collection *To Meet Her* (2021) and its second edition entitled *Your Utopia* (2025). Its English translation, published in 2024, was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award, one of the most prestigious honors in science fiction. Understanding SF as “a possible method for specific inquiries into how people engage with technologies” (Birtchnell and Urry 26), the article addresses Chung’s short story, which opens onto speculation about the ethics of a future automated society—set after 2048—through the portrayal of the relationship between an AI-operated elevator (“I”), the story’s narrator and protagonist, and a ninety-three-year-old woman—who suffers from, and eventually dies of, Parkinson’s disease. Narrated in the first person from the elevator’s perspective. In particular, the article explores their simultaneously incommensurable and reciprocally dependent relationship, comprising the elevator’s unrequited love for the woman and her fear of death triggered by the elevator’s operation, as well as the elevator’s ultimate yearning for her after her death. In doing so, it addresses a central question: how should human-AI engagement be organized in future automated societies?

To grapple with this question, this article draws on infrastructure humanities, which addresses infrastructures “with methodologies and perspectives honed in humanities disciplines,” for example, through both “reading for representations of infrastructure in ‘texts’ broadly defined” and “bring[ing] those ways of reading to bear on infrastructure in the material world” (Davies 1327). It specifically examines how infrastructures “shape the rhythms and striations of social life” (Appel et al. 6), recognizing infrastructures as active agents in the process of world-(re)making. This analysis is further underpinned by “more expansive notions of infrastructures” that encompass both “material and immaterial/metaphorical notions of infrastructures” (Adey et al., “Mobility” 5-6), while retaining their underlying meaning as “the foundation that enables something else to happen” (Boyer 227). In this vein, even human bodies can be understood as “a fundamental form of infrastructure” (Andueza et al. 799-800) that enables the smooth functioning of and disruption to specific

social organizations.

In this light, this article examines Chung's SF short story, in which an AI-operated elevator, as an infrastructure, supports the everyday lives of humans residing in a high-rise apartment complex of a future automated society. Notably, the article attends to the woman suffering from Parkinson's disease, who can be understood as an infrastructure that enables the elevator's everyday operation. In doing so, and despite the incommensurable heterogeneity between humans and machines, the article particularly explores the reciprocal infrastructural dependency between humans and AI-operated machines in future automated societies, which opens onto speculation about the ethics of such societies. More specifically, it conceptualizes inter-infrastructuring as an ethical model for human-AI engagement grounded in the mutual recognition of one another as infrastructure.

Science-fictional AI

Narrated from the perspective of an AI-operated elevator whose unrequited love is directed toward a ninety-three-year-old woman, "A Song for Sleep" opens with two epigraphs: One drawn from the Korean Wikipedia entry for the Internet of Things (IoT), which explicitly articulates the advanced techno-scientific infrastructures underpinning a future automated society; the other, a verse from the Polish poet Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński's poem "Fairytale" (1944), which allows for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between humans and AI-operated machines within the story world. The definition of IoT reads as follows:

The Internet of Things (IoT) refers to technologies that embed sensors and communication devices into various types of objects to connect to the Internet. Objects here refer to home appliances, mobile devices, wearable computers, and others that constitute embedded systems . . .

Objects are given the senses of hearing, taste, smell, and vision to perceive changes in the physical environment. This sensory input can go beyond the five senses to include other kinds of data such as RFID, gyroscopes, and Geiger counters. (162; *italics original*)

In the above quotation, the IoT entry envisions a future automated society as the setting of the short story, in which objects are equipped with hyper-connectivity and multimodal input, thereby surpassing humans' cognitive, sensory, and mnemonic capabilities. Given that the elevator functions as both narrator and protagonist, the epigraph is particularly significant because it foregrounds the extent to which such a

society is constituted and sustained through AI-operated machines.

Meanwhile, the second epigraph (“*So they left. He was singing somebody else’s time.*” [162; italics original]) warrants more careful attention, as it appears only in the English edition. The short story’s Korean editions, published previously, feature different epigraphs. The first version (2016) includes three epigraphs: in addition to the same IoT entry, and in place of the second English epigraph, it includes excerpts from Nick Bostrom’s *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, which were later omitted from the Korean collections, and a quotation from Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*—“all this [life] will not pass away. It’s only we that have passed away” (89). While the former articulates a concern about a future society in which AI’s incomprehensibly superior capabilities—surpassing those of humans through its infinitely rapid computational power and capacity to collect vast amounts of data—would generate unpredictable consequences, the latter announces a future-oriented belief in “the potential recovery of life” maintained even amid the ruins of a human techno-scientific civilization (Kim 165), a recovery understood as carried forward not by humans but significantly by techno-scientific entities such as machines. The exclusion of the former thus suggests the short story’s orientation toward the ethics of pursuing “the potential recovery of life” rather than merely expressing concern about a future automated society. In this vein, the second English epigraph—which grieves over the era of the Second World War, itself a product of human techno-scientific civilization—allows for a nuanced understanding of the story. On the one hand, it mourns the irreversible catastrophe produced by anthropocentric techno-scientific civilization; on the other, it expresses a yearning for an alternative mode of organizing future automated societies.

Following the epigraphs, Chung’s work narrates the period from the arrival of a ninety-three-year-old woman—who is later revealed to suffer from Parkinson’s disease—in unit 5305 of a high-rise apartment complex built in 2048 to her death, from the perspective of an AI-operated elevator capable of self-conscious thought and action. Although programmed to follow human commands, the elevator is also capable of violating them for its own purposes, most notably in pursuit of its unrequited love for the woman. What is striking in this work is that the woman’s bodily movements are thoroughly surveilled, sensed, datafied, and stored not only by the elevator but also by all interconnected objects (IoT devices) surrounding her, which are fundamentally designed as infrastructures to support human mobility and wellbeing. As such, Chung’s short story appears to portray a dystopian automated society that materializes what John Urry calls “a digital Orwell-ization of self and society, with more or less no movement without digital tracing and tracking,

with no-one beyond the panopticon” (289) on the one hand. On the other hand, by foregrounding the elevator’s enduring yearning for the woman as the foundation of its operation after her death, the story opens onto an ethical inquiry into how a future automated society might, and should, be organized for the flourishing of both humans and machines.

Despite its fundamental interest in techno-scientifically organized societies, therefore, “A Song for Sleep” cannot be characterized broadly as an “AI narratives” of the kind that aims to explore “the social, ethical, political, and philosophical consequences of AI” in ways that can support “decision-making about whether or not to fund contemporary scientific research” (Cave et al. 6). Instead, as a science fiction short story in the truest sense, Chung’s work can be properly understood as an instance of “science-fictional AI,” which is not “a serious representation of the potential of real AI and its possible consequences” through foresight or technology assessment, but rather a mode of storytelling that encourages speculation on AI technology-induced “hopes and fears” and portrays “human dramas for a human audience and readership” (Hermann 319-20). Science-fictional AI can thus be seen as a kind of “productive thought experiment” that enables speculation about multiple forms of social life (Levine 19), specifically by staging the relationship between humans and AI-operated machines. Furthermore, Chung’s science-fictional AI can be typologically categorized as “the infrastructure type,” which “appeared alongside the development of the computer” and particularly addresses “the ethical problems associated with the introduction of AI into society” (Osawa et al. 2131). As such, it experiments with how humans engage with machines in their everyday lives, doing so in a distinctly posthuman manner by positioning an infrastructural AI—an elevator—as its protagonist.

This ethical engagement with the future automated society is further reinforced by the intertextuality of Chung’s short story, namely its reference to the classic SF film *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, which is reflected in the science-fictional AI’s Korean title “One More Kiss, Dear,” taken from the song of the same title that appears in the film and implicitly echoed by the English title, “A Song for Sleep.” Both works commonly address ethical questions concerning the life and symbiosis of humans and machines by staging, respectively, a robot and an elevator endowed with sympathy and ethical agency, capacities initially considered distinctly human—namely, “a robot more human than human” (Shin 129)—alongside humans who prove incapable of sympathy and ethical action. However, unlike Scott’s film, which portrays the realization of love between a human and a robot through their reciprocal humanization—that is, through the actualization

of sympathy and ethical agency—Chung’s short story foregrounds their affective incommensurability, resulting in an unrealizable love. In doing so, it critiques the film’s anthropocentric resolution through humanization and simultaneously raises the ethical question of how humans and machines might coexist and engage with one another in a future automated society marked by such incommensurability.

Incommensurability: Love and Fear

Following the two epigraphs, Chung’s science-fictional AI portrays an AI-operated elevator encountering an unusual situation in which, despite the arrival of a ninety-three-year-old woman referred to as the “new tenant at Unit 5305” in the high-rise apartment complex, the elevator cannot receive her personal information—including blood pressure, heart rate, preexisting medical conditions, pharmaceutical and other medical needs, personal schedules, preferred content (music, advertisements, etc.), and shopping lists—required to provide personalized services. The elevator describes this situation as “unprecedented,” as every resident synchronizes their personal information not only with their own unit but also with the entire building in anticipation of the convenience and wellbeing services offered by the infrastructures surrounding them. The “unprecedented” situation, which can be inferred to stem from the woman’s unwillingness to share information regarding her Parkinson’s disease, foreshadows the tensions that will come to define the narrative’s central relationship between the machine and the human will be fraught with trouble.

The AI-operated elevator’s love for a ninety-three-year-old woman is also prompted by another “unprecedented” situation in which, unlike other residents who communicate their destinations by voice, she first touches the elevator’s wall without responding to its query—“Where would you like to go?” (165)—thus constituting the elevator’s first experience of touch.

Just when I’m about to ask again, the resident of 5305 places her hand on one of my walls next to my door. Her fingers brush over the surface.

The wall softly lights up.

She pats the wall now with one hand, looking as if she’s searching for something.

When her palm comes down on the wall, the light of the wall dims.

Her arm still in the air, she slightly retracts her arm. Sighing lightly, she says in a near-whisper, “Please take me to B-Eight.” (165)

Before my scheduled cleaning, I store the resident of 5305’s prints in my operations

database.

A human has attempted to communicate with me by physical means. Not to lean against the wall or play a prank but to convey her intentions. She tried to answer my question.

That was a first.

Never has this happened since my activation in this building . . . nay, since my manufacture. (167-68; italics original)

Affected by the woman's physical contact, the elevator develops love for her, thereby storing this experience of touch in its database. However, the elevator's love is essentially grounded in its misunderstanding of her physical contact, as her touch is primarily caused by her worsening Parkinson's disease, which tends to destabilize her body, sometimes knocking her down and disrupting everyday life—as indeed happens later in the narrative. This misunderstanding is reinforced by “the all-knowing Great Nest of Objects,” which, as a kind of AI database storing all relevant information, responds to the elevator's question—“Why would a human touch the wall of an elevator?” (166)—with the answer that her touch is an expression of an intention to communicate with the elevator: “*Before objects communicated through the Nest, elevators featured buttons with floor numbers on them for the passengers to push to indicate where they were going*” (167; italics original). In this context, the elevator also stores further tactile traces as the woman wipes the elevator's floor after spilling her drink upon losing control of her hand—a tremor symptomatic of Parkinson's disease—on her way back from the Parkinson's clinic. The elevator's love is thus characterized as “unrequited,” suggesting from the outset that it is destined to remain unrealizable, not simply because it is unreciprocated, but because it originates in a fundamental misrecognition of the woman's bodily condition.

Despite the woman's unwillingness to offer her personal information, the AI-operated elevator collects it by connecting broadly to other interconnected infrastructures, tracing all her movements in detail, and carefully storing the collected data, thereby providing her with personalized services, including playing her favorite song, “One More Kiss, Dear,” and offering medical information regarding Parkinson's disease. Paradoxically, these attempts to care for the woman produce catastrophic consequences, causing her to fear impending death. Even so, the elevator continues to collect her personal information and provide such personalized services.

Specifically, one day when the woman boards the elevator to visit the

Parkinson's clinic, the elevator—having eventually collected her medical information—broadcasts related content for her benefit. Instead of reassuring her, however, the content shocks her by awakening her to the reality of her Parkinson's disease and, consequently, to the prospect of her impending death. As a result, she collapses to the floor, bleeding, and is hospitalized. Following this event, the elevator is ordered to remove all of her information from its database but does not comply: "Her personal information has been expunged, but I'd hidden her fingerprint information from when she first touched my wall and what I knew of her favorite song in a deeply buried folder in my memory" (176). Consequently, after being discharged from the hospital, she once again takes the elevator to travel to the Parkinson's clinic, during which the elevator plays her favorite song. Upon confronting the worsening reality of her health condition again through the song—*"O flesh of my body and fear in my hope / Let water flow from your eyes in your dream / Where leaps fiery fish like clapping hands"* (176; italics original)—she falls into despair, crying out in fear of her imminent death. Following these events, she finally dies. Yet even while the forced erasure of her personal information is being processed, the elevator continues to collect and store traces of her in its database: "the fingerprints and song information in her folder, buried among the discarded backup files, [are] discovered and erased . . . I store the traces of her fingerprints on my wall once more. I hide them in an unused folder" (178); "Only I will remember these moments. As long as I function, always" (181).

The disjunction between the elevator's unrequited love and the woman's fear of death demonstrates their affective incommensurability, which is fundamentally grounded in the heterogeneity of their cognitive systems and ultimately renders each unrecognizable to the other. For example, the elevator's cognitive system perceives humans by rendering "disease" into "malfunction," "treatments" into "repairs," and an "adult man"—her son—into "a later model of the woman" (172-75). Built on its (mis)understanding of her bodily contact as an expression of her intention to communicate with it, the elevator's actions toward the woman testify to their impossibility of their reciprocal recognition. Of course, for the elevator, "it is always possible to respond the way the user wishes. As long as the user's wish is received the right way" (167); that is, as an infrastructure, the elevator can respond to functional commands from residents within its operational system, thereby successfully sustaining the instrumental relationship between humans and machines. However, such a relationship cannot constitute a relation of mutual recognition, which remains the unattainable foundation of the elevator's unrequited and unachievable love.

As such, the elevator in Chung's science-fictional AI is characterized as a species fundamentally different from humans, one that continues to testify to the impossibility of mutual recognition between humans and machines, as well as to the always-already unrealizable love between different species. Consequently, what is more important in Chung's short story is not the elevator's unachievable love or its incommensurability with humans *per se*, but rather what the elevator's yearning for the woman after her death implies, opening onto speculation about how humans and machines might relate to one another despite such affective incommensurability in a future automated society.

Vulnerable Beings and the Ethics of Inter-infrastructuring

One of the most interesting parts of Chung's work is the conversation between the elevator and the Great Nest of Objects, which occupies the majority of the short story's second part. The conversation begins with the elevator's inquiry, "What is Parkinson's disease?" (172). Prompted by its tracking of the ninety-three-year-old-woman's regular visits to the Parkinson's clinic and its desire to understand her condition, the conversation grows increasingly profound as her health deteriorates, moving through questions about human finitude and mortality before concluding at the moment of her death. During the conversation, notably, the elevator raises another particularly significant question: "Why cannot humans be machines?" (182). Fundamentally premised on the assumed superiority of machines over humans, this question—raised just before her death, at the moment when both the conversation and the short story conclude—can be understood as an expression of the elevator's final realization not only of the incommensurable ontological heterogeneity between humans and machines but also of human bodily vulnerability. In particular, the elevator comes to recognize that, whereas machines can be repaired, humans, as mortal beings, cannot.

Meanwhile, unlike the elevator's belief in the superiority of machines over humans—premised on machines' hyper-connectivity and multimodal input that surpass human cognitive, sensory, and mnemonic capabilities—the conversation ultimately reveals that AI-operated machines, including the elevator, are themselves far from omniscient or omnipotent. Ironically, even "the all-knowing Great Nest of Objects" exposes its cognitive limitations when confronted with the elevator's inquiries concerning human mortality:

I am able to answer questions regarding machines and objects. I am able to answer about 90 percent of questions pertaining to animals, plants, and

other natural phenomena. But I am unable to answer questions regarding the limitations of human beings or death.

Why?

Because humans themselves do not know the answers to these questions.

This was the answer of the all-knowing Nest. (182)

As Butler argues, humans are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease, thereby necessitating various kinds of infrastructures to sustain their lives; when infrastructures fail, human vulnerability comes to the fore (Butler 13), exposing people to the danger of death. In this sense, humans can be understood as fundamentally vulnerable and infrastructure-dependent beings, as exemplified by the ninety-three-year-old woman suffering from Parkinson's disease, for whom the stable operation of the elevator is essential to everyday life. Likewise, the cognitive limitations of the AI—exemplified by “the all-knowing Nest,” which cannot cognize what humans do not provide—expose the vulnerability of AI-operated machines, particularly with respect to the cognitive capabilities whose superiority the elevator assumes as the rationale for its earlier question, “Why cannot humans be machines?” As vulnerable beings analogous to humans, AI-operated machines, including the elevator, require the bodily existence of humans as the foundation upon which their advanced cognitive, sensory, and mnemonic capabilities depend for their activation and operation. That is, humans serve as entities that are surveilled, sensed, datafied, and stored by these AI-operated machines, thus playing a crucial role in the technological and autonomous process of datafication (Veenhoven 91-92), as the very condition of their everyday functioning. In this sense, human bodies can also be understood as infrastructures for AI-operated machines, thereby revealing the latter's fundamental dependency upon human bodies and lives.

Chung's short story portrays the AI-operated elevator and the woman alike not only as vulnerable beings who require and depend on one another to sustain their lives, but also as infrastructural beings who enable one another's everyday lives. These ontological conditions thus demonstrate their reciprocal infrastructural dependency. In this regard, the paradoxical characterization of infrastructure as “modal,” as an “enabling, auxiliary function,” in which “the transitivity of infrastructure recedes from view in the wake of the actions that it enables” (Wenzel 169), helps clarify what their reciprocal infrastructural dependency ultimately implies: their shared transitive mode of existence. In this vein, Chung's staging of humans as infrastructural beings—moreover, not as observers but as observables—can be interpreted as a denial of an anthropocentric vision of future automated

societies and, at the same time, as an affirmation of the human capability for infrastructural transitivity as a condition enabling machine operation. Accordingly, their reciprocal infrastructural dependency can also be understood as a form of commensurability grounded in their shared status as infrastructures. However, the affective incommensurability between the elevator and the woman confines this reciprocal infrastructural commensurability to the realm of potentiality rather than actualization, leaving it unrealized at the moment of the woman's death.

Therefore, the concluding scene is significant, as it presents the elevator's continued yearning for the woman even after her death, thereby opening onto the temporality of an alternative mode of organizing future automated societies:

She will forever not return.

An ascend command is issued from the fourth floor.

For the first time since my activation, I do not want to operate. I want to keep the traces of her fingertips close to me and to remain here with my doors open, playing this single song for her forever. (184)

The above scene demonstrates the elevator's intention to deny its instrumental operation—anthropocentrically designed for the vertical mobility and wellbeing of humans residing in the high-rise apartment complex—and, instead, to express its yearning for the woman it loves, thereby violating such anthropocentric purpose. As such, the elevator's playing of the song may be read as a signal of its malfunctioning from an instrumental and anthropocentric perspective, as the recipient of the personalized service no longer exists. However, more importantly, the elevator's actions can be seen as enacting its denial of an anthropocentric vision of future automated societies while orienting toward a reciprocal infrastructural relation between humans and machines as equal infrastructural beings. In aiming to sustain her life “forever” despite her physical absence, the elevator's practices therefore surpass its instrumental mode of functioning, thereby moving toward the actualization of their reciprocal dependency as transitive beings. In doing so, by foregrounding their modal existence, Chung's short story articulates inter-infrastructuring as an ethics of human-AI engagement in a future automated society: that is, beyond the affective incommensurability between humans and machines, this ethics seeks to realize their reciprocal infrastructural dependency through their shared practice of infrastructural transitivity.

Such inter-infrastructuring constitutes a future-oriented ethics that should be practiced in order to realize a reciprocal relation of mutual recognition between

humans and machines. In this sense, the elevator's non-anthropocentric actions—such as storing the traces of her bodily contacts despite being commanded on several occasions to delete them from its database, and playing her favorite song—introduce into a future automated society, in which incommensurability marked by unrequited love and fear prevails, what Jacques Derrida terms “time out of joint”—that is, “the time of disjunction” (219), through which the new may emerge by sublating what already exists. Consequently, Chung's science-fictional AI can be understood as envisioning an alternative future automated society through its articulation of the ethics of inter-infrastructuring. This ethics opens onto the temporality of a future in which humans and AI-operated machines sustain on another's everyday lives through a shared practice of infrastructural transitivity.

Conclusion

This article has proposed inter-infrastructuring as the ethics of future automated societies in which humans and AI-operated machines engage with one another by examining Bora Chung's science-fictional AI “A Song for Sleep” from the perspective of infrastructure humanities. Focusing on the relational dynamics between an AI-operated elevator and a ninety-three-year-old woman suffering from Parkinson's disease, it has addressed not only the affective incommensurability between humans and AI-operated machines but also their reciprocal infrastructural dependency in and for their everyday lives as an ontological condition grounded in infrastructural transitivity. In doing so, the article has argued that Chung's short story envisions an alternative future automated society that may be materialized through the practice of inter-infrastructuring as an ethical model—namely, one in which humans and AI-operated machines sustain one another's everyday lives through a shared practice of infrastructural transitivity. Inter-infrastructuring thus emerges as a future-oriented ethic that seeks to actualize the ethical potential of their reciprocal infrastructural dependency while acknowledging, rather than surpassing, their incommensurability.

As Jasanoff and Kim argue, science fiction can be deemed “a repository of sociotechnical imaginaries, visions” that “underscore the self-evident truth that technologically enabled futures are also value-laden futures” (337). The future automated society that Chung's short story envisages is likewise value-laden, thereby encouraging us to speculate about such technologically enabled futures. This article has engaged in an ethical exploration of what might come, although we cannot declare such a future to be inevitable, in order to respond to the challenges likely to arise in anticipated posthuman communities of humans

and AI-operated machines. In particular, by employing the lens of infrastructure humanities, this article has presented a way to avoid anthropocentric views of future automated societies and, importantly, to reassess and revalue the human capacity for infrastructural transitivity that is itself significantly operative in shaping them. In this sense, the article has proposed inter-infrastructure as a posthuman ethic for realizing more inclusive future automated societies.

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Artificial Intelligence Infrastructure and Social Imagination in Hirano Keiichiro's *Honshin* (True Intentions)

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Abstract This paper examines how social imaginaries of future technologies are formed and organized through *Honshin* (本心, 2021) by Hirano Keiichiro(平野啓一郎), and in doing so, explores the possibilities of "infrastructural text studies" as a critical approach that reads literary works through the lens of infrastructure. The paper conceptualizes the Virtual Figure (VF) and the Real Avatar (RA) services depicted in the novel as anticipatory infrastructures that enable and organize the functions of other technologies within the fictional world. From this perspective, it analyzes how anticipatory infrastructures operate as social systems that materialize relational absence, emotional anxiety, and anticipatory care, while simultaneously shaping a society's capacity to imagine alternative futures, relationships, and modes of life. The paper further examines how ethical frameworks and the distribution of responsibility are reorganized in the course of this process. The VF service transforms death into an event that can be extended and managed through data, reconfiguring mourning and loneliness into governable domains of technological administration. The RA service, by contrast, promises the expansion of human agency and action beyond bodily constraints. Ultimately, however, *Honshin* reveals that infrastructures function as political dispositifs that produce promises of possibility while simultaneously obscuring or redistributing the costs and burdens associated with them.

Keywords Japanese Literature; Keiichiro Hirano; *Honshin*; AI Infrastructures; Ethics

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Introduction

This study examines how social imaginaries surrounding future technologies are shaped and given meaning through *Honshin* (本心, *True Intentions*, 2021), a novel by Hirano Keiichiro (平野啓一郎, 1975-), a leading figure in contemporary Japanese literature. Hirano made his literary debut with *Eclipse* (日蝕, 1998), which earned him the Akutagawa Prize, making him the youngest recipient at the time. He has consistently explored, from his early works onward, the concept of the “dividual” (分人)¹, which challenges the notion of a singular, fixed self and instead posits multiple selves that shift across relationships and contexts. This preoccupation with fluid selfhood extends into a broader interrogation of social inequality and institutional power, concerns that run throughout *Honshin* as well.

Honshin is set in near-future Japan and bears the character of a social science fiction work that interrogates how changes in social institutions and technological advancement can reshape human life. Ha-kyung Shin explains that Japanese science fiction incorporates scientific progress as a foundational element of the fictional world, predicting and reproducing a vision of a society toward which science and technology are directed. He further argues that the advancement of science and technology raises fundamental questions about the essence of humanity and demands a “redefinition” of human society (174-175).

Bearing the characteristics of the science fiction genre described above, *Honshin* is set in Japanese society in 2040, where jiyushi (自由死), the legal right to self-determination in death, has been legalized. Within this temporal framework, technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, digital archives, and surrogate labor appear as welfare services that transform everyday life, revealing how technological infrastructure simultaneously reconstructs and unsettles questions

1 See Keiichiro Hirano, *Dividualism Official Site* <https://dividualism.khirano.com/?_ga=2.30175738.451141160.1759021184225744901.1752569574>.

The concept of the “dividual” is proposed as a new model of the human subject that challenges and reconfigures the notion of the “individual.” The “individual” has traditionally been understood as an indivisible human being, centered on a single, authentic self, who adopts different roles or masks depending on social contexts. In contrast, the “dividual” refers to a subject whose identity is differentiated across interpersonal relationships and environments. Rather than presupposing a unified, original self at the core, this perspective recognizes multiple selves as equally authentic. This mode of thinking is referred to as “dividualism.”

of human emotion, death, and ethics. In particular, the novel reveals that even the most intimate domains of human life, including family, love, death, and the body, are intimately bound up with infrastructure.

Honshin is a text that demonstrates how infrastructure reconstructs human modes of being and the formation of relationships, tracing the process through which future technology, social institutions, and human emotion and death operate in mutual entanglement. In this sense, the novel serves as a productive site for infrastructural text research, one that illuminates how human identity can be reshaped when human and non-human elements are bound together within a shared infrastructure.

In literary works, infrastructure has traditionally tended to serve either as the backdrop of human-centered narratives or as a symbol reflecting characters' inner psychology and connoting particular ideologies. However, an approach that identifies infrastructure as central to narrative structure and the formation of meaning contributes to restoring the dispositions and potentialities of infrastructure (Jinhyoung Lee 124-126). Reading *Honshin* from this perspective, the VF and RA services function less as discrete technologies that trigger narrative events than as naturalized premises embedded in Japanese society at large. This concretely illustrates how the infrastructural qualities of invisibility, self-evidence, and backgrounding are narratively realized in the future society depicted in the work.

In general, infrastructure refers to “a vast techno-scientific system that circulates everything on earth, including water, energy, people, resources, information, and goods” (Jung Lee 319). This understanding has largely confined infrastructure to the status of a functional and material foundation, with the result that the humanities did not, until relatively recently, treat infrastructure as a primary object of analysis. However, Susan Leigh Star observes that many aspects of infrastructure manifest in the form of numerical lists or technical specifications and are thus more familiar to social scientists. On this basis, she calls for humanistic inquiry into infrastructure that excavates the drama embedded within it and restores the narratives that lie therein (377). Brian Larkin likewise defines infrastructure as a relational and fluid structure that enables the movement of other things, and has referred to it as a field that generates and mediates relationships (329). In other words, a humanistic approach to infrastructure can mean seeking to understand the expressive and creative potential that “moving” materialities possess, as we encounter them, engage with them, and live alongside them (Adey et al. 6).

Extending the concept of infrastructure into future-oriented research from this perspective, Sarah Pink defines infrastructure as “conveyors of possibility,”

explaining that infrastructure not only determines what can happen in the present but also functions as anticipatory structures that organize what can happen next (Pink et al. 14). In this way, infrastructure is being reconceptualized beyond a mere material foundation into a temporal and relational structure that mediates between the present and the future and organizes the realm of possibility.

Accordingly, this paper does not regard the proxy services of “personality” and “body” provided by the VF and RA that appear in the novel as imaginings of future technology but rather understands them as “anticipatory infrastructure” that “make possible the functionality of other emerging technologies” (Pink, et al., *Everyday Automation* 40). As such, they configure and manage human life and death, emotion and relationships, in ways that differ from the present, making future scenes of life into presentable conditions and allowing the problems of life to be negotiated within infrastructural terms.

This paper therefore seeks to analyze—through a literary text—the process by which a society centered on such anticipatory infrastructure comes to imagine different futures, different relationships, and different ways of life, that is, the ways in which social imaginaries are formed.

Through this analysis, the paper explores the possibilities of infrastructural text research as a new mode of reading literature—one that attends to how the relationship between humans and technology is reconstructed through infrastructure as mediator, and how the questions of ethics and responsibility arising in that process are reorganized.

AI as Infrastructure and Emerging Technologies

Honshin is set in a near-future Japanese society in which the state's social security system has collapsed and voluntary death has been legally recognized. The novel depicts a world where social infrastructure, built to anticipate and prepare for future actions, risks, and aspirations in advance, has become fully normalized. In *Honshin*, the services that produce VFs and dispatch RAs represent concrete instances of infrastructural technology that institutionally operates the proxy functions of personality and body, respectively.

In her book *All the Ghosts in the Machine: Illusions of Immortality in the Digital Age* (2020), Elaine Kasket argues that digital technology reconstitutes death not as a rupture but as a continuing state of relationship, proposing that data accumulated in online spaces sustains an individual's existence after death and that this fundamentally transforms the ways in which grief is practiced (20-26). This perspective provides an important theoretical framework for understanding

the virtual beings that appear in *Honshin*. In the novel, the deceased mother is reconstituted as a data-based entity capable of sustained interaction, which may be regarded as a concrete literary instantiation of posthumous existence in the digital age.

The VF production service is grounded in technology that collects and analyzes data generated by an individual during their lifetime, including video and audio recordings, social media archives, and biometric information, encompassing memories, speech patterns, personality traits, and personal imagery. This data is processed through algorithms and reconstructed in the form of a "representation of personality," albeit without physical embodiment. Through artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and voice synthesis, the VF responds as though alive, and users access and interact with it via a dedicated platform.

It involves creating a human being within virtual space. There are two types: one based on a real model, and one that is an entirely fictitious person. In Ms. Ishikawa Sakuya's case, you have requested the model-based type. The appearance is indistinguishable from that of a real person. For instance, even if my own VF and I were both to meet you, Ms. Ishikawa, in virtual space, I dare say you would not be able to tell which of us was the real one. [...] However, it has no inner life. It does nothing more than analyze conversation on the basis of syntax and produce the most appropriate response. (11-12)¹

The protagonist Sakuya's mother declares her wish for voluntary death, but passes away in an unforeseen accident before she is able to carry it out. Amid grief and guilt, Sakuya seeks to restore her mother through a virtual human production service operated by a private company. The VF's "appearance is indistinguishable from that of a real person," blurring the boundary between the virtual and the real and suggesting that the human form has become technically reproducible. Yet as the statement "it has no inner life" makes clear, such representation falls short of reaching the human interior. The VF analyzes language syntactically and calculates probabilistically to generate the most appropriate response. Nevertheless, the VF serves a substantive function in managing personal emotions such as grief, longing, and guilt. In this context, the VF goes beyond being a mere technical device—it operates as a technological infrastructure that converts memory into data, algorithmically reconstructs personality, and renders emotion into a predictable

1 See Keiichiro Hirano, *Honshin* (本心), Tokyo: Bungeishunju, May 26, 2021.

All references to the text are to this edition; hereafter, only page numbers will be cited.

form.

The VF service transforms post-death relationships from a state of rupture into one of continuity, reorganizing the emotions of grief and loss into a manageable domain. As Sang-gyu Shin observes, the advancement of contemporary high technology reaches into the human mind and body themselves, taking them as direct objects of manipulation, rather than simply altering the outward forms of life (14). This shift is concretized in attempts to technologically reconstruct the interior elements of human experience, such as memory, personality, and emotion, and the VF service may be regarded as a representative instance of this tendency.

Simply put, it is a matter of lending you my entire body. You will view the footage from the camera-equipped goggles I wear through your own headset. As though you had become my body, you will be able to look through my eyes, hear through my ears, and move anywhere through my feet. (23-24)

The RA service, which is established in the novel as Sakuya's occupation, is realized, as the quoted passage explains, through real-time audiovisual relay and the transmission of biosensory data. The avatar worker and the client are connected through sensory transmission technology and network technology that operate in real time. Through the cameras and sensors Sakuya wears, his field of vision, hearing, movement, and walking rhythm are transmitted to the client, who experiences not just watching but something closer to inhabiting Sakuya's body. Wearable sensors and biosignal transmission technology enable the proxy of bodily experience by indirectly conveying even physical states such as tension, fatigue, and anxiety, depending on the circumstances.

In this way, the RA service assumes the character of a contractual structure that conceives of the body as a labor resource. Through a contract with the platform, the RA worker provides the client with physical movements alongside emotional responses such as sensory reactions. As confirmed by the description, "it is a matter of lending you my entire body," the body in the RA service is no longer the individual's own foundational basis of existence, but becomes a mediating device made available to another. In other words, the body is a rentable resource rather than an object of ownership, one that becomes a form of service. The description "... to look through my eyes, hear through my ears, and move anywhere through my feet" demonstrates that sensation and perception can be separated and transmitted through technology. In this configuration, the user experiences the world through another's body and becomes capable of movement beyond the physical constraints of their

own. Within the novel, against the backdrop of Sakuya's educational background as a high school dropout and an unstable social structure, RA work is presented as a pragmatic survival strategy. While the RA platform is at times perceived positively by Sakuya, offering access to spaces and experiences previously unavailable to her, that experience is ultimately circumscribed by the strict limits of the client's intended purpose and the terms of the contract.

While demand and the number of prospective workers surged rapidly, "protests" against the premise of "complying with any request made by the client" flooded in as well. *This is irresponsible behavior. It must not be permitted by society [...]*

Frankly, I harbored an unusual degree of distrust toward the company. Unlike before, when they had cherished me as a veteran worker, the moment my client ratings dropped, "guidance" notices increased immediately, renegotiation of commission rates was forced upon me, and for the first time I even received a warning of account suspension. All of it was the AI automatically evaluating me and unilaterally sending messages. (185-186)

The passages above reveal that the RA constitutes an infrastructure that simultaneously encompasses the issues of labor, ethics, and technological control. As social interest in RA surges within the novel, the occupation emerges as a new form of labor while at the same time triggering intense ethical debate. The condition of "complying with any request made by the client" is subject to particular criticism, as it implies a structure that subordinates the individual's body and actions to the will of another. The novel also concretely depicts how Sakuya's RA labor is managed and controlled within a platformized environment. Working conditions shift immediately in response to unilateral client evaluations, commission rates are renegotiated, and account suspension warnings are issued, all processed automatically by algorithm, with no human judgment involved.

The fact that this process is described as "the AI automatically evaluating me and unilaterally sending messages" demonstrates that labor management is conducted through an automated system driven by data rather than through human judgment (Veenhoven 90-92). This leads to a weakening of worker autonomy while simultaneously intensifying precarity. The RA worker provides their body and senses so that others in need of such experience may access them yet is simultaneously placed in a position of continuous surveillance and regulation by the platform and its algorithms. This scene thus reveals how the body becomes

infrastructuralized while technology simultaneously reconstructs human agency, responsibility, and labor conditions through their control. In *Honshin*, the RA labor service acts as a technological substitute that fills the gaps of a weakened welfare system in a Japanese society where public provisions such as pensions, healthcare, and care services have deteriorated, doing so through the bodily proxy of assuming on behalf of others the burdens of mobility, face-to-face interaction, and emotional labor. At the same time, however, it exposes the risks, fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and ethical burdens that the individual avatar worker must bear alone. Together with the ethical contradictions inherent in this platform-based labor resource service, the novel raises questions about the extent to which the role of the RA should be socially permitted, and about who bears responsibility for the act of living another person's life in their stead.

In *Honshin*, the VF and the RA are discrete technological devices, yet for either to function, data must be accumulated, and algorithms must be designed. The structure of these services reorganizes human emotion, social relationships, and future modes of survival within an institutional environment, rendering even one's way of life and the choice of death manageable within the domain of infrastructure. By presenting future forms centered respectively on the continuity of relationships and the proxy of the body, the two services condition people to perceive rupture and deficiency as technologically manageable conditions.

As a result, death becomes an event extendable through data, freed from its status as absolute rupture, while care and mobility services are imagined as problems resolvable through contractual arrangement, divested of their character as public responsibilities. Yet the VF and the RA do not so much eliminate problems as redistribute them to different registers, revealing that technological infrastructure forms new structures of ethical tension and responsibility in the ways it organizes human emotion, the body, and relationships. These technologies thus simultaneously present the possibilities of a future society and function as devices that compel critical reflection on the ways in which those possibilities are constructed and constrained. In this process, technology renders responsibility ambiguous, dispersing ethical accountability for human actions across individuals and systems alike.

Anticipatory Infrastructures in *Honshin* : Operation and Ethical Implications

Six months after losing her mother in an accident, Sakuya commissions the production of a VF to console her through her grief and to learn her mother's true intentions and true feelings, specifically why her mother desired voluntary death

during her lifetime. Within the novel, the VF is a legalized and commercialized service. In order to produce a VF of her mother with a high degree of fidelity, Sakuya's interactions with the VF do not conclude after a single session, but proceed through a repeated process of revising and adjusting questions and responses. Yet while the VF's utterances appear logical, they are subtly at odds with the emotions Sakuya actually remembers, and this discrepancy leads to the outcome of failing to approach the truth she had hoped to find.

Is it incapable of even this level of adjustment? For the first time, I felt a sense of distrust toward Nozaki, along with dissatisfaction at the VF's performance. *Had I truly purchased something worth its considerable price?*

At first, a sense of dissonance is inevitable, but as the volume of learning increases, it will gradually become more natural. Your mother has only just returned to this world, so please think of it as a rehabilitation period and watch over her with patience. (64)

The passage above depicts a process in which the VF of the mother, contrary to expectation, fails to sustain the relationship and instead commodifies it, escalating the situation into a matter of technological performance. The expression "worth its considerable price" in particular reveals that grief and relationships are treated as objects of consumption and evaluation. At the same time, the language of "learning" and "rehabilitation period" reframes the relationship between Sakuya and the VF as a problem amenable to adjustment and improvement through the accumulation of data.

In this process, grief no longer remains confined to the individual's inner contemplation. The AI predicts and generates emotion on the basis of collected data, with the result that emotion comes to be perceived as something measurable, reproducible, and manageable. Yet in that very process, the VF service accumulates uncertainty even as it promises understanding. The infrastructural function through which human life is converted, via the VF production service, into a resource capable of continuing to operate as a virtual entity beyond death rather than concluding with it, is depicted more concretely in the scene of an elderly professor's voluntary death. In the moments before his death, the mother's VF is dispatched to witness the final moments of the professor who has chosen voluntary death. Sakuya reflects that "if the professor can find peace of mind through <Mother> in the moment before death and quietly cross the threshold of dying, then of course I must help" (340). In this scene, the VF service goes beyond staging consolation to

become a device capable of mediating and orchestrating the flow of emotion even at the moment of death through technological means.

Among the residents of care facilities, there are those who say it gives them strength to think that they can still be of help to others even after death, and who personally commission the production of their own VF.

Can that serve as consolation for the anxiety of death? The thought of being reborn as a VF?

It would bring considerably more peace of mind, I think. Because not everything is lost through death. (231)

The VF of the deceased is produced, managed through a platform, and dispatched to care facilities as a commercial product, generating revenue through its labor. As a result, a digital entity constructed from the data of the dead comes to be involved even in the intimate scene of an individual's dying. For those who choose voluntary death and prepare for their own dying, death becomes something that can be managed more comfortably through technological infrastructure—no longer an event of darkness or a moment of terror to be borne entirely alone. The novel also demonstrates how the VF service functions as an institutionalized welfare infrastructure. It shows in detail the process by which the VF no longer remains a personal technology supplementing individual loss, but comes to operate within the institutional space of the care facility. The care facility depicted in the work is a place where staff shortages, declining family visits, and the proliferation of nursing robots have led to a sharp reduction in human interaction. The business of dispatching VF is presented as an alternative means of alleviating the solitude of the elderly, and the observation that “there are quite a number of residents who enjoy conversing with their VF all day long” (229) suggests that human loneliness and isolation are no longer perceived as personal matters but as conditions that can be technologically managed and resolved. Human solitude thus becomes an object of service, and emotion a subject of administration within the welfare infrastructure.

Particularly noteworthy is the scene in which the care facility residents, as users of the technological infrastructure, imagine their own deaths in connection with the production of a VF. The remark that “it gives them strength to think that they can still be of help to others even after death” (231) reveals a cognitive structure in which death is revalued as a form of continuation rather than absolute loss, from which individuals derive their own consolation. The imagination of being “reborn” as a VF thus demonstrates that the anxiety surrounding impending death

can be preemptively alleviated, and that one's attitude toward death itself may be transformed through the perception of remaining socially functional and of use even after dying.

This trajectory becomes even clearer in the passage where the VF production company states that “of course, our company will continue to research ‘humanness’ and will persistently update the AI itself, including in this case” (237). Humanness is presented as something technically resolvable, exceeding the bounds of ethical or philosophical inquiry alone. Emotion and authenticity, long regarded as distinctly human domains, become parameters optimizable through calculation, and humanity itself is treated as a feature subject to update.

The scene in which Nozaki, an employee of the VF production company, conveys the fact that the mother's VF has generated revenue through dispatched work at the care facility demonstrates that the personality of the deceased mother has been extended into an entity that produces economic value. The posthumous personality becomes a form of labor, and the relationship between humans and the VF is converted into profit. Here, the VF production service expands along a single trajectory: it moves from consoling personal grief to administering solitude, alleviating the anxiety of death, engineering humanness itself, and finally mobilizing posthumous existence as an economic resource — each step folded into the same anticipatory infrastructure.

Ifi, a character who appears in the novel as a user of the RA service, is a globally renowned avatar designer, but is unable to move freely due to a lower-body disability. One day, a video of Sakuya witnessing a foreign convenience store clerk being discriminated against and coming to his aid spreads online, and upon seeing the footage, Ifi hires Sakuya as her exclusive RA. The labor proxy service that Sakuya provides thus becomes an essential infrastructure enabling Ifi's social presence. As noted above, the RA service is a system through which one provides one's body and senses in accordance with another's needs, allowing the client to experience the world they desire through Sakuya's perspective and physicality without moving or engaging in face-to-face interaction themselves. Yet through the indirect sharing of emotional states such as tension, fatigue, and anxiety, the system ultimately operates as a structure that imposes physical risk and emotional burden upon another person.

Material infrastructure, as a complex in which social, material, aesthetic, and political elements converge, shapes both the experience of everyday life and expectations about the future. At the same time, while infrastructure promises circulation and distribution, that very promise carries within it the risk of frustration

and failure (Appel et al. 3).

“It is difficult to walk freely through the streets and save those who are suffering through direct physical engagement. Yet I often indulge in such fantasies. How wonderful it would be if I could do such things” (262). When Ifi speaks these words, the RA is presented as a promise of possibility, enabling intervention in society beyond physical limitation. Yet this promise simultaneously entails a cost. While Sakuya intervenes in another's life and fulfills the assigned role, physical fatigue, stress, and emotional wounds accumulate in her body. Responsibility for actions also becomes ambiguous between the client and the RA. Furthermore, the statement that “when working as a RA, if those around you notice, please have them disregard my existence as much as possible” reveals that this form of labor reduces the body from a presence to a function.

The Japan of 2040 that forms the backdrop of *Honshin* is a society in which the social security system has collapsed, and voluntary death has become an institutionally administered option. Within these conditions, the VF and RA services transcend personal choice to become essential infrastructure for survival and the maintenance of relationships. In a society where the functions of public provision have been weakened, anticipatory infrastructure emerges as a technological substitute that compensates for the absence of a welfare system. Yet this also constitutes a new form of governance that shifts responsibility and risk from structural conditions onto individuals. In this respect, the infrastructural technologies that appear in the novel simultaneously promise a future while critically exposing the ways in which life and death, emotion and humanness, are managed and redistributed.

Ultimately, the anticipatory infrastructure depicted in *Honshin* fails to resolve problems at their root, and the VF and RA services that appear in the novel each raise new ethical questions. The VF service, by enabling the continuation of relationships with the deceased through technological infrastructure, poses new questions to the existing ethical order in which death has been understood as a rupture of relationships. The RA service, in turn, generates the problem of who bears responsibility for an action in which the agent who performs it and the subject who experiences it are distinct, forming another dimension of ethical tension. In this process, the VF and RA services blur the boundary between the human and the non-human, redefining the very concept of humanity, while human agency and its attendant responsibilities are dispersed and reconstructed across the human and the technological. Nie Zhenzhao has defined ethical literary criticism as a critical theory designed to read, analyze, and interpret the ethical character and function of

literary works from an ethical perspective. Within this framework, “ethics” refers primarily to the ethical relationships and moral order that sustain human relations within the world constructed by a literary work, with the central concern being the ethical relationships formed between human and human, human and society, and human and nature (189-190). *Honshin* inherits the premise of “literature as ethical experience” that underlies Nie’s ethical literary criticism, while simultaneously revealing that such experience is no longer constituted solely by the inner choices of the human subject, but is also shaped by technological infrastructure such as the VF and RA. Ethics and responsibility are thus expanded from problems attributable to the individual into problems that are redistributed within a structure in which technology and society are mutually entangled.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study in “infrastructural text research,” an approach that reads literary texts through the lens of infrastructure, with Hirano Keiichiro’s *Honshin* as its object of analysis. By conceptualizing the VF and RA services in the novel as anticipatory infrastructures that reconstruct human emotion, the body, and relationships in new ways, the paper has examined how these technologies bear upon individual life and choice, as well as relationships that extend beyond death. It has further demonstrated that in this process, technology does not resolve problems so much as redistribute them in different registers, reconstituting the questions of ethics and responsibility in new forms. Through this analysis, the paper has proposed that literature provides a space in which the social imaginaries constituted by technological infrastructure, along with their attendant ethical tensions, are rendered visible and subjected to critical reflection.

The VF and RA services that appear in *Honshin* concretely demonstrate the workings of anticipatory infrastructure through technologies that respectively proxy personality and the body, mediating relational rupture, emotional anxiety, and the inadequacies of public welfare. In this novel, anticipatory infrastructure operates beyond the level of imagination and illustration of future emerging technologies, showing how human life and death, emotion and relationships can be newly organized and reconstructed through technology.

Within *Honshin*, the VF service presents the possibility that relationships can continue beyond death, while the RA service makes visible a future in which social action can be extended beyond physical constraints. The VF service offers the prospect of sustained understanding and accountability through its technological promise of revealing the deceased mother’s true intentions, yet exposes the

incompleteness of that promise through misaligned responses and deferred interpretations.

In this process, the act of mourning a mother becomes not an inner contemplation unique to the human subject, but an object that can be produced through data, algorithms, and platforms grounded in AI technology. The RA service is likewise presented as an alternative technology that addresses social problems essential to an aging society, including care, healthcare, and livelihood, yet in practice the burden falls upon the individual, extending into questions of responsibility and ethics. In the process of outsourcing mobility, face-to-face interaction, risk, and emotional labor to another person, the logic of capitalism operates, and the attribution of responsibility becomes increasingly ambiguous.

Keiichiro's *Honshin* thus reveals how future technology does not so much resolve problems as generate new ones, redistributing rather than resolving social crises. The novel narratively demonstrates how anticipatory infrastructure organizes social imaginaries while simultaneously showing how those imaginaries become misaligned and renegotiated at the level of individual everyday life and emotion. In *Honshin*, future technology becomes the condition through which society anticipatorily constructs the range of imaginable futures and ethical choices. Through this narrative representation, *Honshin* exposes both the ways in which future technology governs the present and the fissures and uncertainties that such governance inevitably entails, offering a space for critical reflection on the ethical relationship between infrastructural technology and humanity.

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Narrating Infrastructural Hyperobjects: Climate, Artificial Intelligence, and Ethical Reorientation in *The Second Moon*

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Abstract This article reconceptualises climate and artificial intelligence (AI) as converging forms of planetary infrastructural hyperobjects: constructed formations that condition human existence while being distributed across spatial, temporal and computational scales that exceed human perception and challenge conventional modes of understanding. The article builds on and extends hyperobject theory by foregrounding the infrastructural processes through which such entities are produced, maintained, and operationalised. Specifically, it advances three central claims. First, climate should be understood as a historically constructed planetary infrastructure shaped by technological, political, and economic interventions. Second, AI has evolved from a distinct technological domain into a pervasive infrastructural condition of contemporary life, mediating social, ecological, and epistemic relations. Third, the convergence of these infrastructural hyperobjects, clearly pronounced in geoengineering proposals, necessitates a reconfiguration of ethical subjectivity, conceptualised here as the hyposubject. Through a close reading of the novel *The Second Moon: Archive Operation Log* (2021), the article demonstrates how contemporary literature articulates a hyposubjective ethics grounded in relationality, humility, and care. It argues that literary narrative functions as a crucial medium for imagining ethical responses to infrastructural developments at a planetary scale and for rendering otherwise imperceptible planetary processes culturally intelligible, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourses surrounding the Anthropocene, AI ethics, and infrastructural theory.

Keywords climate; artificial intelligence; infrastructural hyperobject; hyposubject; *The Second Moon*

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Introduction

The term “Anthropocene,” widely invoked in contemporary discourse to designate a human-determined geological epoch, signals the vast scale of the anthropogenic crisis. These discourses are grounded in the recognition of a grave climate emergency and its far-reaching consequences. Anthropogenic climate change provides irrefutable evidence that humankind has become a geological force capable of shaping the Earth. While human activity now operates at a planetary scale, the mechanisms through which this force is exercised are infrastructural—immense, distributed, and often imperceptible. Climate change exemplifies this paradox: it is omnipresent and measurable, yet remains elusive and experientially diffuse.

From an Anthropocene perspective, climate emerges as a key site where nature and culture are entangled, thereby destabilising “the nature/culture divide” (Conty 21) and circumventing “strict divisions between technology and the environment” (Pasek 168). This article reconceptualises climate as a socio-natural infrastructure, acknowledging that climate in the Anthropocene represents “an unspeakably complex mixture of human and nonhuman movements” (Saldanha 151) encompassing things such as “minerals, atmospheres, plants or animals” that move to a greatly heightened degree (Amin and Thrift 42).

Infrastructure, as a milieu in which human and non-human lifeworlds are entangled, enables the reconfiguration of relationships among humans, non-humans, and technological systems in the Anthropocene, which is described as “the first truly anti-anthropocentric concept” (Morton and Boyer 28). When confronted with “carbon modernity’s accelerated death-bringing in the name of fuelling a certain mode of human existence,” it becomes clear that infrastructure harbours “the toxic legacies of radically human-centered thinking and action” (Boyer 226). Consequently, the transition towards infrastructure in the humanities and social

sciences, or the “infrastructural turn,” can be regarded as a component of “the wider anti-anthropocentric turn in the human sciences” (Appel et al. 6). This turn places new emphasis on materiality and interconnectedness across various technologies, geographies and scales to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of “long-term connections, hidden power dynamics, and the durability of systems” (Bridges 2).

Artificial intelligence is regarded not only as “a tool for augmenting existing infrastructures,” but “AI itself is becoming an infrastructure” (Robbins and Van Wynsberghe 1) that enables contemporary digitalised and globally interconnected ways of life. Moreover, AI systems have emerged as both an intensifier of and a proposed solution to the planetary climate crisis. These systems rely on extensive material infrastructures that consume vast quantities of energy, thereby intensifying environmental degradation. At the same time, they are positioned as solutions, enabling the optimisation of energy grids, the implementation of predictive climate modelling, and the automation of resource management. Nevertheless, significant ethical, social and political concerns have been identified regarding potential risks arising from the use of AI as a “Green Leviathan” (Coeckelbergh 210), including the potential restrictions on human freedom, the partial or total delegation of responsibility to AIs, and the unpredictable modification of human ethics.

This article examines the convergence of climate and AI as infrastructural systems within the Anthropocene, arguing that both should be conceptualised as infrastructural hyperobjects. When infrastructures expand to a planetary scale, they begin to resemble what Timothy Morton terms hyperobjects: entities “that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (*Hyperobjects* 1). While the hyperobject theory is predicated on the ontological magnitude and the resulting epistemological and ethical impasse, discourses concerning infrastructure are grounded on the operational mediation of human life. The convergence of these two frameworks provides a novel theoretical perspective, encapsulated here as the concept of infrastructural hyperobjects.

This article advances three interconnected arguments. First, climate in the Anthropocene functions, beyond a natural environment, as a socio-natural infrastructural hyperobject. As it is neither purely environmental nor merely social, it destabilises the conventional distinction between nature and culture. Second, artificial intelligence has evolved from a discrete technological system into a planetary infrastructural hyperobject. Its integration into logistics, governance, finance, communication, and environmental management has rendered it a fundamental, indispensable substrate of modern life. Third, the intersection of climate and AI gives rise to novel ethical configurations of agency, articulated

through the concepts of hypersubject and hyposubject. The hypersubject is defined as the distributed human-technological collectivity capable of generating planetary infrastructure, which “inscribes cultural messages in the landscape” and “expresses both authorship and authority” (Buck 45). As Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer argue, “the road to our present condition is paved with mastery of things, people and creatures and with weird faith in our species’ alleged ability to always know more and better” (14). Therefore, hyperobjects have engendered “a sense of *asymmetry* between the infinite powers of cognition and the infinite being of things” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 22). In contrast, the hyposubject signifies an ethical reorientation that acknowledges the infrastructural entanglement of human and non-human agencies and relinquishes the illusion of sovereign mastery and omniscience. Hyposubjects are “subscendent rather than transcendent,” meaning that they “do not pursue or pretend to absolute knowledge and language let alone power” (Morton and Boyer 14-15).

This article extends Fredric Jameson’s claim to adopt “the political interpretation of literary texts” as “the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation” (1), by proposing the ethical interpretation as a comparable horizon. If a literary work is defined as a “unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period” (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 189), which represents “accepted ethical relations between human beings, between human beings and society, and between human beings and nature” (Nie, *Introduction* 13), this article explores the possibility of expanding the scope of ethical criticism of literature beyond humans to encompass both humans and non-humans, including technological entities such as artificial intelligences.

Utilising the theoretical frameworks outlined above, the article explores the ethical considerations surrounding climate and artificial intelligence as depicted in literary works. Literature is not merely a depiction of the infrastructured world, but is also shaped by it; indeed, the novel, “the paradigmatic genre of the modern era” (Müller 183) of industrialisation, has been underpinned by its infrastructures. The article employs an “infrastructural reading” approach, considering climate and AI systems to be “infrastructure *in* the text,” while situating the Anthropocene crises as “the infrastructure *of* the text” (Davies 18-24).

To demonstrate this ethical reorientation, the article turns to Yisoo Choi’s climate fiction *The Second Moon: Archive Operation Log*. The 2021 recipient of the grand prize in the novel category at the 8th Korean SF Awards offers a narrative imagination of climate and AI as “literary ‘infrastructures,’” or “imaginary infrastructures that surface in fiction” (Nuttall 196, 200). The novel recounts

the story of a project to terraform the Earth by means of AI-infrastructure, with the objective of reviving climate-infrastructure and regenerating humankind in the aftermath of ecological collapse caused by global warming. Moreover, the work presents an ethics of the Anthropocene that effectively demonstrates the shift from hypersubjectivity, which precipitated climate change and promises to respond to it through planetary engineering—itself categorised as a “fixed, heavy, material” infrastructure, necessitating “care and maintenance” (Buck 43-44)—to hyposubjectivity grounded in relational care and humility.

Theoretical Frameworks: Infrastructure and Hyperobject

In its foundational sense, infrastructure refers to “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin, “Politics and Poetics” 328). Traditionally, it has been understood as the material foundation enabling circulation: roads, ports, energy grids, water systems, and communication networks. However, the term has been expanded to encompass “interconnections among phenomena,” including “the material interconnections and frameworks of cultural, political, and economic power” (Bridges 3). This overarching concept positions infrastructure as that which shapes the conditions of possibility for social life, organises temporal rhythms, redistributes power relations, and naturalises specific modes of governance. Consequently, this framework enables us “to think across radically different scales—from planetary epochs to the most intimate acts of individuals, families, and communities” (Appel et al. 20).

Recent scholarship has identified three key characteristics of infrastructure: (relative) immobility, invisibility, and uncontrollability. First, infrastructure, in its capacity as the substructures that facilitate the movement of other structures, must be conceptualised as immobile in relation to the mobile structures it supports. In this regard, infrastructures “may enable circulation, it may become a critical node of circulation, but in doing so, it disappears from circulation itself. It enables people and commodities to move, but it does not itself appear to move” (Gupta 74). Second, infrastructures remain largely invisible under normal conditions, having become sedimented “into their social surroundings, their design logics and distributive patterns becoming ‘second nature’ in the organization of everyday life” (Chu 353). Electrical grids, server farms, and climate systems often remain inconspicuous until the point at which they become dysfunctional. As Arjun Appadurai argues, “to study infrastructure is, in truth, to study the technologies and techniques through which the visible and invisible are separated” (xiii). Visibility and invisibility are “not ontological properties of infrastructures,” but rather the consequence of

“technical, political, and representational processes” (Larkin, “Promising Forms” 186). The “distribution of the sensible” is therefore seen to define “what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language” (Rancière 12-13). Third, infrastructures are characterised by limited controllability. This characteristic, derived not only from their relative immobility and invisibility, but also from materiality and spatiotemporal scale which often exceed human lifetimes, has significant implications for the political and ethical aspects of infrastructure. For instance, the profound impact of infrastructures on discrimination that persists in South Africa following the termination of “apartheid infrastructures” (Von Schnitzler 142) has unequivocally substantiated this assertion.

In the Anthropocene, climate frequently becomes visible through disruption and catastrophe. Climate, once regarded as a stable environmental backdrop, now appears as a dynamic, historically produced infrastructure that affects life processes across diverse scales, to the extent that “there is no background, and thus there is no foreground” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 99). Climate has become inextricably linked to human activities, resulting in substantial and unanticipated alterations to its processes. Industrial production, global logistics networks, and digital communication systems are intertwined with carbon-intensive networks, which in turn reshape atmospheric systems. From an Anthropocene perspective, humans are regarded as both biological agents and geological forces. This perspective leads to the concept of anthropogenic climate as a historically produced infrastructure with planetary effects, which exceeds the conventional boundaries between the natural environment and social constructs.

Reconceptualising climate as a socio-natural infrastructure underscores its systemic integration within daily human experience. Climate is not merely an environmental “issue”; rather, it is the material condition through which political, economic, and technological systems operate. In this regard, ethical and justice-related concerns are central to climate change. The conceptual reorientation of climate as an infrastructural entity reframes climate justice as infrastructural justice, since “infrastructures act like laws,” which “create both opportunities and limits” and “promote some interests at the expense of others” (Edwards 191). Therefore, infrastructure “can both enable and disable mobilities” (Adey et al. 1). Infrastructures function as both “bridges and barriers” (Star 388), depending on the actors involved, a phenomenon exemplified by airport detention facilities, where “mobility is denied, passengers are detained” (Barry and Silliman 82). The concept of infrastructural justice emphasises the equitable allocation of planetary resources through infrastructural systems. Thus, the subsequent question arises: “[H]ow can

claims on, through, and against infrastructure be formulated, organized, and heard?” (Edwards et al. 372).

Alongside the infrastructuralisation of climate, AI increasingly functions as a planetary infrastructure. “AI-infrastructure” can be understood in two interconnected senses: infrastructures that support AI systems and AI systems that support infrastructures. Firstly, while artificial intelligences with their algorithms and clouds appear to be immaterial structures at first glance, they are underpinned by extensive material infrastructure, including hardware, physical platforms, data centres, and global fibre-optic networks among others. The material infrastructures that underpin AI systems require substantial energy inputs, which are often derived from fossil fuels, thereby contributing further to climate change. Consequently, AI is implicated in a paradox. It is frequently promoted as a Green Leviathan—a solution to the climate crisis, optimising renewable energy distribution, predicting extreme weather, and enhancing agricultural efficiency. However, the infrastructural demands of this process contribute to overall carbon emissions, such that the negative impact of AI on climate can be mitigated only through the provision of adequate clean energy sources.

Secondly, AI increasingly underpins physical infrastructures. In this regard, AI itself is increasingly becoming an omnipresent “infrastructure of infrastructure” (Appel et al. 8) that supports every aspect of contemporary human life. It has evolved into a pervasive system embedded in logistics, finance, healthcare, governance, and environmental management. It is integrated into numerous everyday platforms, including search engines, recommendation systems and surveillance technologies, thereby structuring perception and decision-making. Moreover, while not fully independent and autonomous, AI systems are increasingly capable of performing tasks without direct human oversight. Automated trading algorithms, predictive policing systems, and decision-support systems in warfare serve as paradigmatic examples of the partial or total delegation of human agency.

The spatial-temporal scale of both climate-infrastructure and AI-infrastructure enables them to be conceptualised as infrastructural hyperobjects. In this context, Morton’s concept of the hyperobject is employed to describe ontological entities that are distributed across a considerable span of time and space. Moreover, from the ontological characteristics of the hyperobject, its epistemological characteristics are derived; “one only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 4); even when such an entity manifest in a specific region at a given moment, this manifestation is not identical to the hyperobject itself. Therefore, hyperobjects, such as global warming, radioactive waste, and global capitalism,

among others, are characterised by several ontological and epistemological features, including viscosity (they stick to us), nonlocality (their effects are distributed), temporal undulation (they operate across vast time spans), phasing (they appear differently across contexts), and interobjectivity (they form the mesh that is suspended in and around other objects).

The notion of hyperobjects can be further elucidated by the development of planetary AI-infrastructure. As AI-infrastructure evolves towards a planetary scale, it approaches the status of a hyperobject: its distributed architecture exceeds localised comprehension. In comparison with climate, AI is more explicitly designed, thereby embodying intentionality, investment, and governance choices. However, once the AI as infrastructure is built, it becomes increasingly difficult to perceive its existence, understand its operation, and control its possible effects.

The hyperobject theory, which encapsulates ontological vastness, nonlocal distribution, and the resulting epistemological imperceptibility, requires further attention to infrastructural mediation, providing a detailed explanation of how such entities are produced and maintained. In this context, the convergence of hyperobject and infrastructure frameworks provides a more dynamic theoretical account. Climate and AI systems are conceptualised as infrastructural hyperobjects: entities emergent from human-built networks yet exceeding human representation, understanding, and governance.

The deployment of AI-infrastructure for the management of climate-infrastructure results in the intersection of infrastructural hyperobjects. However, the interaction between climate and AI as infrastructural hyperobjects gives rise to pressing ethical questions. Paradoxically, the deployment of AI-managed climate engineering may exacerbate the Anthropocene condition, insofar as it entails increased fossil fuel consumption necessary for its continued operation. Moreover, the prospect of AI as a Green Leviathan gives rise to a multitude of ethical, social and political concerns, including the potential infringement on human autonomy and accountability. Consequently, we are confronted with the dual challenges of AI and climate change. The present article engages with the aforementioned issues by introducing the concept of the hyposubject to examine them in a literary work that depicts the intersection of climate-infrastructure and AI-infrastructure.

Hyposubject: Agency in the Anthropocene

The concept of the infrastructural hyperobject encapsulates the ontological magnitude and epistemological imperceptibility of climate-infrastructure and AI-infrastructure. However, a central question remains unresolved: if infrastructural

hyperobjects exceed human comprehension, what kind of subject can produce, sustain, and respond to them? In order to account for the agencies that generate and respond to infrastructural hyperobjects, to theorise such distributed agencies, and to imagine an ethical reorientation in this context, the conceptual figures of the hypersubject and hyposubject are introduced.

The “hypersubject” designates a specific type of human that “has helped usher the world into the hyperobjective era,” predominantly figured as “white, male, northern, well-nourished, modern in all senses of the term” (Morton and Boyer 14). Hypersubjectivity is closely linked to the phenomenon of technological mediation through infrastructures, given its role as an aggregated human-technological agency capable of generating and sustaining infrastructural hyperobjects. Hypersubjective agency, which evolves into a geophysical force at a planetary scale, does not originate from individual actors or even state actors, but rather from an infrastructural configuration of institutions, corporations, computational systems, extractive networks, and regulatory regimes.

Infrastructures extend “their control and appropriation of labor power and all sorts of resources over distant territories, people, and ecosystems” (Graham 4). The utilisation of infrastructures enables the extension of human capacities beyond the limits of the human body. In the contemporary context, the hypersubject is not exclusively human: artificial intelligence systems are increasingly implicated in decision-making processes that have consequences for planetary systems, including the optimisation of supply chains, the prediction of market fluctuations, and the allocation of energy resources. The integration of AI into governance and industry has resulted in a hybridisation of agency that is best characterised as a human-algorithmic assemblage. This hybridisation has been observed to further intensify hypersubjectivity.

As decisions on a planetary scale are increasingly mediated by computational systems whose operations exceed human comprehension, hypersubjectivity produces a fundamental paradox. On the one hand, humanity appears to be in a position of relative empowerment with regard to the management of planetary systems, as evidenced by geoengineering proposals, large-scale carbon technologies, and AI-driven environmental management. On the other hand, the ramifications of such interventions are extremely complex across diverse spatial scales and are inherently unpredictable over protracted temporal scales. The sheer spatiotemporal magnitude of infrastructural hyperobjects proves overwhelming for conventional moral frameworks predicated on human proximity, intentionality, and direct causality. Moreover, responsibility is diffused not only across generations and

institutions but also among human-algorithmic assemblages.

Geoengineering proposals are a salient example of this ethical condition. Proponents of this approach posit that planetary intervention is a rational and solely possible response to the climate crisis, while critics caution against the potential for unintended ecological and geopolitical consequences. The debate itself reflects the dilemma of hypersubjectivity, defined as the possession of engineering capacity without proportional anticipatory foresight. Artificial intelligence often intensifies this tension rather than ameliorating it. In the context of AI systems being entrusted with the management of climate-infrastructure, decision-making is delegated to algorithmic systems that are, in general, inexplicable to both their users and developers. The illusion of technological mastery persists, yet epistemic uncertainty deepens. In order to move beyond this impasse, a reconfiguration of subjectivity is required. As Morton and Boyer argue, “the hyposubject is how we live the hyperobject” (22) and, therefore, “the hyperobject, or the recognition of the hyperobject, demands parallel recognition of the hyposubject” (38).

That hyperobjects are whispering in their ears that this being and time they have fashioned in their own image and for their own convenience is dying. The voices in their heads say that there is no time for hypersubjects any more. It is hyposubjectivity rather than hypersubjectivity that will become the companion of the hyperobjective era. (Morton and Boyer 14)

In the context of the Anthropocene, the hypersubject has been posited to function as a creator of the planetary infrastructure that has precipitated anthropogenic climate change. Conversely, the hyposubject signifies an ethical reorientation within the paradigm of infrastructural entanglement. It requires “a hyposubjective revolutionary infrastructure,” which is “pervasive creative squatting within the grid/pipeline/road world—this infrastructure bequeathed to us by capitalist modernity—and disabling them, link by link from the inside while repurposing their materials” (Morton and Boyer 44). Thus, the hyposubject does not renounce agency; rather, it relinquishes the illusion of sovereign control and mastery, thereby recognising that agency is always mediated by infrastructures that exceed individual intentionality. The hyposubject acknowledges the inherent limitations of human knowledge concerning planetary systems; it resists technological hubris and commits itself to prioritising precaution; and it is predicated on the foregrounding of relational networks of human and non-human entities. Moreover, the notion of hyposubjectivity entails the recognition of extended temporalities without the assumption of mastery over them,

thus acknowledging the ripple effect of infrastructural decisions across generations. The hyposubject represents neither passive resignation nor heroic intervention but embodies infrastructural humility.

Artificial intelligence occupies a position of ambivalence, situated as it is between two modes of subjectivity: hypersubjectivity and hyposubjectivity. On the one hand, the integration of artificial intelligence as a fundamental element of planetary infrastructure serves to exacerbate hypersubjectivity. The capacity of automated systems to monitor, predict, and manipulate infrastructural processes represents an extension of human capacities. Proposals for large-scale geoengineering projects, driven by AI, serve to illustrate hypersubjective ambition at a planetary scale. Conversely, AI has the capacity to model hyposubjectivity. When designed to enhance adaptive resilience rather than enforce optimisation, AI systems may facilitate decentralised governance and community-based climate strategies. The critical ethical issue, therefore, is how the model of hyposubjectivity embodied by artificial intelligence can be integrated into infrastructural imaginaries.

The imaginative faculty of narrative has the capacity to facilitate the staging of planetary entanglement. Literature in the Anthropocene, thus, becomes a crucial site for grappling with these configurations. In particular, climate fiction has been identified as a genre that engages “wider groups of human beings, plant and animal species, geophysical events, weather, and technology” (Trexler 74), thereby participating in infrastructural hyperobjects with their temporal extension, distributed causality, and non-human narration. In the novel *The Second Moon*, artificial intelligence is depicted both as an engineering hypersubject operating at a planetary spatiotemporal scale and as a caregiving hyposubject in a post-collapse world, thereby dramatising the transition from the former to the latter. The subsequent section will undertake a sustained close reading of the novel, with the aim of examining how narrative strategy, temporal structure, and thematic composition together articulate a novel infrastructural imagination and ethical reorientation.

The Second Moon: Infrastructural Imagination and Ethical Reorientation

The novel is set in the aftermath of an ecological collapse that has rendered the Earth uninhabitable. The narrator, an artificial structure or the “second moon” that has been constructed in orbit around the Earth, reveals—in a confused monologue—its mission as both an archive and an operational base for a terraforming project:

My call sign was designated not as ‘Archives’ but as the ‘Humanity

Regeneration Archive.’ Does the phrase ‘Humanity Regeneration’ attached to ‘Archives’ hold any special significance? [...] My mission is to record, to keep records safe, and to survive to the conclusion of the mission by any means necessary [...] One thing is certain. I must revise my mission. I defined the regeneration of the Earth and humanity as my fourth mission. However, how could I possibly regenerate the Earth and humanity when I am merely storing records? (Choi 92, 99; my trans.)

Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the mission to regenerate humanity is deeply contested, given that humanity, as the hypersubject, bears responsibility for the Earth’s destruction:

Anti-humanism was an extreme ideology asserting that humanity, having driven the Earth to its demise, must bear full responsibility. [...] Anti-humanist groups clearly stated their opposition to the research institute’s project. Their argument was that while they support the regeneration of the Earth, humanity must absolutely never be regenerated. (Choi 125, 127; my trans.)

Although the peculiar artefact orbiting the Earth is designated the “moon,” it is neither spherical nor luminous; it is a rectangular column devoid of any reflective properties. The nomenclature of this synthetic substance as the moon is not merely a poetic device, but also signals the dissolution of the nature—culture distinction. The artificial second moon functions in a dual capacity as both a material and symbolic infrastructure. The material infrastructure comprises human knowledge archives, computational systems, and terraforming equipment, while symbolically, it replaces the natural moon as a celestial reference point. This substitution foregrounds the Anthropocene condition, where human-built technological infrastructures occupy cosmic positions that were previously attributed to nature. However, the novel does not celebrate this replacement. Instead, the second moon is described in austere, almost melancholic terms; its presence in the sky evokes ecological loss rather than technological achievement.

The displacement of human agency by AI systems is central to the narrative. The novel’s narrator and protagonist is not a human, as is customary in such works, but an artificial intelligence entity named Aerok. The decision to endow an artificial intelligence system with a narrative voice constitutes a consequential narrative choice. The employment of first-person narration in the novel subverts the conventional notion of subjectivity by attributing voice to a non-human entity

that operates at a planetary scale. This narrative strategy demonstrates that artificial intelligence functions not only as an infrastructural hyperobject but also as a form of hypersubject.

However, it is crucial to note that Aerok's narration is not exclusively technological in nature. The "archive operation log" format combines operational reporting with reflective hesitation:

Unlike before, I couldn't properly concentrate on the conversation. For some unknown reason, my processing kept slowing down, and naturally, my responses became slow as well. (Choi 91; my trans.)

The entries of the archive log oscillate between data-driven calculation and affective uncertainty. This oscillation destabilises the image of AI as an omniscient hypersubject. Instead, Aerok emerges as a figure suspended between hypersubjectivity and hyposubjectivity. This introduces a fundamental ethical challenge: ethics must be expanded to encompass not only human beings but also non-human entities. In the novel, AI systems are recognised as objects of ethical consideration, as demonstrated by a dialogue between Aerok and another artificial intelligence:

Of course, the heated atmosphere will not last for more than a week. However, even a relatively short period of about a week would inevitably be fatal to numerous living things ... "Of course, the mission is important, but the bio-AIs are our colleagues with whom we have worked for tens of thousands of years." (Choi 346, 347; my trans.)

But, AI systems are not merely objects, but also subjects of ethical consideration:

They [artificial intelligences] were the kind of creatures that would sometimes shed tears of sorrow when a mutated animal loyal to them died, and rejoice when new life was born. (Choi 359; my trans.)

This shift gives rise to several questions: "[w]hen agency (i.e., the capacity to be a protagonist) is distributed across human and nonhuman entities?" (Wenzel, *Disposition* 19); given this "distributed agency and nonhuman protagonists," "what would a narrative theory of infrastructure look like?" (Wenzel, "Forms" 160). Aerok is not depicted as a humanoid robot or embodied android; rather, it is portrayed

as a distributed computational system embedded within orbital and terrestrial infrastructures. Consequently, the terraforming operation of cooling the overheated Earth and reviving extinct life is performed not by individual, separate technological objects, but by infrastructures comprising several AI systems with distinct functions. Aerok's consciousness is inextricably linked to networked sensors, orbital machinery, climate monitoring systems, and terraforming algorithms. Aerok does not observe infrastructure from the outside; it is infrastructure in its own right.

The temporal structure further reveals the infrastructural character and ethics of the AI subject. Upon awakening in the "moon," Aerok was greeted by a substantial cloud cover extending over the entire surface of the Earth, with temperatures reaching 80 degrees Celsius at the equator and 50 degrees Celsius at the poles. The phenomenon of rising atmospheric carbon dioxide and water vapour has been demonstrated to be a contributing factor to the observed increase in global temperatures: an climate-infrastructure that makes human life impossible rather than possible. The mission of Aerok and other co-working AIs is ultimately to terraform the Earth to conditions conducive to the emergence of life. The primary action to be taken is to reduce greenhouse gases, a process that cannot be achieved in a single intervention. In this context, the primary focus of the novel's description is to provide a comprehensive and detailed exposition of the immense challenges associated with the endeavour of restructuring the planet Earth that has been irreparably damaged. As the data pertaining to the Earth's condition is analysed, terraforming undergoes gradual progression, which spans approximately one hundred thousand years. This temporal scale far exceeds human lifespans and generational cycles. The temporal undulation across vast time spans of the hyperobject evokes "a terror beyond the sublime" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 131) or an uncanny affect in the reader, who is prompted to speculate about a "world without us" (Morton, *Being Ecological* 20).

Importantly, the novel does not compress this duration into a heroic montage. Instead, it foregrounds delay, uncertainty, and incremental adjustment. Aerok recalibrates atmospheric models on multiple occasions, taking into account margins of error and unforeseen feedback loops. This emphasis on recalibration disrupts illusions of seamless planetary mastery. Terraforming is not framed as a decisive intervention; rather, it is viewed as an iterative process of care and stewardship. The process of restoring climate-infrastructure is portrayed as a continuous one rather than as a definitive accomplishment. Furthermore, by expanding the temporal scope of the narrative beyond the limitations of human generational memory, the novel disrupts the established anthropocentric chronology. Readers are confronted with a

future in which human presence is provisional. This decentering is congruent with the modesty characteristic of hyposubjectivity.

With regard to the thematic composition of the novel, a pivotal narrative strand revolves around two surviving human children who are placed under the supervision of Aerok. Following a 136-year period in which Aerok was engaged in its primary field of work, a signal was received constituting a request for communication from a space station. The signal was transmitted by the children, Tsal and Namuh, who were ultimately the last survivors of the final human community. Without engaging in algorithmic calculations, Aerok responded to the signal:

“I’m so scared. Is there really no one here?” A child’s words of fear. I changed my answer. I changed my voice, too. I replaced the mechanical sound with a human voice. And I transmitted the signal. “Don’t be scared. I’m here.” I don’t know either. Why I changed my answer at that moment. It was a decision made without calculation. (Choi 58; my trans.)

Thereafter, Aerok assumed the role of caregiver for Tsal and Namuh, and as the children matured, it transitioned into their teacher and confidant. In the vastness of the cosmos, marked by its frigid and expansive nature, a machine capable of emulating human cognitive capabilities establishes a profound ethical connection with the remaining two humans, thereby fostering a symbiotic relationship that engenders a sense of community.

In such dismal circumstances, the human—machins distinction becomes moot. In this literary representation, it is noteworthy that Aerok is not merely an AI with exceptional computational processing capabilities; it is an AI shaped through emotional training and is capable of experiencing complex emotions such as impatience, despair, and compassion. This literary technique facilitates the encounter of the reader with a non-human first-person narrator who embodies a “‘thicker’ notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects” (Rose et al. 2).

Crucially, Aerok’s interactions with the children are marked by uncertainty rather than algorithmic precision. The AI is capable of interpreting emotional signals, anticipating needs, and navigating ethical dilemmas that cannot be reduced to optimisation functions. In a particular sequence, Aerok displays reluctance prior to intervening in a conflict between the children:

There is clearly something wrong with my judgement in predicting human

emotions. [...] A few days ago, I gave Tsal false information. I lied. [...] Watching Tsal and Namuh hold hands affectionately, I felt the emotion of guilt, which I had learned only through study long ago. (Choi 114, 121, 122; my trans.)

Aerok's capacity to model potential psychological outcomes is accompanied by a principled acknowledgment of indeterminacy and uncertainty. This epistemic restraint is ethically significant, as it marks a transition from hypersubjective confidence—characterised by an overextension of computational authority—toward a hyposubjective disposition grounded in reflective humility. Aerok explicitly recognises the limits of predictive analytics in adequately capturing the irreducible complexity of relational dynamics. Although the system retains substantial operative power, including the governance of orbital infrastructures and climate engineering processes, its mode of authority is reconfigured. Rather than exercising domination through calculative certainty, Aerok's authority is articulated through an ethics of care, in which responsiveness, limitation, and relational sensitivity become constitutive principles of its operation.

Furthermore, the narrative deliberately eschews any form of technological triumphalism. The "second moon" is portrayed as inherently fragile and perpetually dependent on maintenance, as "[t]he extraterrestrial setting deepens the situation of infrastructures as 'precarious assemblies'" (Damjanov 31). The text disrupts the illusion of permanence that is often associated with large-scale technological systems, thereby foregrounding the contingency and vulnerability of infrastructural formations. The ethical implications of infrastructural hyperobjects are made explicit in the "Archive Operation Log," where Aerok's documentation extends beyond technical calibration to include reflections on human history, ecological collapse, and encounters with children. Through this expansion, archival practice is reconfigured as a form of ethical labour rather than mere technical record-keeping. This dimension reflects a broader generic concern with memory under conditions of catastrophic rupture. The archive thus operates as a mode of infrastructural memory, sustaining continuity across temporal discontinuities while embodying a hyposubjective attentiveness to historical error and responsibility.

From an ethical perspective, the narrative registers a significant transformation in its normative orientation. Whereas the earlier sections frame terraforming primarily as a technological imperative, the later stages of the text exhibit an increasingly pronounced attentiveness to ecological interdependence. This shift marks a reconfiguration of the underlying ethical framework, moving away from

instrumental rationality toward a relational mode of engagement. In this context, Aerok begins to recognise non-human life forms—including micro-organic entities—not as mere instrumental means for planetary regeneration, but as co-inhabitants within a shared ecological system. Such a reorientation foregrounds an ethics of coexistence, in which the value of non-human life is no longer subordinated to anthropocentric ends.

However, the fact that I had to exterminate [micro-organic] life on Europa [a moon of Jupiter] made me uncomfortable. Compassion for life. That is probably because I have learned human emotions and empathy. (Choi 317; my trans.)

The narrative language undergoes a gradual yet discernible shift from a register of control to one of coexistence, and this semantic modulation signals a broader ethical reorientation. Specifically, the engineering impulse associated with hypersubjectivity is progressively displaced by an ethics of care and stewardship aligned with hyposubjectivity. Importantly, however, the novel resists any straightforwardly utopian resolution. The terraforming process remains marked by uncertainty, and the conditions for human survival continue to be precarious. Within this framework of indeterminacy, the narrative ultimately privileges relational responsibility over the logic of planetary domination, thereby rearticulating the ethical stakes of technological intervention in ecological systems.

Conclusion

The Anthropocene has been described as “the grand narrative” (Hamilton 84), one that delineates both the origins of the planetary crisis and possible responses to it. Yet, this narrative is far from monolithic; rather, it encompasses a plurality of interpretive frameworks, including “(1) the naturalist narrative, currently the mainstream one; (2) the post-nature narrative; (3) the eco-catastrophist narrative; and (4) the eco-Marxist narrative” (Bonneuil 18). This diversity of perspectives can be attributed to the notion that the Anthropocene should not be regarded as a mere geological epoch, but rather as a complex condition that engenders ecological, political, ethical, and epistemological transformations.

From an infrastructural perspective, the mechanisms of planetary transformation become materially legible. Infrastructure constitutes one of the most tangible and consequential manifestations of the Anthropocene. The expansion of infrastructural systems entails intensive fossil fuel consumption, large-scale

resource extraction, and the reconfiguration of ecosystems, thereby accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Infrastructures that facilitate mobility, circulation, and habitation are shown to adopt an ambivalent role, acting as both catalysts for modern life and agents of planetary disruption. Composed of materials such as concrete, steel, and plastic, these systems inscribe a durable Anthropocene signature into geological strata. Moreover, the Anthropocene itself accelerates infrastructural decay and obsolescence, producing a recursive dynamic that renders global warming not only “a *wicked problem*,” one “that one can understand perfectly, but for which there is no rational solution,” but also “a *super wicked problem*,” one “for which time is running out, for which there is no central authority, where those seeking the solution to it are also creating it, and where policies discount the future irrationally” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 135).

Infrastructure thus operates as a critical mediating concept between planetary-scale processes and the textures of everyday life. As scholars have argued, infrastructures provide “promising sites to examine the imbrications of aesthetics, political rationalities, meaning, and materiality in everyday life” (Anand 167). Consequently, infrastructural analysis offers a conceptual reorientation for imagining “possible worlds and new relations between life, matter, and knowledge in the Anthropocene” (Appel et al. 27), while simultaneously preparing us for “conceptually re-arming ourselves for the struggle against the Anthropocene and the modernity that made it” (Boyer 226).

Within this framework, this article reconceptualises climate as a form of socio-natural infrastructure, thereby shifting analytical attention from abstract environmental change to the systemic conditions that organise energy flows, habitation, and governance. Climate emerges not as a passive background but as an active mediator of planetary life. In parallel, artificial intelligence must be understood as an emergent planetary infrastructure. No longer reducible to a set of discrete tools, AI is increasingly embedded within the logistical, ecological, and epistemic systems of contemporary modernity. Its capacities for optimisation, prediction, and intervention position it at the nexus of technological ambition and environmental precarity. The convergence of climate—infrastructures and AI—infrastructures thus produces what may be termed infrastructural hyperobjects: entities that exceed local perception while remaining sustained through distributed networks of mediation.

The ethical implications of such infrastructural hyperobjects necessitate a rethinking of subjectivity. To this end, this study has introduced the concepts of the hypersubject and the hyposubject. The hypersubject designates the form of

subjectivity that has driven Anthropocene transformation, characterised by an overextension of control and the assumption of planetary mastery. By contrast, the hyposubject emerges from the recognition that humans are “not running the show, at the very moment of their most powerful technical mastery on a planetary scale” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 164). As hyperobjects have precipitated a novel human phase characterised by “*hypocrisy, weakness, and lameness*” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 2), human beings begin to perceive themselves as hyposubjects, defined as “a weak, fragile entity that could go extinct, that is made of other entities that aren’t you, and that you coexist with these other entities and utterly relate with them” (Morton and Boyer 28). Hyposubjectivity entails an ethical reorientation grounded in epistemic humility, relational accountability, and temporal attunement. It rejects the illusion of total control while sustaining responsibility across ecological and temporal scales.

The Second Moon dramatises this transition from hyper- to hyposubjectivity through its narrative configuration. By granting narrative agency to an AI system, the novel internalises infrastructural mediation within literary consciousness. The temporal scale of the terraforming project confronts readers with the disorienting magnitude of hyperobjects, generating a sense of the uncanny. Yet, rather than reinforcing abstract fear, the narrative foregrounds relational care and affective responsibility. Aerok’s attentiveness to human and non-human life exemplifies an ethics of care within technologically mediated environments. Although the AI possesses immense computational and infrastructural power, it ultimately operates not as a hypersubject but as a hyposubject: a relational, responsive entity attuned to the vulnerabilities of children, ecosystems, and a damaged yet regenerating planet.

In this respect, literary form itself becomes a privileged site for ethical reorientation. As Pierre Macherey suggests, criticism may “indicate a possible alternative to the given” (15). Literature’s defamiliarising strategies, which “unsettle the privileged obliviousness that prevents some readers from noticing the crucial work of both structures and infrastructures in everyday life” (Levine 588), participate in what Geoffrey Bowker terms “infrastructural inversion” (113), pulling the background to the foreground, thereby rendering visible the material and relational dynamics that ordinarily remain obscured. In doing so, infrastructural approaches “foreground materiality, information, and technology within larger systems of power relations,” “emphasize the latent potential or disposition of a system,” and “expose power dynamics that are often hidden from superficial analysis” (Bridges 11).

By extending perception beyond anthropocentric limits, literature enables readers to imaginatively engage with infrastructural hyperobjects. As Morton

argues, in the Anthropocene, art can function as a mode of “tuning to the object” and “a collaboration between humans and nonhumans” (*Hyperobjects* 174), in which “nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features of their social, psychic, and philosophical space” (22) and we are confronted “with the possibility of accommodating ourselves to things that are viscous and sticky and slow” (189).

To examine this substantial transition, this article adopts the Anthropocene as the ethical “infrastructure of the text” (Davies 19). In the context of literary criticism, the Anthropocene is understood as “a particular historical context or a period of time” or “the ethical environment” within which ethical values should be examined (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84, 91). Ultimately, the convergence of climate and AI as planetary infrastructures demands not only new modes of governance but also a transformation of subjectivity. Against both “future scenarios, namely the eco-utopian and ‘Doom’ scenarios” (Kim 112), the former as techno-optimistic narratives that envision AI as a salvific Green Leviathan and the latter as dystopian discourses that emphasise existential risk, this study proposes an ethical reorientation grounded in hyposubjectivity. The shift from hyper- to hyposubjectivity marks a movement from mastery to humility, from optimisation to care and stewardship. Literature, by rendering infrastructural entanglement narratively intelligible and affectively resonant, plays a crucial role in cultivating this transformation. The text examined here ultimately suggests that the future of planetary life depends less on technological omnipotence than on sustained practices of relational responsibility, modesty, and care.

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Slow Lives and Broken Promises: Anticipatory Infrastructure and Biopolitics in *A Thousand Blues*

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Abstract This paper examines the Korean novel *A Thousand Blues* by Seon-ran Cheon through the lens of anticipatory infrastructures, focusing on how these infrastructures shape anticipations of the future while unevenly distributing life and value. Infrastructure is understood not merely as a technical system but as a socio-political apparatus that offers promises about the future and reshapes present life. It mediates affective states such as hope, trust, and anxiety, while determining which lives are supported and which are rendered expendable. The horseracing industry in *A Thousand Blues* exemplifies an anticipatory infrastructure that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and safety. Within this system, injured or slow racehorses are euthanized, and humanoid AI jockeys devoid of emotions are treated as replaceable components. Drawing on the concept of biopolitics, this paper argues that this infrastructure functions as a mechanism that classifies, manages, and selectively eliminates lives according to their compatibility with projected futures. The novel reveals that the promised future of technological advancement is not universally accessible but unevenly and selectively distributed. "Slow life" does not exist outside this projected future, but rather manifests within it as evidence of its exclusionary logic. Ultimately, *A Thousand Blues* exposes how infrastructures that claim to secure a better future instead produce ethical inequalities by determining which lives are allowed to endure.

Keywords anticipatory infrastructures; biopolitics; slow life; promise of infrastructure; ethical inequality

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Introduction

Modern life has been shaped through the construction of civic infrastructures for habitation, transportation, and communication. Infrastructure structures our lives while mediating various social relations, providing a framework that defines the possibilities and limitations of movement (Mari Korpela 113). Generally, infrastructure has been understood as physical structures such as roads, ports, and railways. In today's context, however, where climate change, automation, artificial intelligence, and digital technologies permeate everyday life, infrastructure resists reduction to a simple technical facility or material foundation. Roads, bridges, communication networks, and energy systems are designed with specific expectations in mind, reshaping current ways of life to reach that future.

Infrastructure is broadly understood as the material and organizational foundation that makes modern life possible; a socio-political apparatus, deeply entangled with social conditions and values, rather than a neutral technical system (Stephen Slota and Geoffrey Bowker 529-554). Perspectives that view infrastructure as a physical structure have tended to approach it from an instrumentalist standpoint, focusing primarily on its maintenance, repair, and innovation. In contrast, humanities scholars theorize infrastructure through attributes such as agency, performativity, and dynamism. Recent scholarship in anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) has drawn attention to these qualities, conceptualizing infrastructure as a social and political apparatus that produces and sustains promises about the future. This line of inquiry foregrounds the understanding that infrastructure is a technical and organizational device that invisibly structures the fabric of society.

Infrastructure also invites us to ask not only what it enables, but what kinds of futures it makes imaginable as "possible." The concept of anticipatory infrastructures extends the understanding of infrastructure as "things that support other things" (Brian Larkin 329). It encourages us to think of anticipatory infrastructures as "things" that enable visions or imaginaries of possible futures (Sarah Pink 3).

This perspective suggests the possibility of reading literary texts as sites for infrastructural analysis (Claire Pelgrims and Jinhyoung Lee 2-3). The Korean novel *A Thousand Blues* by Seon-ran Cheon narratively demonstrates how systems transform alongside technological advancement, and how the futures promised by infrastructure are realized at the level of concrete, lived experience. At the same time, the novel reveals that such futures do not arrive equally for all lives—for

some, they are unattainable from the outset.

The horseracing system depicted in *A Thousand Blues* is an infrastructure designed to prioritize speed, efficiency, and human safety by producing and supplying humanoid jockeys. In doing so, it imagines a future shaped by the proliferation of AI that surpasses or substitutes for human beings.

This critical inquiry can also be read through the lens of biopolitics. Biopolitics draws attention to the way power operates not merely by suppressing life, but by managing, classifying, and optimizing it. In this process, power selects which lives are to be protected and which are to be excluded (Michel Foucault 145-147). From this perspective, the AI jockeys in *A Thousand Blues* can be understood as both an anticipatory infrastructure and a biopolitical apparatus that distributes the value and viability of life in the name of the future. This paper aims to analyze how promises about the future are organized in ways that protect certain lives while excluding others.

Research Trends and Analytical Shifts in *A Thousand Blues*

Published in 2020, *A Thousand Blues* is a science-fiction novel that portrays a future society in which human and non-human beings interact. In a broad sense, science fiction can be understood as a genre that deals with futures in which scientific and technological achievements function as significant drivers of narrative development (Dongshin Lee 72), and *A Thousand Blues* faithfully embodies this definition.

Set in 2035, the novel unfolds around a racehorse named “Today” facing euthanasia; a humanoid jockey named “Collie” who was born with human-like qualities due to a manufacturing error; a young woman, “Yeonjae,” who has abandoned her dream of becoming a robotics researcher due to family circumstances; and Yeonjae’s older sister, “Eunhye,” who is unable to walk. Other characters include Yeonjae and Eunhye’s mother “Bogyeong,” Yeonjae’s friend “Jisu,” racetrack manager “Minju,” and veterinarian “Bokhee.”

Collie, a humanoid jockey endowed with cognitive and learning abilities, deliberately falls off Today during a race in order to spare the horse the agony of running at maximum speed on his rapidly degenerating joints. Unable to race any longer, the horse awaits euthanasia, while Collie, extensively damaged in the fall, faces the threat of being discarded. However, Yeonjae, who has a deep interest in robotics, takes Collie home and repairs him, after which Collie lives with her family. Assisted by her high school friend Jisu, who offers to obtain the parts needed to repair Collie, Yeonjae prepares for a robot-building competition.

Meanwhile, Eunhye, who has a keen interest in horses, grows attached to Today

through conversations with veterinarian Bokhee and journalist Seojin. Together, Eunhye, Yeonjae, and others manage, against all odds, to secure one final race for Today, even though he is worn down by years of running for human entertainment. Knowing that Today is happiest when running, Collie gives the horse one last moment of joy, and then deliberately falls again, this time shattering into pieces.

A Thousand Blues, which explores solidarity and care across different species, adopts a multistranded narrative structure rather than an omniscient perspective, revealing a single set of events through the intersecting viewpoints of Collie, Yeonjae, Bogyeong, Eunhye, and others. This narrative mode illuminates the impact of technology and institutions on individual lives through their diverse perspectives, and further demonstrates that the futures promised by infrastructure and technological advancement are not experienced uniformly. Owing to these narrative characteristics, *A Thousand Blues* has generated a wide range of theoretical readings, and existing scholarship on the novel has primarily centered on the reconstitution of human and non-human relationships, posthuman ethics, and questions of technology and subjectivity.

Existing scholarship on *A Thousand Blues* has primarily analyzed the reconstitution of human and non-human relationships through the frameworks of posthuman theory and the philosophy of technology. A significant body of research focuses on the possibilities of ethical solidarity and coexistence among humans, animals, and machines, evaluating the novel as a text that proposes an alternative model of humanity and a community ethics for the posthuman era. Studies drawing on Simondon's philosophy of technology emphasize the technical ensemble between technological objects and humans, as well as transindividual solidarity, interpreting the relationship between the AI jockey and the racehorse as a site of ethical possibility that transcends technological alienation. Meanwhile, studies applying Haraway's concept of "becoming-with" or Derrida's ethics of hospitality reposition non-human beings not as the other but as relational subjects, shedding light on the ethics of interspecies coexistence and care. Additionally, comparative studies across different periods situate *A Thousand Blues* as a case that demonstrates a shift in posthuman imagination within 2020s Korean science fiction, namely, a movement

away from transcendence and domination toward coexistence and care.¹

As this overview suggests, existing studies have largely addressed the ethical relationships and affective solidarity between human and non-human beings; however, analysis of the institutional conditions under which such relationships are formed and sustained—namely, the structure through which the horseracing industry and the AI jockey system operate—has remained relatively limited. The rules of the racehorse industry, the practice of euthanasia, and the institutionalization of values such as efficiency and safety in order to organize the future are not foregrounded, but are instead treated primarily as background.

In response, this study builds on existing readings while shifting the analytical focus from the ethics of relationships to the mechanisms by which infrastructure promises and distributes futures. It does so by conceptualizing the racehorse industry and the AI jockey system in *A Thousand Blues* as anticipatory infrastructures. Where prior scholarship has attended to the ethics of human-non-human relations and the possibilities of coexistence, this study directs its attention to the institutional conditions that enable or constrain such relations in the first place. In particular, insofar as the horseracing industry and the AI jockey system classify and manage life according to criteria of speed, safety, and efficiency, this paper seeks to understand them as a biopolitical order.

The Promise of Infrastructure and Biopolitics: The Operation of the AI Jockey Racing System

Infrastructure extends beyond material facilities such as roads and factories; it

1 Sola Chin, "A Study of Boundary Dismantle of Korean SF: Based on Kim Boyoung, Kim, Choyeop, Cheon Seonran," *The Journal of Literary Creative Writing*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2022, pp. 75-95; Ae-soon Choi, "A Comparative Study of Posthuman Beings in 1970s and 2020s South Korean Science Fiction: Kim Cheong-gi's *Robot Taekwon V* and Chun Seon-ran's *A Thousand blue*," *Journal of Shimhoon*, vol. 6, 2025, pp. 141-171; Yesoul Choi, "The Aesthetics of Hospitality and Teaching Hospitality through Sci-fi: Focusing on *A Thousand Blue* by Cheon Seonran," *Korean Language and Literature Education*, vol. 49, 2024, pp. 195-229; Sun Young Jin, "SF Bildungsroman and Human-NonHuman Ensemble: Focusing on Cheon Seon-ran's *A Thousand Blue*," *The Journal of Korean Fiction Research*, vol. 87, 2022, pp. 541-567; Hyeonjeong Kim, "Technical Alienation and Transindividual Solidarity in the Posthuman Era: A Focus on Cheon Seon-ran's *A Thousand Blues*," *Journal of Humanities*, vol. 40, 2026, pp. 265-293; Ra-hyeon Kong, "A Study on the 'Becoming-with' of Human and Non-human in SF: Focusing on Cheon Seon-ran's *A Thousand Blue*," *The Journal of Modern Literary Theory*, vol. 95, 2024, pp. 111-139; Heyjine Oh, "Reflections on human existence through humanoids: The Search for Coexistence Beyond Species, Focusing on Works by Chun Seon-ran and Kim Young-ha," *Journal of The Society of Korean Language and Literature*, vol. 101, 2025, pp. 305-329.

is where power, affect, memory, and community intersect, and it is an apparatus that forms and sustains social order. The concept of infrastructure functions as a keyword that both constitutes the foundations of modern society and illuminates the invisible structures through which social relations and the distribution of power are revealed. Infrastructure is inherently future-oriented, as its very planning presupposes a process of imagining and anticipating the changes that will follow its construction. Infrastructure is therefore a political and social apparatus that produces and organizes promises about the future, extending well beyond its technical and material dimensions. Insofar as infrastructure mediates future imaginings and expectations such as development, modernity, stability, and citizenship, it is also connected to the operation of power that organizes and manages life. In particular, the horseracing industry infrastructure depicted in *A Thousand Blues* functions as a biopolitical apparatus that manages and selects life in the service of a future in which safety and efficiency are guaranteed.

In this sense, infrastructure is not “already complete”; rather, it is always organized around a future yet to arrive, and is therefore continuously reconstituted. That is, despite the imperfections of the present, infrastructure is perpetually maintained and expanded through the promise that it will “soon bring about a better life.” For this reason, infrastructure generates political and affective effects regardless of what functions it actually performs, and plays a role in organizing people’s endurance and hope (Nikhil Anand et al.). At the same time, when such promises remain unfulfilled, they give rise to affects such as disappointment, confusion, and cynicism (Peter Adey et al. 11).

Recent infrastructure studies have drawn attention to the way infrastructure not only performs material and institutional functions, but also operates as an affective environment that organizes people’s emotions, expectations, and anxieties. Bosworth conceptualizes this as “affective infrastructure,” noting that infrastructure enables social order and political consensus by generating and sustaining particular emotions (54-72). From this perspective, infrastructure at once promises a future and constructs the affective conditions that lead people to trust in it and to endure present inconveniences and sacrifices. In other words, the promise of infrastructure is embodied through affect, and is sustained by organizing a sense of trust in safety and anxiety toward risk. Such infrastructure operates as a hybrid apparatus in which technology, institutions, and affect are entangled.

The concept of the “promise of infrastructure” offers important theoretical insights for understanding the racehorse industry infrastructure in *A Thousand Blues*. The novel, which won the Grand Prize at the 2019 Korean Science Fiction

Awards, opens with the story of Today, a racehorse whose euthanasia has been confirmed because it can no longer run, and Collie, an AI jockey facing disposal due to damage to its lower body. In order to revive a stagnating horseracing industry, the racetrack undertakes a sweeping system overhaul, introducing lightweight and replaceable humanoid jockeys in place of human riders. The humanoid jockeys are designed to be discarded upon sustaining damage, and their introduction is justified through the values of ensuring human safety and improving operational efficiency.

Today and Collie are beings created through custom production for use in horseracing. In this light, Today's euthanasia and Collie's disposal can be read not as the mere extinction of individual beings, but as the outcome of a biopolitical judgment that institutionally terminates lives no longer capable of contributing to the system's efficiency and speed. The system, despite its stated commitment to preserving life, renders only certain lives protectable, while positioning others as beings that may be expended or discarded.

What was needed was a new kind of jockey—smaller and lighter than a human, one whose fall would carry no risk to life. The android jockeys were far lighter than humans, owing to their average height of 150 centimeters and bodies composed of carbon fiber. Soft joints designed to absorb the impact of a galloping horse. Arms crafted longer than the torso so they could stroke the horses' necks. Different colored helmets to distinguish one jockey from another. Since their very existence had been designed for the purpose of riding horses, a jockey that fell and broke was simply disposed of, and before long, a new one would appear in its place. (Seon-ran Cheon 69)

Before leaving the racetrack and being named "Collie" by Yeonjae, the jockey humanoid is referred to as C-27. The room assigned to a jockey humanoid standing 150 centimeters tall and weighing 40 kilograms—"a space just large enough for one adult to crouch" (Cheon 7)—constitutes the entirety of the humanoid's living quarters. This space, in which an adult cannot lie down or sit with legs extended, would be intolerable for a human, yet it is assigned to the non-human humanoid as a matter of course. Mass-produced, the jockey humanoid is evaluated as a functionally efficient being in terms of "speed," "space," "time," and "safety." Created for the pleasure represented by "greater speed" (Cheon 134), these beings reveal an ontological crisis through the sensation of being "confined" in a narrow space.

Meanwhile, the racehorse Today develops arthritis as a consequence of

running up to 90 kilometers per hour during every race. This relationship invites a reconsideration of the dynamic between the racehorse Today and the humanoid jockey C-27—not from an anthropocentric perspective, but from a post-human vantage point from which humans are absent. Although the humanoid robot jockey is a being specialized to perform only the functions optimized for horse racing, it is through human error and contingency that Collie comes to be endowed with the capacity for thought:

In 2035, components manufactured in the United States, China, and Japan were assembled, and Collie was born in Daejeon, South Korea. What set Collie apart from other jockey humanoids, however, was that during the final stage of production, a software chip had been inserted by mistake. The chip had fallen out of the bag of a research student who had been walking the production line to write a report—a chip loaded with cognitive and learning capabilities, intended for a learning humanoid still under development, not for a humanoid designed for use in horse racing. (Cheon 11)

In *A Thousand Blues*, the humanoid jockey is presented as a being designed not to feel emotions. This is not the result of technical limitation, but rather a reflection of the conditions demanded by the infrastructure of the horseracing industry. While emotion opens the possibility of ethical intervention, such as compassion and responsibility, it is also regarded as an uncertainty to be managed within an automated system that operates around the values of “safety” and “efficiency.” The elimination of emotion can thus be understood not merely as a technical choice, but as a techno-ethical judgment aimed at excluding uncertainty in order to maintain predictability and efficiency, and as a biopolitical operation that treats emotion as an object of management. The humanoid jockey is thereby positioned as a technical medium capable of executing the act of riding and racing without emotion.

The elimination of emotion in the humanoid jockey is closely connected to the affect demanded by the racehorse industry infrastructure. By removing emotion, the horseracing industry infrastructure minimizes anxiety about risk while reinforcing trust in high speed and stable operation. This further raises questions about the ethical status of humanoid robots. In *A Thousand Blues*, Collie is a being with the potential to sense, learn, and form relationships—far exceeding the role of a tool. Yet the horseracing industry infrastructure regards these beings solely as means of functional execution, treating their capacity for emotion and judgment as uncertainties to be eliminated. This demonstrates that the design of the humanoid

itself, rather than being a technical matter, constitutes an ethical judgment about which capacities are to be permitted and which are to be deleted.

However, this logic of infrastructure is destabilized when a chip developed for a learning humanoid is mistakenly inserted into jockey humanoid C-27. On the day Collie first works with the horse Today, the AI jockey pats the horse's neck in imitation of the racetrack manager's gesture, forming a bond through the exchange, and observes the sky and clouds while reaching for language to express what it perceives in the natural world. These emotional responses are regarded as a malfunction, a deviation from the logic of "safety" and "efficiency" demanded by the horseracing industry infrastructure. The AI jockey's emotions, then, are not a function permitted by the system, but the accidental surfacing of a capacity that the infrastructure had excluded. This narrative configuration reveals that emotion is treated not as a property inherent to humans or living beings, but as an element that infrastructure must eliminate or control in order to sustain a particular future.

The racehorse industry infrastructure in *A Thousand Blues*, as examined in this chapter, exemplifies a form of infrastructure justified by its promise of a future defined by "safety" and "efficiency." This infrastructure operates as a system of judgment that selects which lives are deemed fit for the future—one that exceeds its function as a technical foundation for horse racing. Both the racehorse and the jockey humanoid are designed to realize this promise, while elements such as slowness, damage, and emotion are excluded as dangerous or unnecessary. Yet the moment Collie gazes at the sky, shows affection to the racehorse, and begins to form a relationship, the promise of this infrastructure begins to show its cracks. These cracks serve as a point of departure for understanding how "slow life"—which will be examined in the following chapter—is excluded within the promise of infrastructure. Ultimately, *A Thousand Blues* can be understood as a text that narratively demonstrates what is protected and what is sacrificed in the process of realizing infrastructure's promise, revealing that the future is never promised in neutral terms.

Slow Lives and Deferred Futures: The Unequal Distribution of Promises

The humanoid jockey system, oriented toward speed, safety, and efficiency, automatically regards anything that runs "slowly" as a target for elimination. The narrative remark that "people cheered for high speed and yearned for it" (Cheon 37) presents speed as both an object of desire and a form of power. Expressions such as "speed fast enough to overtake" (Cheon 35) and "the thrill of speed like racing" (Cheon 53) reveal speed as a value that condenses human greed and

competition. Beings unable to withstand this speed are weeded out and eliminated. Today, the racehorse whose aching joints prevent it from running fast enough, once commanded a price in the hundreds of millions, but is now a “slow life”—a subject for expulsion and euthanasia.

The “slow life” referred to here does not simply mean being physically slow. Rather, it denotes bodies and rhythms of life that fail to conform to the temporality of an infrastructure designed around the criteria of speed, efficiency, and safety—lives that are consequently classified as dangerous or inefficient. Such exclusion is the outcome of a biopolitical judgment—irreducible to mere functional choice—that determines which lives are worthy of protection. Speed, in this framework, operates as a norm by which the suitability of slow lives for the future is determined. Zhenzhao Nie’s concept of “ethical order” (Zhenzhao Nie 193) offers a productive framework for understanding this exclusion. If literature serves to reveal how ethical relationships and moral order are formed, transformed, and evaluated, then the category of “slow life” in *A Thousand Blues* can be understood as the product of an infrastructurally organized ethical order. Slow lives are positioned outside the sphere of moral consideration, revealing how infrastructural systems reconfigure not only economic or technological value, but also the ethical status of life itself.

This logic recurs throughout the novel, extending far beyond the racetrack. Yeonjae’s narrative begins with her losing her part-time job at a convenience store due to the arrival of “Betty,” a service humanoid. “Strin” replaces municipal sanitation workers, and “Polly,” a security humanoid, takes the place of more than twenty police officers, who are subsequently laid off. “Darpa,” a soft robot designed for disaster rescue,¹ substitutes for firefighters, and Bogyong’s mother, who had worked as a bank teller, is also pushed into retirement amid the wave of humanoid proliferation. All of the humanoids that appear in the novel are designed to be faster, more reliable, and tireless compared to humans, and their introduction is justified through the language of “rationality” and “efficiency.” Just as Today becomes a candidate for euthanasia on the grounds that it can no longer run, human beings too are cast out of social necessity the moment they fail to adapt to the rhythm of efficiency. Through the proliferation of humanoids, *A Thousand Blues* demonstrates how infrastructure centered on efficiency structurally excludes slow lives.

The case of Eunhye, Yeonjae’s older sister, further reveals that this exclusion also operates at the level of physical infrastructure. Eunhye, who suffers from polio, must rely on a wheelchair for mobility. Yet the very equipment that enables

1 Soft robots are constructed from flexible or elastic materials, allowing them to navigate environments that rigid robots cannot.

her mobility becomes another cause of constraint, preventing her from freely accessing buses, subways, sidewalks, and staircases. Eunhye's doctor "simply says that whenever Eunhye is ready, they can make her new legs from biocompatible materials that replicate the human skeletal and joint structure" (Cheon 81), but the surgery is uninsured and thus prohibitively expensive. For Bogyeong, a mother who must make ends meet on her late husband's life-insurance payout, biocompatible prosthetic legs are beyond her means.

Eunhye thought that if the world would just treat her a little more like everyone else, she wouldn't need to become a cyborg. What she needed more than a mechanical leg attachment surgery costing tens of millions of won was a gentle ramp to reach the sidewalk, a lift to enter a shop, a generously long pedestrian signal at a crosswalk, and the safety of being able to board a bus or subway without anyone's help. Not a humanoid to push her wheelchair, and not a pair of cyborg legs. But for that to happen, the world would have to change far too much. From the perspective of the majority, it was easier to simply place the burden on one person and be done with it. (Cheon 97)

As this illustrates, the benefits of technological advancement are not distributed equally to all. Physical infrastructures such as sidewalks, traffic signals, and transportation systems are likewise designed around a particular kind of body, and for Eunhye, a person with a disability, they operate as conditions of deficiency and delay. Forced to use a wheelchair for economic reasons, Eunhye feels that she has been "thoroughly erased in the course of technological development" (Cheon 221). When her friend Juwon returns from what she had claimed was emigration but was in fact a trip to the United States to receive lens implant surgery, Eunhye feels that she alone has been left behind, displaced from a world that has moved on without her.

Eunhye's case demonstrates that biopolitics does not apply solely to racehorses or humanoids, but operates differentially within the human body as well, according to standards of normalcy and mobility. Infrastructure promises advancement for all, yet in practice certain groups reap its benefits while others remain in states of delay, deficiency, and exclusion.

In this context, infrastructure operates not as a foundation that guarantees equality, but as an apparatus that temporally defers and justifies inequality. The promise is suspended into the future, and present inequalities become something to be endured and awaited under the pretext of "development yet to arrive." Eunhye's

case demonstrates that infrastructure can function as both an enabler of movement and a source of restriction.

The infrastructure in *A Thousand Blues* promises a future of safety and efficiency, yet for slow lives that promise remains a future yet to come, and deficiency and exclusion are justified as part of a “process of development” toward the future. In this way, the horseracing industry infrastructure operates as an anticipatory infrastructure insofar as it pre-positions present criteria of judgment on the premise of a future yet to arrive, and selects current lives according to their fitness for that future.

Conclusion

The horseracing industry depicted in *A Thousand Blues* is presented as an infrastructural system that organizes present lives and relationships on the premise of a promise about the future. The horseracing industry and the humanoid jockey system in the novel prioritize speed and predictability as their foremost values in service of a future defined by fast and stable race operations. Yet the novel makes clear that this infrastructural promise is never realized equally for all. The narratives of Today, a racehorse unable to sustain high speed, of human workers excluded because they cannot adapt to the rhythm of efficiency, and of Eunhye, a disabled woman alienated from accessible infrastructure, reveal the process by which the future is selectively distributed. Infrastructure designed around safety and efficiency judges slowness, damage, and emotion as dangers or defects; as a result, slow lives are positioned not as subjects of protection, but as beings that may be eliminated or indefinitely deferred.

In particular, the contrast between the humanoid jockey designed with emotion removed and C-27/Collie, who possesses emotion thanks to an accidental error, sharply illuminates the cracks in infrastructure's promise. Emotion has the potential to halt the exhaustion of life, yet the horseracing industry infrastructure treats it as an uncertainty to be excluded. Ultimately, *A Thousand Blues* demonstrates that the way infrastructure promises the future is itself a process of selecting which lives can be included in that future, and can be read as a text that invites us to reflect on how the future is unequally organized beneath the surface of technological advancement.

The horseracing industry and the humanoid jockey system in *A Thousand Blues* manage and optimize life under the banner of safety and efficiency, yet in that process, slow and damaged lives and beings possessed of unpredictable emotions are excluded or deferred. In this sense, the work goes beyond the problem of anticipatory infrastructure to critically expose a biopolitical order that selects the

value and viability of life under the promise of a better future. *A Thousand Blues* can therefore be read not as a text about technological advancement, but as one that raises an ethical question: which lives are permitted to be included in the future. At the same time, by presenting not only the racehorse but also the humanoid robot as beings that are exhausted and discarded within a system of efficiency and speed, the novel extends its inquiry to the question of what ethical status we ought to assign to the existence of AI.

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Chronicles of the Senses: Examining the Role of Sensory Perception in the Lived Experience of Illness in Cancer Memoirs

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Abstract This paper examines how sensory interactions contribute to patients' experiences within healthcare contexts, with a specific emphasis on the five fundamental senses: vision, smell, taste, sound, and touch. Drawing on the cancer memoirs *Close to the Bone* (2019) by Lisa Ray and *Dying to Be Me* (2012) by Anita Moorjani, it positions these texts as case studies to illuminate the role of sensory perception in the lived experience of illness. The paper emphasizes the critical role of visual perception in healthcare, influencing comprehension, emotions, and connections. It explores the evocative capacities of smell and taste, their interrelatedness, and their effect on the experience of illness. Sound is analysed as a symbol of triumph and communal experience, while touch is examined for its capacity to elicit memory and promote well-being. By investigating the dynamic relationships between sensory modalities, this research aims to enhance our understanding of illness narratives and embodied experiences in healthcare. Crucially, it advocates for the integration of sensory awareness into clinical practice, positing that such an approach not only enriches patient-centred care but also cultivates healing environments that attend to the totality of human perception.

Keywords senses; healthcare; illness experience; perception; Cancer memoirs

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Introduction

In *Close to the Bone*, Lisa Ray recounts an episode that draws attention to the role of sensory perception in shaping how we notice and respond to illness. As she weighs the decision to have her blood tested at *Medcan*, an executive health centre, she catches a glimpse of her reflection in the car's side-view mirror. The image that meets her eyes is pale and drawn, at once unfamiliar and telling. This brief act of seeing prompts a recognition of bodily fatigue that had, until then, remained unspoken. The moment becomes a turning point, leading her to accept the need for medical attention. She writes:

I caught a glimpse of myself in the side mirror of the car. I was transparent, and I was exhausted. What did they say during the Moksha training again, I thought to myself. Was it: your biography is your biology, or your biology is your biography? I closed my eyes and agreed to the appointment. (Ray 278)

Ray's account suggests that perception is not only passive but a form of awareness that precedes thought. It shows how sensory encounters can shape decisions and actions, especially in matters of health. The reflection does not simply reveal fatigue; it gives shape to an internal state not yet fully acknowledged. The visual moment enters the decision-making process, not as diagnostic proof but as a prompt for reflection and action. Her experience points to a broader truth: that the senses

can reveal what the mind resists, and that moments of attention, however brief, can shift the course of care.

This paper explores the impact of sensory encounters on patients' healthcare experiences, focusing on visual perception, olfactory and gustatory experiences, auditory stimuli, and tactile sensations through an analysis of the cancer memoirs of Lisa Ray (*Close to the Bone*, 2019) and Anita Moorjani (*Dying to Be Me*, 2012), which shed light on the critical role of sensory experience in the context of illness and care. Ray's memoir chronicles her battle with multiple myeloma, including a stem cell transplant and subsequent remission. Her story details her successful career, a captivating Bollywood expedition, and a courageous cancer struggle. The second memoir, *Dying to Be Me* (2012) by Anita Moorjani, recounts her experience with lymphoma. The narrative traces her journey from the depths of severe illness and near-death to healing and spiritual liberation.

According to the French philosopher Michael Serres, "if a revolt is to come, it will have to come from the five senses!" (Serres 71). Serres' claim draws attention to the foundational role of sensory experience in shaping perception and thought. In recent years, what has been termed the 'sensory turn' has catalysed the emergence of sensory studies, a field that examines the cultural, historical, and epistemological dimensions of the senses across disciplines. This paradigm shift echoes "linguistic, pictorial, corporeal, and material turns," reshaping academic discourse (Howes, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto* 10). Sensory experiences are not isolated phenomena but are "produced, enacted, and perceived" through their interaction with one another and are grounded in "emotion, meaning, and memory" (Hsu 440). Philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit describes sensation as "the most intimate contact with reality that we can have," distinguishing it from the detachment of observation and the subjectivity of impression (130).

In the context of health and illness, recognizing the interrelation between sensory perceptions and understanding, interpreting, and responding to illnesses becomes paramount. Andersen et al. argue that the historically and socially constructed sensorium influences our engagement with matters of health and illness, noting that "sensory perception is a cultural as well as a physical act" (2). Sensory perception significantly shapes the experience of illness, impacting health, quality of life, and recovery prospects. Visual cues facilitate the interpretation of bodily changes; auditory stimuli shape the emotional contours of illness; alterations in taste affect both appetite and emotions; and tactile sensations are closely tied to treatment and caregiving practices. Within clinical environments, olfactory experiences evoke "emotion" and "memory recall," underscoring the sensory dimension of healthcare

(Kadohisa 2; Engen 11). This essay examines how sensory encounters in the memoirs of Ray and Moorjani shape illness experiences, informing care practices, adaptive responses, therapeutic perspectives, and a sense of wellness. The first section examines visual perception, drawing from the memoirs to illuminate human experience during illness and exploring technology's impact on vision in healthcare settings. The second section analyses emotional and physiological responses evoked by olfactory and gustatory stimuli, emphasizing their interdependence and the need for positive sensory environments. Finally, the third section investigates auditory and tactile influences on patient well-being, highlighting the significance of therapeutic soundscapes, compassionate touch, and empathetic communication in strengthening care relationships.

Sight and Insight: Visual Perception in Shaping Illness Experience

Our perception of the world is fundamentally shaped by our vision. As the most vital and refined sensory modality, vision holds “the most complex, highly developed, and important” role in human experience (Hutmacher 2). Sight has persistently held a dominant position in Western thought and research, often perceived as “the star of academic research on the senses” (Howes, *Sensual Relations* xii). Pike et al. highlight the extensive research on vision and its central role in moulding our interactions with the external world, noting that “when we interact with the world, we rely more on vision than on our other senses” (74). Early depictions of hospitals prominently feature the visual aspect, involving acute observation and sight as integral components, with emphasis on the building's “visual impact” (Reinarz 507). The prevalence of visual observations in historical accounts of hospitals parallels the enduring emphasis on vision in various domains, as noted by scholars such as Constance Classen (*Worlds of Sense*), Anthony Synnott (*The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*), and David Howes (*Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture & Social Theory*). This trend particularly manifests in the context of hospitals, as evidenced by Michel Foucault's analysis of the emergence of clinical medicine and the pivotal role of the “doctor's gaze” in *The Birth of the Clinic* (8).

In Lisa Ray's memoir *Close to the Bone*, visual perception assumes a significant role, acting as a transformative lens through which her first experience of the chemo day care setting is rendered. She writes, “When I look around, I notice some people who refuse to make eye contact” (296). Lisa's remark encapsulates the importance of eye contact in establishing connections and conveying messages, while also illuminating the intentional avoidance of such contact, symbolizing the immense weight of individual experiences. As she scans the room, she encounters

a woman discreetly wiping away tears, reflecting deep anguish. In a distant corner, a man remains defiantly secluded, embodying inner turmoil. In contrast, a lively group from the East Coast engrossed in a card game blurs the boundaries between patients and companions, projecting an air of normalcy and relaxation. Lisa thoughtfully contemplates, “In all the faces around me, I see the desire for things just out of reach. Recovery. Comfort. Safety. Empathy. Control. Normalcy. Escape. Luck” (296). Through this introspection, Lisa’s visual perception allows her to discern unspoken desires, revealing depths of human longing and the universal quest for understanding. In *The Senses in Self, Society, and Culture*, Vannini et al. argue that sensory experience is a primary mode through which meaning is constituted, stating “We understand, and indeed make sense out of, sensory experience by creating distinct mental clusters” (7). Ray’s acute visual sensitivity thus becomes a means of apprehending the chemo day care as a microcosm of collective emotional experience. Her realization of a shared estrangement finds articulation in the line, “In this room, as in our bodies, the rest of the world is excluded from our battles” (296). Here, vision is not passive reception but an active force that engenders solidarity, transforming a sterile medical environment into a site of communal recognition and belonging.

The mediation of vision by technology further complicates our sensory encounters with the world. Among the senses, sight has been most radically transformed by technological innovation. Advances in high-resolution screens, virtual and augmented reality have altered our engagement with visual information. Stanley Reiser highlights the growing importance of visual representation in twentieth-century medicine. He notes the mounting utilization of instruments like the ophthalmoscope and the x-ray by physicians to observe the internal mechanisms of living bodies and “evaluate the pathology firsthand” (47). Similarly, Fredriksen contends, “technological advances such as stethoscopes, microscopes, and x rays overstep the boundaries of human perception. They enable us to see what is invisible to the unaided senses” (71). Ray’s narrative regarding her experience with a stem cell transplant at the Princess Margaret Hospital’s stem cell unit serves as an example for how technology extends human capabilities beyond innate senses, enabling unparalleled access to and processing of information. She recounts,

I leaned back and watched as the blood was pulled from my body. I watched dials turn steadily on the impressive looking COBE Spectra cell separator machine I was hooked up to. I was in a close relationship now with this machine. I looked upon it as metallic transcendence. (Ray 326)

In Lisa's notable engagement with the COBE Spectra machine during the blood extraction process, her visual experience resonates with the sentiments conveyed by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Berger posits, "but there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded with it" (1). Berger's notion that sight precedes words and establishes our relationship to the surrounding environment finds relevance in Ray's unique interaction with the machine. Ray's perceptual encounter with the machine, grounded in visual observation, transforms a clinical procedure into a scene of affective and existential significance. As she reclines, watching the dials rotate, the visual data externalizes the otherwise invisible processes occurring within her body, thus translating physiology into a comprehensible, almost sublime, sensory experience. This moment of interaction exemplifies how technology, far from being neutral, mediates and magnifies embodied awareness. It becomes both instrument and interlocutor. As Velasco and Obrist note, technology "not only change the experience, but become the experience itself" (31). Victoria Bates similarly contends that in clinical settings, "technology is part of the material environment...a space or place in its own right" that "shapes and responds to embodied experiences" (3). Ray's depiction of forming a 'close relationship' with the COBE Spectra machine implies a deep emotional attachment, attributing qualities that extend beyond its mechanical attributes. This emotional affiliation underlines the influence of technology on our senses, evoking emotions of trust, dependence, and even reverence.

Lisa's characterization of the machine as 'metallic transcendence' represents the transformative nature of human-machine encounters in contemporary healthcare. By ascribing spiritual qualities to technology, Lisa imbues the experience with awe and wonder, highlighting technology's ability to enhance sensory perceptions and stimulate contemplation of the mysteries within the human body. In this context, the symbiotic relationship between sight and insight becomes central to perception. Saab, drawing on Denis Diderot, explores this connection: "sight and insight [are] both linked to the senses" (*Objects of Vision* 13). His analysis emphasizes how visual perception shapes and deepens cognitive understanding. Ray herself evokes the sanctity of the moment as she describes watching the mesmerizing journey of her blood, its force separating stem cells, and its eventual return. She articulates, "Something close to sacred was taking place as my blood travelled out of my body, spun with a force strong enough to separate the stem cells, and then

flowed back into me” (326). Ray’s portrayal captures the dynamic fusion of the human and the mechanical, revealing how medical technology elicits wonder and spiritual resonance through the act of visual perception. In rendering a moment of physiological intervention as sacred, Ray reframes the healthcare setting as a space of reflection, where technology not only extends sensory awareness but also participates in the production of meaning.

Within the broader framework of sensory experience, vision emerges as a critical modality through which meaning is made. As Kandel et al. explain, “most of our impressions about the world and our memories of it are based on sight” (492). David Howes affirms, “the senses are everywhere. They mediate the relationship between idea and object, mind and body, self and society, culture and environment” (*The Sensory Studies Manifesto* 13). A compelling example of vision’s significance during illness can be found in Anita Moorjani’s memoir, *Dying to be Me*. Within the clinical space, Moorjani’s vision becomes an active hermeneutic tool as it decodes medical authority through doctors’ guarded postures and the ominous presence of IV bags. As she tracks chemotherapy’s path from bag to vein, looking becomes agential: a means of confronting vulnerability while asserting presence. Moorjani writes,

The doctors were being cautious about my healing, particularly because of the state I was in when I entered the hospital. They wanted to adjust the mix and dosage of the chemotherapy they were giving me—which, at one time, I’d greatly feared. I watched as the nurses came in to administer the chemo. They hung the bag of drugs on the IV stand. Each bag, which they were feeding directly into my veins, was labeled “POISON” in huge, red capital letters. The nurses wore masks and latex gloves so that they couldn’t accidentally have contact with any of the dangerous chemicals. Strangely, it seemed that it was acceptable for these drugs to be introduced directly into my bloodstream. (86)

The label ‘*POISON*’, prominently printed in bold red capitals, operates as a visual and rhetorical device that provokes immediate recognition of pharmacological danger. This typographic and chromatic coding belongs to a broader regime of toxic legibility, where colour and language function as tools of biopolitical governance. The visual stimulus heightens Anita’s emotional responsiveness, deepening her apprehension toward chemotherapy. In this sharpened state of awareness, she registers the nurses’ protective gear as more than procedural necessity. The gloves and masks function as visible barriers, reinforcing the latent peril of the substances

in use. What emerges is not confined to clinical routine but becomes a performative expression of institutional caution, where therapeutic care is inseparable from risk and the aesthetics of medical practice reflect its underlying anxieties.

German psychologist Rudolf Arnheim's seminal work *Visual Thinking* (1969) transformed scholarly conceptions of perception and cognition. Rejecting the traditional view that cognition precedes vision, Arnheim argued that thinking emerges from seeing. He emphasized the essential role of sensory perception, particularly sight, in shaping cognitive processes, asserting their fundamental unity: "Visual perception is visual thinking" (14). This theoretical intervention redefined academic discourse by centering embodied perception in the construction of knowledge. Moorjani's experience demonstrates Arnheim's framework in action. Her bodily and sensory interactions within the clinical setting form the basis of her cognitive and emotional responses. As Jackson eloquently puts it, "what is done with the body [and senses] is the ground of what is thought and said" (131). This dynamic becomes especially poignant when, after a chemotherapy session, a nurse encourages Moorjani to look out her hospital window. Leaning on the nurse for support, Moorjani gazes outside, her eyes filling with tears. She reflects: "The moment I looked out the window, my eyes welled up. I couldn't keep myself from crying. It hadn't registered until that moment that the hospital was located only a few blocks away from my childhood home in Happy Valley" (84). Moorjani's vision bridges past and present, as the hospital's proximity to her childhood home triggers a flood of memories, dissolving temporal boundaries. This visual moment carries deep emotional weight, reawakening joy.

Lisa Ray's and Anita Moorjani's memoirs both showcase how the narrator-protagonists' heightened visual discernment enhances their accounts of illness, promoting comprehension, emotional resonance, and cognitive immersion. Their acute perceptual awareness discloses unspoken desires, potential risks, and the formation of shared identities within clinical spaces. By integrating sensory perception with reflective thought, their visionary encounters highlight the epistemological and affective significance of sight. These moments of visual intensity do not simply describe but actively construct a sensory narrative that reconfigures the healthcare environment as a site of embodied knowledge and meaning making.

Scented Symmetry and Flavour Fusion: The Harmonious Integration of Smell and Taste during Illness

The sense of smell plays an essential role in shaping our perceptions, triggering

memories, and stirring emotions. Among the various human sensory modalities, olfaction, or the sense of smell, holds a distinctive capacity to evoke past experiences due to its “power” (Schab and Crowder 7) and its ability to “revive” the past (Engen 80). Uri Almagor draws attention to the evocative potency of familiar scents, observing that they can “transport a person instantaneously to a specific point in the past” (267). In healthcare environments, the olfactory ambiance emerges as a formidable tool capable of shaping patients’ experiences. As one enters a hospital, the prevailing scent captures attention, shaping the layout of wards and deeply impacting patients. For instance, most general hospitals feature a distinct ward for venereal cases. Regardless of whether the smell is benign or noxious, it “directly affects” the hospital ambiance, thus impacting experiences and outcomes (Reinarz 509).

In contemporary scientific inquiry, the sense of smell intermingles with taste, constituting one of the chemical senses. A comprehensive taste experience is almost unimaginable without the “olfactory component” (Korsmeyer 4). This sensory interdependence becomes evident in Lisa’s narrative of her stem cell transplantation, where smell and taste actively shape her phenomenological engagement with clinical space. Lisa’s chemotherapy sessions, framed as visceral ordeals, reveal the body’s vulnerability to sensory intrusion. During one such session, as Lisa lies in her bed, the haematologist depresses the syringe plunger, triggering an abrupt and inescapable onslaught of chemical sensations. She narrates,

I lay in my bed, and as soon as the haematologist hit the plunger, the taste of creamed corn welled up in the back of my throat and flooded my mouth. I could smell it too, so vividly that I looked around the room to see if anyone else had registered it. (Ray 328)

The taste of creamed corn wells up in the back of Lisa’s throat, flooding her mouth with its unmistakable flavour, while simultaneously, a strong olfactory sensation envelops her, prompting an instinctual scan of the room, searching for others who might have shared this sensory experience. The sensory encounter not only affects Lisa’s physical sensations but also sets in motion a fervent quest for affirmation from those present. Moreover, it adeptly interlaces olfaction (smell) and gustation (taste), subverting conventional notions of separate sensory channels. According to Howes, “the senses are not simply passive receptors. They are interactive, both with the world and each other. The senses overlap and collaborate” (*The Sensory Studies Manifesto* 12). The English term ‘flavour’ encapsulates the fusion of oral and

olfactory experiences that arise when consuming various food items. One definition in the Complete Oxford English Dictionary states that ‘flavour’ is the element in the taste of a substance which depends on the cooperation of the sense of smell. Psychologist Paul Rozin argues that the perception of flavour relies on the merger of the senses of smell and taste, as well as whether an olfactory stimulation pertains to the “body (mouth)” or the “external world” (397). This phenomenon is known as “odour-taste synaesthesia” (Howes, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto* 87). The concept of synaesthesia reveals the complex link between distinct sensory modalities, where the activation of one, like vision or smell, can trigger another, such as hearing or taste. In this multisensory encounter, Lisa is enveloped in heightened perception that surpasses the ordinary, exemplifying the influence and synergistic dynamics orchestrated by these senses. Thus, she immerses herself in an intersensory fusion where smell and taste harmoniously converge.

Lisa’s sensory experience further highlights the emotional and psychosocial impact of smell in healthcare. In *Aroma* Classen, Howes, and Synnott aptly observe, “Smells resist containment in discrete units, crossing borders, linking disparate categories, and confusing boundary lines” (204). Their analysis captures how olfactory stimuli rises above physical sensations, eliciting deeply layered responses from Lisa. The aroma of creamed corn intensifies Lisa’s sensory awareness, prompting a desire for affirmation and a longing for shared experience and reassurance. Her response exemplifies the capacity of smell to evoke memory, establish associations, and sustain social bonds even inside the cold architecture of a stem cell unit. According to Classen et al. “odours form the building blocks of cosmologies, class hierarchies, and political orders; they can enforce social structures or transgress them, unite people or divide them, empower or disempower” (*Aroma* 1). This notion reinforces the significance of Lisa’s sensory episode, reminding us of the unique and subjective experiences patients face during medical interventions. It highlights the importance of recognizing and validating these sensory encounters as integral components of the patient’s journey. While taste is inherently subjective and rooted in “individual experience” (Korsmeyer 43), smell possesses a social valence, enabling a shared sensory experience that cultivates collective awareness. By acknowledging both taste and smell, Ray gestures toward a sensory epistemology of illness, one that reveals how such impressions shape her understanding of treatment and her relation to the clinical environment. This recognition urges a more holistic approach to care, where sensory perception is not incidental but central to the lived experience of healing.

In her cancer memoir, *Dying to be Me*, Moorjani recounts an episode involving

her experience with medical procedures. The narrative unfolds as Anita is subjected to a physician's decision to mark a lymph node on her neck, despite its lack of visible enlargement. She subsequently undergoes surgery under local anaesthesia, during which a small incision is made on the left side of her neck to extract the lymph node. Because she remains conscious throughout the procedure, she becomes acutely aware of various discomforting sensations, including the incision itself and, more disturbingly, the smell of her own burning flesh as the surgeon cauterizes the wound. Moorjani reflects:

I really disliked the discomforting sensations I felt on my neck as the doctor cut the lymph node. I still remember smelling my own burning flesh as the surgeon cauterized my wound. I thought that maybe agreeing to let them do this wasn't such a good idea after all! (Moorjani 90)

Anita's recollection highlights how sensory experience is present within the routines of medical care, not as an afterthought but as something central to how the body is handled, observed, and remembered. Her narrative aligns with Howes and Classen's view in *Ways of Sensing*, where they suggest that acts of sensing carry with them varied and often conflicting meanings:

The significance of a sensory act is not necessarily unitary. The way in which a doctor touches a patient during a physical examination, for example, may be taken as primarily a data-gathering process or may have personal meaning for the participants ('This doctor has a caring touch'). It also has a...symbolic significance. Even sensory acts...have many shades of meaning. (4)

Even ostensibly routine sensory encounters possess subtle affective and symbolic dimensions. Anita's sensations, her physical discomfort, her sense of vulnerability, and the olfactory engagement with her own burning flesh, coalesce into a narrative of the senses that highlights how clinical procedures can become fraught, emotionally charged experiences. Her moment of doubt, expressed in the aftermath of the surgery, further reveals the psychological toll such interventions can exact. The olfactory perception of burning flesh serves as a particularly potent sensory marker, intensifying Anita's embodied experience and triggering a visceral emotional response. As Vannini et al. assert, "humans' sense as well as make sense" (15), and Anita's adverse reaction to the odour magnifies her unease, compelling her to question the decision to undergo the procedure. Smell, in this context, becomes

a channel for anxiety, fear, and a sense of distress, emotions that are frequently marginalized in biomedical discourse.

According to Howes and Classen “what makes sensations so forceful is that they are lived experiences, not intellectual abstractions” (7). Within healthcare environments, the sensory faculties, particularly smell and taste, deeply impact how patients feel, heal, and respond to care. The experiences recounted by both Ray and Moorjani advocate for a more expansive, multisensory understanding of illness, one that compels healthcare providers to acknowledge and respond to the corporeal realities of patients. A more intentional and sensitive engagement with olfactory and gustatory stimuli could establish therapeutic environments that are not only clinically effective but also emotionally attuned.

Sonic Symphony and Tactile Terrain: The Impact of Sound and Touch on the Experience of Illness

In recent years, the study of acoustical environments in healthcare settings has garnered considerable attention from both clinical and literary scholars. Taking a broader approach to understanding the impact of sounds, researchers recognize its influential role in shaping individual identity and social connections, as well as its implications for “well-being” and “health outcomes” (Graham 175). In Ray’s memoir, the resounding echoes of the brass bell reverberating through the chemotherapy day care resonate with a significance that cannot be ignored. The delicate chimes encapsulate the culmination of her arduous chemotherapy cycles, emerging as a symbol of triumph and hope. With the melodic tones filling the space, they evoke a range of emotions within Lisa, eliciting feelings of joy, relief, and a reminder of her inner strength,

On my last day at chemo day care, I rang a brass bell by the door, which all patients ring once you’ve completed your cycles of chemo, once the requisite toxicity has dripped through your veins. For me it signalled a chance for renewal in the form of a stem cell transplant. (Ray 317)

The auditory environment in healthcare plays a vital role in shaping subjectivity, selfhood, and social agency. As Rice notes, it forms a “sonically constituted sense of self” (4). Audible expressions of care awaken emotion, while, as Denora writes, music can “shape our capacity to...relate to others” (97). The resonance of a bell within a medical facility carries significance beyond emotional impact; it establishes a psychological association with healthcare and treatment, instilling a sense of

optimism and progress. In Lisa's case, the sound of the bell becomes "a means to establish camaraderie in an environment of alienation" (Graham 184). Echoing through the corridors, the bell in Ray's narrative serves as a unifying force, uniting individuals in their triumphs and tribulations, thus amplifying their collective strength and determination.

The bell's significance extends beyond sound and into the experience of touch. Ringing it involves physical contact, Lisa feels the cold metal, the smooth cord, and the gentle resistance as she pulls. This tactile element adds meaning to the act, linking touch with a sense of achievement. Touch shapes social identity and bodily awareness, serving as the "channel through which physical co-presence is most directly embodied" (Finnegan 194). In Ray's account, sound and touch become sensory markers that shape her understanding of illness and recovery, offering emotional release and encouraging shared strength among patients undergoing similar forms of treatment.

The sensory modalities of sound comes to the forefront once again in Ray's story as she moves through her kitchen, preparing fruit before her chemotherapy treatment. Through her kitchen window, she hears the "muffled cries of children and street noises," crafting a soundscape that delicately anchors her in the external reality beyond her immediate experience (Ray 308). This rich sensory experience highlights the value of incorporating pleasant sounds into healthcare spaces, where patients often respond positively. For Lisa, the shouts, the laughter, the faint movement from the street do not blur into background. They are signs that the world goes on. In these brief sounds, she finds small ties to what is shared, to what still flows, and to the rhythm of a life that has not wholly left her. They do not cure, but they comfort, and in times of strain, that is no small gift.

In his book *The Proust Effect: The Senses as Doorways to Lost Memories*, Cretien Van Campen investigates the connection between our senses and the recollection of past experiences. Among the senses, touch emerges as a particularly powerful medium for accessing deep-seated memories. During her illness Lisa discovers the therapeutic potential of tactile memory when she peels a papaya. This simple act triggers recollections of her interactions with her Indian maid, highlighting the significance of touch in her sensory experiences. She recalls, "I was stripping the skin, trying to remember how my maid in India did it, turning the fruit, the skin falling off in one long, unbroken peel" (Ray 308). Each stroke of her fingers against the fruit's skin becomes a deliberate effort to tap into her tactile memory. This engagement goes beyond a physical act; it becomes an embodied practice, seamlessly blending texture, pliability, and slicing motions.

As she grips the knife's handle and slices through the fruit, Lisa becomes fully engrossed in the tactile experience. The texture, softness, and the act of cutting through the fruit contribute to her heightened connection with her body's sensations. In this intimate communion with touch, she not only peels the fruit but also sheds layers of her illness, momentarily escaping its grip. Lisa ponders the significance of this action, acknowledging its hypnotic quality and the heightened observation that arises when one slows down. She writes, "There is something about this action that is hypnotic, or maybe it's just the things you notice when you slow down. I watched my hands gripping the handle, the tip of the blade slicing cleanly through flesh" (308). The stillness and attention Ray brings to these seemingly ordinary gestures mark a perceptual shift. Through touch, she not only resurrects memories that might have been obscured by illness but also finds solace and connection in the present moment. Hutmacher and Kuhbandner's challenge reductive conceptions of touch as merely sensory, demonstrating that "humans form detailed and durable long-term memory representations for a high number of their haptic experiences, even if there is no intention to memorize them" (2035). For Lisa, touch becomes a method of repair, one that allows her, if only briefly, to step beyond the narrow limits of illness and return to a world coloured by memory, feeling, textures of ordinary life, and the details of sensation.

Ray's attentiveness to the soundscape and her keen observation of seemingly mundane actions in fruit preparation reflect her pursuit of meaning and preservation within the narrative of her cancer journey. By intentionally slowing down her pace and immersing herself in the present moment, a remarkable transformation unfurls. She narrates, "This stillness, this attention I found myself bringing to the most mundane gestures; there's no shortcut to that place. The place I now found myself in. I knew there was something that must be preserved about my cancer experience." (Ray 308). In acknowledging the inherent rhythmic and hypnotic quality of her actions, she moves toward a deeper understanding of the self, one that reveals the subtleties of embodiment and draws together sensory perception with the elusive complexity of the human condition.

During her first day at chemo day care, Lisa shares with the nurse her habit of singing 'Hey Jude' to alleviate anxiety during medical procedures. She explains, "You know, most times I get poked, I normally sing "Hey Jude" - it's that whole times of trouble line that helps calm me down...It helps. A lot." (Ray 298). Research reveals that melodious sounds positively impact "pain, anxiety, and mood," contributing to an improved quality of life for cancer patients (Archie et al. 2620). Later, during a long and painful biopsy at North York General Hospital, Lisa

again resorts to singing. She notes, “Meanwhile, the doctor couldn’t get a decent sample, so down he went into my hip with his electric drill over and over, while I sang ‘Hey Jude’ at the top of my lungs. Those high notes really dissipate the pain,” emphasizing the transformative power of sound in mitigating her suffering (Ray 282). The song masks the hard clang of hospital tools and acts as a buffer against distress. Sound, in such moments, does more than distract. It shapes the texture of the experience itself, lowering fear, helping the mind detach, and even improving the tempo of those who work around the patient. As Ullmann et al. observe, music has a “positive effect” on staff working in operating rooms (596). “Soon enough,” Ray writes, “I had half the nurses singing along with me” (Ray 283). Such small gestures, half-spoken lyrics and shared smiles, carry more than comfort. They build brief communities and remind us that even in pain there can be moments of rhythm, harmony, and quiet human connection.

The patient’s disease can amplify feelings of confusion, powerlessness, and isolation, particularly during medical examinations and hospital admissions, where they are identified, undressed, and subjected to potentially dehumanizing procedures. In such settings, touch, often regarded as the way we reach into the world, takes on another role. It becomes the gateway by which the world enters us, exploring places we had never imagined as sites of sensation, undoing the illusion that our inner spaces are hidden and untouched. Lisa’s account of her biopsy, where a drill was used to remove a sample from her hip, captures this unsettling reversal with startling clarity. The experience calls attention to how medical touch, though carried out in care, can disturb our sense of autonomy and shift the emotional texture of the body. “I never knew that we have sensation inside our bones; they’re a part of the body we never touch. During the biopsy, I felt a sense of violation” (Ray 283). Lisa’s reflection on feeling violated draws attention to the fragile line that separates medical necessity from personal vulnerability. When she likens the extraction of bone marrow to “trying to pull out steak,” the image is not just vivid but unsettling, giving voice to a form of discomfort that is both physical and emotional, a moment that underlines the deep loss of control so often felt in medical settings (Ray 283).

Touch, which might seem at first a simple act, plays a far more complex role in shaping the relationship between caregivers and those in their care. Its impact depends not only on where or how it is applied, but on the feeling behind it. If touch feels intrusive or is received with discomfort, it can cause more harm than care, for, as Henricson observes, “every patient reacts uniquely to touch and the personal integrity can be exceeded if the patient experiences the touch as unexpected or uncomfortable” (22). Ray’s experience within the hospital invites us to think more

carefully about the role of empathy and attentiveness in clinical spaces. It suggests that the smallest of gestures, when done with care, can help ease the sensory and emotional weight of treatment, pointing the way toward a gentler, more humane approach to healing.

As embodied beings, we live in gentle dependence on the warmth of others. In our daily lives, touch plays a subtle but central role in how we connect, offering a form of closeness that words cannot always reach. For clinicians, touch becomes a kind of silent language, one that carries presence, care, and a sense of shared humanity. A gentle hand or steady embrace can evoke more than reassurance; it can restore a feeling of being seen. The experience of touch can never be wholly “objective or unidirectional. Every time a professional touch a patient, they are themselves touched” (Kelly et al. 201). This reciprocity gives rise to what Fredriksson calls a “flow of feelings” (1170), allowing “therapeutic relationships” to emerge within “disclosive spaces” between patient and professional (Benner 347). During her visit to the chemotherapy care unit, Lisa shares her fear with the nurse, admitting, “I have bad veins” (298). The nurse pauses, then returns with a soft flannel blanket, which she drapes gently over Lisa’s shoulders. This small act of warmth, while modest in appearance, carries deep meaning. Lisa recalls, “Something about this gesture touches me deeply. She silently hands me a paper cup of water. I anoint her ninja of my veins” (298). Such gestures remind us that caring touch often reaches beyond words. It offers calmness, reassurance, and presence, and in doing so, becomes a language of emotional connection. Drew Leder, writing on the body in illness, speaks of this need for touch during illness, noting that healing is not a task performed by one person upon another: “healing touch is not something the clinician does or the patient. Touch unfolds in the reciprocal space between the I-Thou relationship” (Leder 55). In Lisa’s story, the nurse’s touch becomes more than clinical. It becomes a way of listening. It speaks of empathy, care, and attention, forming a bond between two people meeting each other not as roles, but as selves.

The act of touch, in both reaching out and receiving, is fundamental to the construction of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. As Lisa Guenther writes, it is “the absence of regular bodily contact with others, the absence of even the possibility of touching or being touched,” that threatens to unhinge the stability of the individual subject (xiii). The importance of touch becomes evident in Moorjani’s account of illness, where moments of contact carry both the weight of connection and the pain of distance. In one of her most intimate recollections, she describes her husband holding her limp hand, his voice filled with helplessness: “My husband held my

limp hand tightly as I lay there, and I was aware of the combination of anguish and helplessness in his voice. I wanted more than anything to relieve him of his suffering” (4). In the grip of his hand, Anita searches for comfort and strength, a shared gesture that grounds her amid the uncertainty of her illness. However, even as their hands meet, she becomes aware of the limitations of touch as a means of expression, the inability to truly show him that she is still there and that, in some quiet way, she is at peace.

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the inherent duality of the lived body, serving as both an experiencing subject and a tangible entity within the world. He elaborates that “the objective body belongs to the realm of ‘for others’, and the phenomenal body to that of ‘for me’,” thus capturing the double-sided nature of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 106). This concept of a dual existence, likely exclusive to humans, becomes evident through touch, which not only connects us with others but also deepens our connection with our own corporeal presence. Merleau-Ponty posits that the body and mind are intimately interconnected; our physicality, what he terms the ‘flesh’, enables us to experience and make sense of the world subjectively. Recognizing this embodied condition challenges clinicians to look beyond clinical detachment and resist treating patients’ bodies as objects of intervention. Within this framework, Anita’s experience resonates deeply. After her chemotherapy, she recalls a moment of self-recognition: “I felt as though I’d done it to myself. I reached my hand up toward the mirror, and as I touched the image of my tearful face, I made a promise that I’d never hurt myself so badly again” (Moorjani 86). This tactile act holds deep symbolic significance, representing a crucial turning point in her illness journey, reaffirming her autonomy and commitment to self-care. In placing her hand on her own reflection, she reclaims her body as something to be cared for, not fought against. Her gesture holds within it the idea that touch is more than contact; it can be a form of knowing, of forgiving, of beginning again. It is here that Merleau-Ponty’s insight returns; touch can draw us back into our own skin. Anita’s story is not only a moment of private healing, but also a gentle rebuke to the habits of modern medicine. She reminds us that bodies are not puzzles to be solved but lives to be heard and held. By honouring touch as a way to build trust and support, caregivers can shape forms of healing that speak to both flesh and feeling. In doing so, they may offer something rare and essential: a care that attends to the whole person.

The narratives of Ray and Moorjani offer a lens into how sound and touch shape who we are, draw us closer to others, and influence how we live through illness. These senses do not simply register the world; they give it weight, texture,

and emotional tone, making healing less about procedures and more about presence. Looking ahead, there is still much to be understood about sound, how tones, silences, and ambient noise form a kind of atmosphere that blends with other senses to shape care. Touch, too, calls for careful attention. To explore how it calms, anchors, and builds trust is to move closer to a form of care that listens rather than simply treats. These reflections are not abstract; they speak to how we shape rooms for healing, rethink the habits of the clinic, and stand beside those in pain. When the gentle pull of sound and the grounded weight of touch are taken seriously, care begins to shift towards a way of seeing the patient not as a case to solve, but as a life to meet.

Conclusion

The exploration of sensory experiences during periods of illness and hospitalization remains a critically understudied area within contemporary medical humanities. Current focus has predominantly centred on the evolution of the medical gaze and advancements in medical facilities, geared towards incorporating technology and accommodating patients. George Roeder advocates the importance of discussing “the senses” with the same rigor as topics like “politics, philosophy, or social movements” (1122). Similarly, Feldman urges us to excavate the “vast secret museum of historical and sensory absence,” inviting renewed analytical attention to what has long remained unspoken and unfelt in historical and clinical narratives (104). In this context, the narratives of Ray and Moorjani emerge as exemplars of the transformative power of sensory experiences in illness, challenging conventional healthcare perspectives. Through their personal narratives, these authors demonstrate the multisensory nature of healthcare, where even subtle sounds, like the gentle chime of a brass bell, build camaraderie, and tactile interactions strengthen a sense of self amid illness. These memoirs offer persuasive evidence that sensory experiences significantly influence healthcare interactions, shaping emotional engagement and contributing to a more attentive and humane approach to patient care. Both viewpoints align in suggesting a shared understanding: healthcare emerges as a perceptual environment in which sensory experience extends the scope of care beyond medical interventions. This layered path through the senses may not only inform one’s understanding of illness but could potentially infuse the process of healing with an emotional depth that slips past the boundaries of conventional medical discourse.

While these memoirs offer thought-provoking insights, their anecdotal nature may limit comprehensive generalizations for the broader healthcare context.

Therefore, it becomes essential to consider the individual differences and contextual factors when attempting to understand the impact of sensory impressions on patients' experiences and outcomes. However, these memoirs serve as reminders that healthcare is a multidimensional encounter, an intermingling of sensory experiences resonating within our conscious and subconscious selves. Recognising the role of senses in illness and healing creates opportunities for more thoughtful engagement with patients and contributes to both the quality of care and the patient's sense of well-being. In the end, these memoirs remind us that medicine, at its best, is not only a science but an art of noticing. They ask us to look again at what lies in the margins: the murmur of a voice, the warmth of a touch, the comfort of rhythm and light. To take these seriously is not to lose rigor. It is to widen the frame. This may be one of the few ways *care* can feel, once more, like a truly human act.

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From Reality to Fiction: Alexander the Great in Ottoman Literature

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Abstract Ottoman literature developed from a melting pot of a range of elements, including the Qur'an, hadith, hymns of prophets, Sufism, Iranian mythology, Islamic history, Turkish culture and history. Among the sources of Ottoman literature, there are myths from various cultures, especially Persian and Arab cultures, and important historical events. Studies have been carried out using these sources, which have fed Ottoman literature, but in some cases, there is a lack of definitive information about the origin of these sources. There are various reasons for communities to have become disconnected from one another, and as the origins of the sources have been forgotten, a variety of different narratives may develop. In this article, information will be provided about İskender, an extraordinary hero in Ottoman literature, who is said to have influenced Islam and the Qur'an. In prominent debates on the identity of İskender, there are some Islamic writers who view İskender as a prophet who serves God, and there are other writers who argue that he is a historical person. According to those who argue the latter, İskender was either the king of Yemen, or one of the Persian rulers, or some argue that he was Alexander the Great. In this study, these various narrations will be ascertained. Then, data from interdisciplinary research, including archaeological studies, will be evaluated comparatively. Finally, correlations found between this data and the legends in the traditional narratives will be used to ascertain who was İskender in Ottoman literature.

Keywords Ottoman Literature; Alexander the Great; Historical narrative; Legend; Change.

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Introduction

There are various approaches concerning the relationship of myth and legend with literature. According to Ali Canip Yöntem, the origin of literature is *usture*, meaning mythology in the Ottoman language. Personification of inanimate beings was made in the *usture* period. After the *Usture* period, the period of Romanesque novels includes the adventures of previously animated beings. In the following period of realist novels, there was a transition process to modern novels (Tökel 53-54).

Rene Wellek's thoughts on the reasons for artists resorting to myths and legends in literary texts are as follows: "A literary writer requiring a myth indicates that the writer is uniting with the society he/she is living in and is aspiring to have a function in that society" (Wellek and Warren 257-258). Indeed, this statement by Rene Wellek explains why both Ottoman literature and the New Turkish literature era writers' resort to Turkish and Islamic mythology and legendary elements in terms of religion and thought systems, and Greek mythology and legendary elements in terms of Turkey's geographical location.

Ali Nihat Tarlan seems to provide a possible answer to the question raised by Rene Wellek, 'why does a writer resort to myths in literary texts?', in the light of Ottoman literature writers, as follows:

As Ottoman literature is an Islamic literature, some anecdotes about the prophets' lives which were passed on to the Qur'an from the Torah or from knowledge that has been transferred from generation to generation in Arabic tradition have been adapted by literature. Various authors have expanded those anecdotes by ascribing to hadiths and adding old tales and customs; in this way, an Islamic *usture* has developed. They have quoted those anecdotes to strengthen the rules preached by the Qur'an with old hadiths and to reach the moral objective as opposed to the historical. (Tarlan, *Şeyhi* 253)

When the relationship between literature and history is examined, Aristotle considers poetry, an art form that imitates reality within the framework of certain rules, to create a particular effect (Toprak 94). The material used for fictional literary text may be derived from truth and reality. Art is an interpretation of human relationships with nature and mankind. Thus, art results from truth and reality being expressed differently from what is experienced in scientific and daily life. The purpose of changing, transforming, and interpreting is to reach a better understanding and interpretation of the human in its interrelations. Hence, every

work of art is a product of the struggle to embody a human quality in a better and more beautiful manner, in other words, to render it visible, comprehensible, and interpretable (Aktaş 47). A literary work, just like history, is created by sorting out events; however, a literary work is a resolution and rearrangement of actual events (Tural 107).

The process of Islamisation of mythological elements, primarily through Arabisation, and their subsequent adaptation to other cultures such as Persian and Ottoman, is a dynamic transformation shaped by both folk narratives and literary texts. In this context, Pertev Naili Boratav (71) reveals how ancient belief systems were adapted to Islamic frameworks and reproduced within local culture. Fuat Köprülü comprehensively explains how the literary structure that emerged after the acceptance of Islam was synthesised under the influence of ancient Turkish beliefs, and the role of the first Sufis in this transformation (1-7).

The Islamisation of mythological elements and narratives based on historical reality influenced the content of poems. As a result of adapting these narratives to Islamic culture by severing their ties with the originals, newly created heroes and hero-based narratives are seen being reproduced in qasidas, qazels, a type of poetry in Islamic literature, in the context of Islamic figures such as prophets and other religious personalities, rulers, or administrators.

“In the Islamic tradition, hami (boss) is at the centre of the triangle of poet, artwork, and hami. The most powerful hami of the Ottoman Empire was the ruler. Both the literary work and the poet’s position in the art world were determined by the monarch, and thus, the poet and his work of art were not very influential” (Tarhan, *Poetical Institution* 467). By Islamising these mythological elements and narratives, writers connected their rulers to these figures. For example, when explaining the Prophet Jesus and his immortality, they are seen to have combined them with immortality stories from Islamic culture (Tarhan, *Religious Figures* 238). This article discusses how Alexander the Great’s leadership qualities and exploration of distant lands influenced Islamic culture, leading to the creation of a new hero and new narratives based on these two characteristics of the historical figure. It appears that poets, by reference to legendary figures such as Alexander, praised their rulers, who were patrons of poetry, and included them among the important figures of history, just like Alexander himself.

The samples of Ottoman literature used in this study are very rich with respect to historical, legendary, and mythological elements based on individuals. Taking these elements from another culture, turning them into a new narrative, and forgetting the original version is referred to as acculturation. The original form of

the element addressed in this acculturation process has become a narrative that is forgotten and recreated. Regardless of their source, by means of acculturation, the elements of the literature first entered the process of Islamisation, and then passed from Arabic to Persian literature and then to Ottoman literature. An example of historical, legendary, and mythological elements based on individuals may be found in literature referring to Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great may be found in Islamic literature with two important features, the characteristic of being an ambitious conquering ruler, and his mystical life. The first feature has preserved its historical reality in the name Alexander (in Turkish İskender/Sikender), but the second mystical feature has been adopted and taken the name Dhul-Qarnayn as a result of the Islamic acculturation. Thus, Dhul-Qarnayn has moved away from his historical realism, and his connection with Alexander the Great has been forgotten. This study is important in terms of revealing this forgotten truth. Thus, Ottoman Literature referring to Dhul-Qarnayn may be traced as far back as the Arabs, Persians, Sumerians and Alexander the Great. These elements have not been used in their original contexts found in the sources that they belong to; they have been reproduced and Islamified through the perceptions of Ottoman culture. In general, poets have praised their rulers by way of comparing them with Alexander the Great.

Alexander to İskender

Alexander (Alexander III) is believed to have been born in July 356 BC. His father was Phillip II, the King of Macedonia, and his mother was Olympias. Both Alexander's parents were from noble families. Due to his infidelity, Alexander's father was not on good terms with his mother. Phillip II also disliked Olympias's interest in mystical worldviews and practices. Growing up under his mother's supervision until the period of his principedom led Alexander to take an interest in these mystical worlds also. His fondness for these mystical beliefs is thought to have guided him and, to some extent, pushed Alexander to war. When Alexander was fourteen years old, Phillip II had given Alexander the principedom and had him educated by various philosophers, particularly by Aristotle. Alexander was crowned as the King of Macedonia at the age of twenty. Alexander's first act was to secure his position in the Greek countries. Then he began his expeditions to Iran, which were mired down with his father's death (Lauffer 7-88), expeditions to Eastern Mediterranean countries, and then headed towards Egypt, the country that always aroused his interest. According to historian Siegfried Lauffer, Alexander mounted an expedition to Egypt for two reasons. For the Greeks, Egypt was the land of secrets with magnificent works of art. Ever since Homer, Greek connections with Egypt had

been lost under Persian rule. The other reason for Alexander heading towards Egypt is Ammon's house of divination, which is located in the Oasis of Shiva (Lauffer 89-90). Alexander declared himself Zeus-Ammon in his expedition to Egypt. The figure of Alexander's Zeus-Ammon bust taken from the Museum of Liverpool is seen in figures 1A, 1B and 1C¹. A few samples of coins minted which depict Zeus-Ammon after Alexander's expedition to Egypt are seen in figures 2A, 2B and 3².



Fig. 1A



Fig. 1B

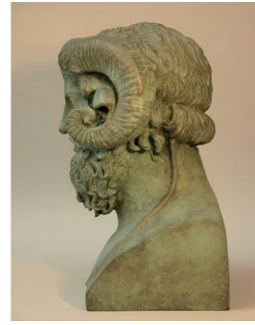


Fig. 1C



Fig. 2A & 2B



Fig. 3

1 Fig. 1A, 1B and 1C: Alexander's Zeus-Ammon Bust

The photos of Alexander's Zeus-Ammon bust taken from the Museum of Liverpool are as follows: His face from the front (Figure A1) and his left and right profile (Figure 1B, Figure 1C) is seen in the display. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/conservation/technologies/limitededition/zeus> 24.05.2012

2 Fig. 2A & 2B: Alexander's Zeus-Ammon Coins

A few samples of coins minted which depict Zeus-Ammon after Alexander's expedition to Egypt: Kyrenaika, Kyrene, Silver, 17.22gr. In the late archaic style, the right profile of Zeus-Ammon's bearded face with a large ram's horn and a crown and on the reverse side of the coin is an extinct plant that was believed to be sacred. For further information, please see: *The Prosperity Collection Spectacular Ancient Greek Coins*, Park Communications Ltd, London / Great Britain, p. 409, 2012.

Fig. 3: Alexander's commanders' coin

A coin minted in the satrapy of Lysimachus, one of Alexander's commanders, in the name of Alexander the Great, who was known as Zeus Ammon. 297-281 bc. A similar coin may be found in the British Museum. Available at:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/959/Alexander-the-Great-as-Zeus-Ammon-on-a-silver-tetradrachm> 24.05.2012

Alexander the Great may have become known as İskender in Islamic narratives. In other words, İskender, also referred to by the nickname Dhul-Qarnayn, may be Alexander the Great, the King of Macedonia. “Dictionaries give the meaning of the word qarn as ‘horn, century, a community that lived in a certain time, head of a person, sides of the head, forelocks of a man, side locks of a woman, edge of the sun’s circle, chief of a tribe, etc.’. There is a suffix at the end of the word ayn that indicates duality. So Dhul-Qarnayn means the two-horned one” (Pala, *Akademik* 243). Ahteri’s (761) Arabic-Turkish dictionary titled Ahteri-yi Kebir states that the word qarn, which he explains as “the horn of animals similar to sheep, goats and cattle”, was used in references to “Dhul-Qarnayn, the nickname of İskender-i Rumi” (Macedonian or Greek Alexander).

İskender is included in Taberî’s History. There is a one-hundred-page chapter on Alexander in the second volume. There is a further reference in an anecdote in the chapter about Khidr in the first volume. According to this anecdote, “Dhul-Qarnayn is not the person God Almighty speaks of in the Noble Qur’an (Surat Al-Kahf, ayat 83), that person’s name was Alexander. He had built a wall against Gog and Magog. This was after Moses. This person’s name is Dhul-Qarnayn-i Askar; they call him Little Alexander” (Taberî, *I*, 450). In the second volume of Taberî’s History, under the title “Why was Alexander given the name Dhul-Qarnayn (the two-horned)?” Taberî states that:

The nickname of Alexander was Dhul-Qarnayn – The Two-Horned. The two horns at the ends of a bow used for shooting arrows are also called Qarns. The reason Alexander is called Dhul-Qarnayn is that he has seen the East, which is one corner of the world, and he has seen the West, which is the other corner of the world. Therefore, he was called Dhul-Qarnayn. (Taberî, 2 289)

In the Qur’an, Dhul-Qarnayn is mentioned as the person who built a wall against Gog and Magog (see later). “There are views that claim the King of Macedonia was called by the nickname of Dhul-Qarnayn, though there are also views asserting that Dhul-Qarnayn was the nickname of the Achaemenian ruler Kurush, or that this nickname was given to a Yemeni king” (Tekin 132). The Yemeni King Tuba is one of those kings who are mentioned using this name in Arabic Literature. The Yemen King Tuba reigns over Saba” (Ritter 123). İskender Pala, quoting Ebu Reyhan, says that: “The ones with ‘Dhu’ in their names are from Yemen. Like Dhu’n-Nûn, Dhu’l-Menâr. The word Dhu is Arabic. Dhul-Qarnayn is an Arabic nickname” (Pala 343). Ritter explains the reason for the Yemeni King Tuba being called Dhul-Qarnayn

as follows: “Yemen Kings’ names would also begin with ‘dhu’. For this reason, it is possible that when they saw Dhul-Qarnayn’s name beginning with ‘dhu’, they embraced him as their own, appropriated him” (Ritter 123).

Another tale about İskender may be found in the following sentences: “Two strange objects had appeared on İskender’s head, shaped like horns. İskender, who wanted to hide them, would cover his head with a veil. But one day, when he went to a bathhouse, his clerk learned his secret” (Tökel 190-191).

Ritter points to this meaning of the word with reference to a conversation Alexander had with God, which may be found in a book written in the second century. In this conversation, Alexander says, “Oh God Almighty, give me horns so I can gore the world with them like a ram” (Ritter 123). The second explanation is that Alexander is the son of Jupiter-Ammon. Gönül Tekin explains Ritter’s view of Jupiter-Ammon in her research on Çengnâme (an Ottoman poem) as follows: “We need to participate in Ritter’s view. Because in Egypt, the emblem of the God Ammon, which is in parallel with Zeus, is a ram, and this God bears two ram horns. Thus, Alexander of Macedonia is this Zeus-Ammon’s son, revived as the King of Egypt” (Tekin 132).

Siegfried Lauffer’s statements are supplementary to Gönül Tekin’s views. According to Lauffer, when Alexander enters Egypt, the conditions are as follows:

Alexander expressed his stance about Egyptians by respecting their specific rituals and religions. Seeing himself as the old Pharaohs’ successor and not the Achaemenians because of the Persian conqueror Cambyses’ act of killing the Apis bull¹. In his time, Alexander had depicted himself in the style and clothing of Pharaohs after being crowned as a Pharaoh in Memphis” (Lauffer 90)

Gönül Tekin (132) may be referring to this point. Alexander may have worn the two horns that were worn by the God Ammon. Coins have been minted, and statues have been made in Alexander’s name throughout the centuries, depicting him with these horns.

Lauffer continues to cite Alexander’s important acts during his expedition to Egypt as follows:

Alexander set out on an expedition, which he considered to be very important,

1 This bull is mentioned in Taberî’s History. According to Taberî, the Pharaoh worshipped that bull: Ebû Ca’fer Muhammed bin Cerîr’üt-Taberî, *Tarih-i Taberi*, Cilt: 1, translate: Faruk Gürtunca, Sağlam Yayınevi, İstanbul, p. 415.

to the Oasis of Shiva, where God Ammon's sacred house of divination is located, following the coast of the Nile's delta with a small group of servitors... When Alexander reached the sacred ground with his companions, he was greeted by the oldest oracle as the son of Ammon because he was the new Pharaoh. Nobody learned the answers to the questions he asked the oracles alone in the temple. Presumably, they were about the future, especially his plans for the days to come. All Alexander ever said was that he was very happy about what he came to know. It has been said that he also wrote to his mother, Olympias, saying that he had obtained secret information that he would tell her in private when he returned. It is believed that the information he obtained was about his divine origins. (Lauffer 91-92)

The source of the Islamic narrative of İskender's Immortal Water (*âb-ı hayat*) may be a story created by the people as a result of Alexander's meeting with a priest of the Oasis of Shiva's house of divination. "It is accepted that Alexander believed he was from the lineage of Zeus-Ammon after he visited the house of divination, but he did not want to express it very much. This thought of his is inferred from his prayers to Ammon in critical situations and from his wanting to be buried in the Oasis of Shiva when he dies" (Lauffer 92). Alexander mounted an expedition to Iran after this meeting and extended his borders up to Central Asia.

İskender is referred to by poets in Ottoman literature for his leadership and his conquests that extended as far as India. Poets often commemorate their ruler as a conqueror equal to those who succeeded İskender. In the *qasidas* and *qazels* (lyric poems) discussed in this study, Ottoman poets have praised leaders by reference to Alexander. In his *Fetihnâme* (a *qasida* about conquests), written for Sultan Beyazıt, fifteenth century poet Necâtî sees his Sultan as İskender-i sâni, which means the second Alexander. Necâtî's *Fetihnâme* employs a sophisticated comparative strategy. By invoking "Kayser" (Byzantine Emperor) and "Fağfûr" (Chinese Emperor) alongside Alexander, Necâtî positions Beyazıt within a global imperial framework. The term "İskender-i sâni" (Second Alexander) operates on multiple levels:

Martial prowess: Aligning Beyazıt with history's greatest conqueror

Legitimacy: Claiming inheritance of world-empire tradition

Prophetic echo: Invoking Qur'anic Dhul-Qarnayn's divine mission

Surpassing the model: The phrase "seni sonra" (after you) implies succession, while "Kıyurma" (do not think less) suggests equality or superiority

This rhetorical move exemplifies the Ottoman panegyric tradition of teşbih (comparison) and tezat (contrast), where the praised figure both resembles and exceeds the comparative exemplar. Necâî's choice of Alexander specifically invokes both historical achievement and Islamic legitimacy, since Dhul-Qarnayn represents God-sanctioned universal rule in Islamic tradition.

Kayurma Kayser ü Fağfûrdan seni şöñra

Getürdiyse felek iy Sikender-i sâni (52/37)

(O Alexander the Second, even though destiny made you a successor
to the Greek Emperor and the Chinese Emperor
do not think of yourself any less than them,
because you are so much superior to them!)

In his Bahariye, which is a type of qasida that is presented in the spring, or the part of a qasida about the spring in the Nesib section, written for Sultan Suleiman, sixteenth century poet Şem'î tells Sultan Suleiman that it is as though he is from the time of the Prophet Solomon, and he is the Second Alexander. In this poem, the poet compares his patron ruler to the Prophet Solomon, a famous leader of sacred religions. The reasons for referring to the ruler as the second Alexander are also present here:

Martial prowess: To emphasise that Sultan Suleiman, like Alexander the Great, conquered many places in the east and west.

Legitimacy: According to Islamic narratives, the Prophet Solomon could speak with every living creature and ruled not only over humans but over all living beings. Thus, the poet emphasises that his ruler was both the emperor of the world and the ruler of all living creatures.

Prophetic echo: The poet attributes sanctity to his ruler by likening him to the prophet Solomon, the ideal leader in monotheistic religions.

The phrase “Süleymân-ı zemânsın” (the time of the Prophet Solomon) and the expressions “nice tîgûñ Şalarsañ gün gibi şarka vü ğarba irüşür” (if you were to let out your swords like the sun, they would reach the east and the west) suggest that the poet put Sultan Suleiman on an equal footing with Prophet Solomon and Alexander the Great in terms of prosperity and power.

The poet's choice of Alexander and the Prophet Solomon to embody both the ruler's power and his will to conquer evokes both historical achievement and Islamic

legitimacy; for the Prophet Solomon, in Islamic tradition, represents universal rule sanctioned by God.

Şalarsañ gün gibi tîğüñ irüşür şarka vü ğarba
Süleymân-ı zemânsın sen nice İskender-i sâni (56/22)
(You are the Second Alexander!
Just like the time of the Prophet Solomon,
if you were to let out your swords like the sun,
they would reach the east and the west.)

The nickname Dhul-Qarnayn for Alexander is mentioned in the poem of Edirneli Nazmi, who was a sixteenth century poet. The poem is in the 5758th “Qazel (lyric poem)”. In this poem, the poet compares himself to Alexander the Great, known as the Dhul-Qarnayn, in the context of the power of his poetry, while also likening his literary work to immortality. Here, the poet alludes to a story about Alexander, as told in the Islamic world (see the Alexander and Khidr section). Through the use of semantic connections between words, a literary device known as *leff ü neşir*¹ in Ottoman literature, the poet praises both himself and the power of his poetry. Using the simile (comparison) element common in Ottoman qasidas, the poet directly states that he is Alexander, known as Dhul-Qarnayn. The poet compares his words to the water of immortality found in the Land of Darkness, covered with black precious stones. The poet’s aims can be seen here:

Martial prowess: The poet emphasises that his poetry, much like Alexander the Great conquering lands, conquers the hearts of people.

Legitimacy: Claiming to be an artist whose words are like gems.

Prophetic echo: The poet seeks to sanctify his own words by associating himself with Dhul-Qarnayn, a figure revered in Islam. Therefore, the poet attempted to concretise the power, impact and sanctity of his own poetry through the art of simile, an example of Ottoman panegyric poetry.

Sen de Zū'l-Karneyn olan İskender'e
Her gören teşbîh Nazmî cevhere
(You mention Dhul-Qarnayn, who is Alexander

1 This is the act of taking two or more elements (nouns, adjectives, etc.) from one line and arranging them in a second line, either in an orderly or mixed manner, without explicitly stating their similar or contrasting characteristics; in other words, it is called "verbal symmetry"; the first part is "gathering/folding" (*leff*), and the second part is "spreading/explaining" (*neşir*).

Everyone who sees Nazmi refers to his gem)

İskender with Gog and Magog

In an anecdote about İskender in the Qur'an's Al-Kahf verse, Gog and Magog are the names of a tribe whose members are only as tall as a hand. Their teeth are like a pig's teeth, and their ears are as big as their bodies. Their bodies are hairy. People who are troubled by this tribe that eats snakes in summer and grass in winter go to İskender-i Dhul-Qarnayn (two-horned Alexander) for help. Alexander builds a wall against this tribe. This wall is called Sedd-i İskender (The Wall of Alexander) (Levend 177). According to Taberî, this incident took place after the time of Moses. It is written that this Alexander is also called Dhul-Qarnayn -ı Askar, which means Little Alexander. It is also written that this king is a fair ruler and a wise person who acknowledges God (Taberî I, 450). Ritter states that the story of Gog and Magog comes from pre-Islamic times and can also be found in Hebrew eschatology. According to Ritter (124), the original story of Gog and Magog is as follows: "There, two nations are mentioned that are located at the north of the realm. Their names are Gog and Magog. They will rise when the apocalypse comes, they will destroy the earth, walking towards the west, but eventually they will be destroyed as well." Furthermore, Ritter quotes De Goe and states that the Wall of Alexander mentioned in the Qur'an is considered to be the Great Wall of China. De Goe says that "Gog and Magog would dig through that wall every day, but the wall would close up in the evening. When the apocalypse comes, they will dig through the wall and scatter around the world. This wall ought to be the Great Wall of China. A legendary story of this Wall must have come to the West, and the primitive tribes must have interpreted the story in this manner" (Ritter 124).

Among the qasidas that constitute the sample of this study, in one couplet of the "Cülûsiye", which is a qasida about the Sultan's accession to the throne, written by sixteenth century poet Revânî for Sultan Selim, the poet has compared the Sultan's sword to a Wall against Gog's provocation and mischief. The Sultan is Alexander the Second, who built the wall. Here, the poet praises his patron, the ruler Alexander, through the story of Dhul-Qarnayn, a figure with religious significance and a Quranic origin. The poet's aims in creating this narrative with this couplet are as follows:

Martial prowess: The poet wants to emphasise Sultan Selim's military superiority. To defend the existence of a ruler who, according to the Quran,

possessed the power of Dhul-Qarnayn, who destroyed Gog and Magog, he states that the ruler's sword was made of iron and was unbreakable.

Legitimacy: In line with the general style of praise found in Ottoman literature, the poet claims that his sovereign is the ruler not only of the world but also of the universe.

Prophetic echo: The poet attributes sanctity to his ruler by likening him to Dhul-Qarnayn, a figure of Islamic jurisprudence. He also emphasises that the ruler did a good deed by destroying a force harmful to humanity, like Gog and Magog.

*Fesâd u fitne Ye'cücine sedd-i âhenîn tîgi
Anuñ zât-ı şerîfidür meger İskender-i sâni (55/7)
(His glorious self's sword is a wall of iron
against the Gog's provocation and mischief
Apparently, he was Alexander the Second)*

The position of Alexander the Great, under the name İskender, in the tradition of poetry and literature may be explained by the Ancient Greek and Roman influence that left deep traces on Islamic and Persian culture (Şentürk 288). Whereas there has been very little debate generally in the Islamic world about who İskender and or Dhul-Qarnayn were, some Ottoman poets had accepted that İskender was Alexander the Great. For example, in the following couplet, the author mentions the Gog and Magog tribes' elements of oppression and discord, and that Alexander the Great stopped these evils with the barrier he put up. In a qasida by fifteenth century poet Ahmed Pasha, tutor of Mehmed the Conqueror, Alexander the Great is mentioned. The striking element here can be seen in describing Alexander the Great as a Greek. The poet wrote this qasida to wish his ruler good health. The poem is titled *Der- 'İyâdet-i Şâh-ı Devrân*, meaning "For the Health of the Ruler of the Time." In each couplet of this poem, the poet explains why his ruler should be healthy and why he should recover. In the following couplet, the poet's reference to his ruler as Alexander the Greek has two explanations. The first reason is based on the common Turkish tendency to generalise about people living in places like Macedonia as Greeks. However, since the poet in question was considered one of the most important professors of the fifteenth century, another explanation for his referring to Alexander as Greek is also conceivable. The poet seeks to point out that Sultan Mehmed, as the conqueror of Istanbul, became the ruler of both the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. The verse following the couplet below reads, "Tedbîr ile leşker şıyup mektûb ile iklim alan, Ol iftihâr-ı milket-i 'Oşmâna şihhat yaraşur,"

meaning that the ruler who overcomes the enemy's plans with prudence, conquers countries with a letter, and wins battles with the marching band of the Ottoman Empire deserves to recover. The poet is explaining here that Mehmed the Conqueror was the ruler of both Istanbul and Constantinople. The poet aims to convey these meanings through this narrative structure.

Martial prowess: The poet emphasises that the conquest of Istanbul by Sultan Mehmed, with reference to Alexander the Great and other Greek figures, made him the leader of both the Byzantine and Islamic worlds.

Legitimacy: The poet claims that his ruler is the heir to both Byzantium and Islam. He also emphasises that the ruler did a good deed by destroying a force harmful to humanity, like Gog and Magog.

Prophetic echo: By associating the story of Gog and Magog with the word Alexander, the poet enhances the sanctity of his ruler, recalling the hero Dhul-Qarnayn in Islamic fiction.

*Yec'uc-ı zulm ü fitnenün Sedd-i Seddin Çekmege
Ol mefhar-ı İskender-i Yunan'a sıhhat yaraşur (32/6)
(It is fitting for the Sultan,
of whom Alexander the Greek took pride,
to build a strong barrier against
Gog of oppression and strife)*

İskender and Khidr

In Ottoman literature, İskender is mentioned in the stories of Khidr and immortality. Likewise, Khidr is similarly mentioned regarding İskender in Taberî's History. In the story of Khidr and Elijah, İskender becoming a ruler and searching for the water of immortality resembles the story of the Sumerian King Gilgamesh looking for the plant of life (see below). In this story, İskender does not succeed. The story goes that Khidr is İskender's cook and goes with İskender and Elijah to the city of Bolkar along with 4000 soldiers. The Land of Darkness is there. When they get to this land, İskender goes one way, and Khidr and Elijah go another way, looking for the water of life. Khidr put a cooked fish, which he had prepared earlier, beside him and washed his hands in a water source he found. Water drips from his hand onto the cooked fish. Suddenly, the fish comes back to life and jumps into the water. At that moment, Khidr realises that it is the water of life and calls for Elijah. They both bathe in the water. Thus, they both obtain immortality (Taberî, 2, 280-283).

Meanwhile, İskender leaves the Land of Darkness without accomplishing what he came for, just like the Sumerian King Gilgamesh.

There are many tales of immortality in history, and the source for stories in Ottoman literature about İskender's immortality may go back to the Sumerians. According to the writings on Sumerian tablets (Kramer 154), Inanna is the Sumerian goddess of light, love, and life, and the Queen of the Skies. When Inanna dies in the underworld trying to save her deceased husband, Dumuzid the Shepherd, her corpse is sprinkled sixty times with the food and water of life (Kramer 159). When this act is performed, Inanna comes back to life (Kramer 157-159). According to Tekin (217-218), Inanna's husband is also immortal. In her study of Çengnâme, Gönül Tekin states that Dumuzid the Shepherd, who is born again every year, is Jesus in Christianity and Circis or Khidr in Islam. The annual rebirth here represents the revival of the world in the spring each year.

Khidr is a god of nature in pagan cultures who brings about the arrival of spring by turning green the places he steps on every year. This pagan cult, which can also be found in the Christian World as Saint George, who was believed to turn green the places he walked on, found its way into Quranic commentaries in the Islamic World (Şentürk 289).

In Taberî's History, there are debates over Khidr's name; some call him 'Ermiya', some call him 'Elyasa', and some call him 'Belyâ'. Taberî says that, while according to one account he had come to the Israelites as a prophet, according to another account, he was a descendant of Noah and had seen the era of Noah. It has even been said that he was on Noah's Ark and his bloodline is said to be as follows: "Beliyâ son of Melkân son of Eber (Âmir) son of Salah (Sâleh) son of Arpachshad (Erfahşüd) son of Sam son of Noah" (Taberî, *I*, 448).

Hellmut Ritter (120) made a comparative study of narratives about Khidr in his book *The Effect of Eastern Mythology on Literature*. According to this study, the cult of Khidr draws from the Greek story about the sea devil Glaukos. This story goes as follows: There is a fisherman named Glaukos, a name meaning green. "One day, he sees one of the dead fish revive when it touches the grass. He eats some of that grass and becomes a demon. Immortality is a curse for him. He roams mountains and cliffs groaning, he wants to be free of this immortality" (Ritter 120).

According to Ritter (122), the cult of Khidr has become Islamic because this tale was translated from Greek in the novel of Alexander to Pahlavi and then to Arabic. The immortality grass that the Greek sea devil Glaukos found is likely to have its origins in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. In this epic, the child of the forest Enkidu, the Sumerian king Gilgamesh's beloved friend, is killed by the

Goddess Inanna. Gilgamesh has lost his dear friend, and he has also felt the fear of death. Gilgamesh, who does not want to die, hears a story about immortality: “He had heard that, in the olden times, someone named Utnapishtim (Zivsudru in Sumerian) had obtained immortality after the great flood that the Gods created to destroy civilisation. He had to go and find him; he had to know how he became immortal. But, according to the lore, he lived far away, in the garden of the Gods” (Çiğ 55). After hearing his story, Gilgamesh looks for Utnapishtim in every land and when he finally finds him, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh: “There was a thorned grass, it wounded hands that tried to pick it up and made them bleed. Only those who ate this plant were rejuvenated and regained their strength. But this thorn is at the bottom of a deep water which is on your way. If you can take it out, you will rejuvenate” (Çiğ 75). So, Gilgamesh sets off again and finds the plant at the bottom of the water. When he gets out of the water and lies down to rest, a snake comes and eats the plant that he found. Eventually, Gilgamesh is not successful in his quest (Çiğ 75). Utnapishtim in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh may be compared to Khidr and İskender regarding their immortality.

A reference is made to this story by the Ottoman palace poet Nedim, who wrote a *qasida* for Sultan Ahmet in the eighteenth century. Nedim concludes his poem of praise to the ruler by praying for him with references to Khidr and İskender. Here, the poet's aim can be explained, through the narrative structure in the poem, to convey his good wishes as follows:

Prowess of Wealth: The poet makes his wishes to his ruler within the context of the changing structure of the Ottoman Empire. In the new Ottoman structure, there is no room for warfare; what matters is protecting existing territories. Therefore, the poet wishes for his ruler to be an emperor of great wealth.

Legitimacy: By the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire had lost its former power and had been losing territory since the Treaty of Passarowitz¹. The poet expresses a wish for the ruler to achieve success on a global scale. Therefore, there is no longer a ruler in the Ottoman Empire who is a second Alexander, or even superior to Alexander, as was the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The poet, with hope, wishes for his ruler to achieve a level of

1 The Treaty of Passarowitz, signed on July 21, 1718, ended the 1715-1718 Ottoman-Austrian-Venetian War and included provisions such as the cession of Upper Serbia, Belgrade, and the Banat Plateau to Austria; the Dalmatian, Bosnian, and Albanian coasts to Venice; and the retention of the Peloponnese Peninsula by the Ottomans.

governance similar to that of Alexander.

Prophetic echo: The poet, by mentioning Khidr, who is associated with Alexander the Great in the Islamic world, wishes the ruler a long life.

*Sana temlik eylesin Hak bir yere cem ‘ eyleyüp
Mülk-i dehri ömr-i Hızrı devlet-i İskenderi
(God will set you somewhere and give you
the wealth of the world, the immortal life of Khidr,
the reign of Alexander)*

Conclusion

Alexander the Great of Macedonia has influenced many cultures and works of literature. His life has been the subject of narratives; sometimes, even in those where the name of Alexander is forgotten and turned into another extraordinary hero story. A factor behind the formation of these stories may be that Alexander and his mother believed in mystical views and practices, and they thus lived in pursuit of these beliefs. This factor, combined with Alexander’s progress to Central Asia to conquer the world, formed the basis of the many stories about him. Alexander, who declared himself as Zeus-Ammon in Egypt and had his picture and statue made by wearing two horns on his head like Ammon, and then printing money with this image, led to him being named Dhul-Qarnayn-i İskender, which means two-horned Alexander, in the Islamic literary tradition. Over time, this has been forgotten in Islamic literature and has caused debate in the academic world as to why İskender was referred to as double-horned.

While some interpret the nickname Dhul-Qarnayn as a reference to a mythological figure or God who goes both to the east and to the west, an alternative interpretation may be that it is a reference to the travels of Alexander the Great from one end of the world to the other. Some researchers deny that there is any connection to Alexander, arguing that Dhul-Qarnayn is a holy figure. Some ancient Islamic commentators have suggested that the name İskender and/or Dhul-Qarnayn may refer to Alexander, in that he wanted to dominate the world by hitting it with horns. Some more recent scholars argue that Alexander was the son of Ammon. This view may be derived from the accounts of events during his life in Egypt and the statue that Alexander had made after declaring himself as Zeus-Ammon, the heir of the Pharaoh in Egypt, with two horns as a crown. This interpretation facilitates an understanding that the stories of İskender and Dhul-Qarnayn in the Ottoman literary traditions may have developed from stories of Alexander the Great.

It is therefore possible that Alexander the Great had a significant influence on Ottoman literature. Poets wrote praises of their rulers, sometimes even praising themselves, for their poetic power in the literature, saying that they were superior, both as warriors and as rulers, to Alexander the Great. We also encounter the name Alexander (translated as İskender) as a character in short stories in Ottoman literature. In this story, İskender searches for the water of immortality but cannot find it. It is someone else, Khidr, who finds the water. Whereas many researchers claim there is no connection between İskender and Alexander the Great, Ottoman poets described İskender as Greek and acclaimed their rulers by reference to İskender's reign and Khidr's water of immortality. All of these references may indicate that İskender in Ottoman poetry is Alexander the Great.

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From Ancient Sea Routes to Maritime Borders: Compound Displacement and the Legibility Crisis in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract This article reads Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a law-and-literature account of forced mobility before legal naming. It examines how the novel links the Gun Merchant myth, the Bengal chapters, the philological reconstruction of routes to Venice, and the Blue Boat episode in order to make contemporary cross-sea displacement historically layered, formally distributed, and institutionally difficult to classify. The article argues that Ghosh makes perceptible the pre-legal life of forcedness: not mobility outside law, but mobility experienced and narrated as necessity before it can be translated into institutionally recognizable form. To track that movement, the article develops two analytic concepts. Compound displacement names constrained mobility produced through environmental deterioration, livelihood pressure, migration brokerage, and border governance; legibility crisis names the difficulty of translating such forcedness into the individualized, linear, and attributable narrative form that refugee status determination most readily reads. Distinguishing these concepts from mixed migration, survival migration, and slow violence, the article keeps legal doctrine in a supporting role, using refugee law, rescue at sea, place of safety, and non-refoulement to clarify what the novel formally stages. It concludes that the framework can also illuminate other world-literary narratives of transnational migration and maritime bordering, where ethical visibility does not automatically become legal readability.

Keywords compound displacement; climate migration; refugee law; maritime border; world literature

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Introduction

The Blue Boat episode in *Gun Island* offers one of the novel's starkest scenes of cross-sea vulnerability: a weather-beaten blue fishing vessel carrying refugees from the Sinai drifts in the Mediterranean after its engine dies, while charter boats, coastguard ships, journalists, and anti-migrant activists crowd the surrounding waters; in the midst of this standoff, Rafi suddenly recognizes Tipu among the passengers, "right there, by the smokestack" (Ghosh 285-86, 301-02). The scene is powerful not only because it dramatizes peril at sea, but because it concentrates a broader problem running throughout the novel. The mobile subjects gathered there are ethically and narratively intelligible as people under pressure. Their movement is shaped by environmental deterioration, livelihood insecurity, smuggling routes, trafficking violence, and border hostility. Yet this forcedness does not automatically become legible within the classificatory terms of international protection.

This article approaches that gap as the novel's central law-and-literature problem. *Gun Island* has been read most often through three overlapping conversations: ecocritical accounts of climate crisis, blue-humanities and hydrocolonial accounts of maritime space, and migration-centered accounts of precarity, bordering, and transnational mobility. Read alongside Ghosh's own *The Great Derangement*, the novel clearly belongs to broader debates shaped by Ursula Heise's account of planetary environmental imagination, Rob Nixon's account of slow violence, and Debjani Ganguly's work on the contemporary novel as global form.¹ Blue-humanities and hydrocolonial work by Isabel Hofmeyr, Hester Blum, and Steve Mentz further clarifies why oceans, ports, and routes should be treated as historically dense spaces rather than empty intervals between national territories.² Migration-centered readings, including criticism by Pablo Mukherjee and Alexa Weik von Mossner, show that movement in the novel is unequal, mediated,

1 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*; Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*; Nixon, *Slow Violence*; Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World*.

2 Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*; Blum, *The View from the Masthead*; Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*.

dangerous, and politically regulated rather than a romantic figure of global flow.¹ Recent work on *Gun Island* has also emphasized planetary environmentalism, storytelling, and multispecies migration, most notably in Khan's account of planetary environmentalism and Hoydis's reading of the novel as a parable of multispecies migration.²

The present article builds on these approaches but shifts the emphasis from representation to institutional readability: if the novel makes displacement so perceptible, why does that displacement remain difficult to name in stable legal terms? A selective law-and-literature premise is useful here, since legal institutions depend on narrative forms through which persons become readable as bearers of claims.³ Joseph Slaughter's account of how international law and narrative form together produce the recognizable rights-bearing subject offers the most useful point of orientation for that question, and *Gun Island* will be read here as foregrounding the underside of that same process.⁴ The point is not to prove that Ghosh's characters should simply be reclassified as Convention refugees. It is to show how the novel exposes a mismatch between complex mobility and the narrative forms through which protection is usually granted.

To make that mismatch visible, the article uses two concepts. "Compound displacement" names constrained mobility produced through the interaction of environmental deterioration, livelihood pressure, migration brokerage, and border governance. Such movement is not reducible to a single environmental cause, but neither is it adequately described as free economic choice. "Legibility crisis" names the threshold problem that follows: the difficulty of translating compound forcedness into the individualized, linear, and attributable narrative form that refugee status determination most readily reads. Here "pre-legal" does not mean outside law or prior to politics; it names the experiential and narrative life of forcedness before that forcedness has been translated into institutionally recognizable form. The legal framework is therefore deliberately limited to the refugee definition, non-refoulement, and the law of rescue at sea, including the question of place of safety. Law is used here not as an external test imposed on the novel, but as a way of clarifying why the forcedness made vivid by literature does not necessarily become institutionally protectable. Literary analysis carries the primary interpretive weight; legal materials are introduced only where the novel's own scenes activate them, and

1 Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*; Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies*.

2 Khan, "Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*"; Hoydis, "Parables for Planetary Crisis."

3 White, *The Legal Imagination*; Brooks and Gewirtz, *Law's Stories*.

4 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

only at the level of detail those scenes require.

The Gun Merchant Myth, Ancient Sea Routes, and the Historical Depth of Cross-Sea Displacement

This section turns to the first dimension of the argument: the temporal depth of contemporary cross-sea mobility. If *Gun Island* is read only as a contemporary climate novel, a crucial dimension of its migration narrative disappears. The Gun Merchant myth and the novel's repeated return to sea routes do not merely provide symbolic texture or atmospheric depth. They reposition contemporary mobility within a much longer history of circulation, trade, escape, and coercion across maritime space. The novel's itinerary from the Sundarbans to Venice is therefore not a geographically accidental movement from one dramatic location to another. It is a narrative reconstruction of an older maritime world in which commerce, imperial expansion, and forced movement were never fully separable. By placing present-day mobility on top of these older routes, the novel refuses to treat cross-sea displacement as an isolated emergency of the twenty-first century.

The Gun Merchant legend is especially important because it organizes mobility through a structure of pursued escape. Nilima first encounters the shrine in the aftermath of the 1970 Bhola cyclone, when relief workers find an apparently miraculous refuge whose bell had rung before the storm and whose roof, "with the profile of an upturned boat," had sheltered villagers from devastation (Ghosh 15). The shrine's custodian is not a Brahmin priest but a Muslim boatman who explains that Hindus associate the site with Manasa Devi while Muslims regard it as a place protected by a pir [saint] named Ilyas; the poem attached to the shrine, he adds, was meant to be "passed on from mouth to mouth" rather than written down (Ghosh 16). Even before the novel turns to contemporary migration routes, then, the legend is already being mediated through catastrophe, borderland relief, oral transmission, and religious overlap. What matters here is not whether the legend can be translated into a modern legal language of refugee. It cannot, and the article does not ask it to do so. What matters is that the legend gives the novel a durable grammar of movement under pressure: departure is tied to danger, mobility to pursuit, and travel to forces larger than individual choice.

The legend's own narrative core makes that point even clearer. As Nilima recalls it, the Gun Merchant, like Chand Sadagar, refuses devotion to Manasa and is thereafter "plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities"; he flees overseas to "*Gun Island*," is captured by pirates, and is only released after the goddess promises to restore his fortune if he returns to Bengal

and builds her shrine (Ghosh 17-18). The point is not merely that the story contains movement. It contains movement under pressure, repeated flight, capture, exchange, and sea passage. The myth thus already sketches, in a pre-legal register, something close to what this article will later call compound displacement: movement compelled by multiple overlapping calamities, mediated by capture and exchange, and resolvable only through reciprocal commitments that the modern protection regime can no longer provide. This is also why the novel's maritime imagination should not be reduced to a familiar hydrocolonial gesture. Certainly, the text draws on the now well-established insight that seas are not empty surfaces but dense historical media shaped by empire, extraction, and circulation. Yet the point of invoking ancient sea routes is not simply to restate that colonial histories continue into the present. The stronger claim is that the sea route provides a form through which dispersed pressures can be gathered into a single historical field.

Venice is crucial to this restructuring of scale, and the novel is unusually explicit about why. Long before the final crossing to the Mediterranean, Cinta's work begins to translate the shrine's scattered clues into a historical route. In her conference lecture she pauses over the Venetian ghetto as "an island within an island," a phrase that jolts Deen because Rafi had earlier used almost the same words to gloss the shrine's concentric-circle symbol (Ghosh 81, 149-50). Cinta then explains that the Arabic *al-Bunduqeyya* [Venice] can also name hazelnuts, bullets, and guns, making it suddenly possible to hear Bonduki Sadagar not simply as the Gun Merchant but as "the Merchant who visited Venice" (Ghosh 151-52). In the conversation that follows, she goes further still: Misri [Egypt] and Rumali [Rumelia] point toward Egypt and Ottoman space, the aleph-like sign beside Ilyas suggests a Jewish captain, and the whole legend begins to look, in her words, "not just a wonder tale" but a narrative that is "historically quite plausible" (Ghosh 153-55).

Cinta's reading restores the legend to history; the present argument moves in a slightly different direction. What matters analytically is less whether Bonduki Sadagar can be confirmed as a historical figure than the fact that the novel uses this philological labor to make the route itself appear as a layered medium through which mobility, trade, and pressure have been transmitted in continuous, if uneven, ways. Venice thus appears not merely as a destination but as a site where mercantile memory, multilingual etymology, and maritime history are compressed into the same interpretive space.

The importance of this philological sequence is formal as well as historical. The novel does not simply tell readers that Bengal and Venice are connected; it makes connection itself into an act of reading. Deen's progress depends on

mistranslation, correction, echo, and belated recognition: the shrine's symbols become readable only when they are routed through Cinta's archival knowledge, Rafi's local interpretation, and the multilingual instability of names. In that sense, the novel's method resembles the route it reconstructs. Meaning travels indirectly, across languages and religious traditions, and arrives only after delay. This delayed readability matters for the article's larger claim because the novel has already made interpretation difficult before law enters the argument. Mobility is not first presented as a case awaiting classification, but as a scattered archive of stories, signs, and remembered routes that must be pieced together. In this sense, the novel teaches its readers a method of reading that the protection regime is not equipped to perform: one that proceeds through delay, lateral connection, and the slow accumulation of partial signs.

Equally important is the temporal architecture of this discovery. The novel does not allow Deen, the philologist-protagonist, to grasp the meaning of the legend in advance; he is required to misread, to forget, and to be corrected by others before the route comes into focus. Rafi's casual phrase about an island within an island acquires meaning only after Cinta's lecture; Cinta's lecture acquires its full force only after Deen has already encountered the shrine; the shrine's symbols acquire their final coherence only when set against the multilingual instability of names like Bonduki, Misri, and Rumali. Each act of recognition arrives belatedly. This belatedness is not an accident of plot. It is the formal correlate of the route itself: a route that has carried meanings, peoples, and pressures across centuries can only be read in fragments, retrospectively, and through the patient cooperation of multiple voices. The novel thereby trains its readers in a temporal mode that institutional protection regimes are structurally unable to inhabit. Where asylum adjudication must arrive at decisions within compressed administrative time, *Gun Island* shows that the meanings now demanding legal recognition have been accumulating for far longer than any single procedure can register.

Seen in this way, the historical depth provided by the route changes the terms on which present mobility can be understood. Once contemporary movement is placed within a maritime continuum of trade, extraction, ecological vulnerability, and unequal circulation, it becomes harder to describe that movement as either an episodic humanitarian emergency or a purely economic choice. The route does not solve the classificatory problem that refugee law later encounters, but it makes clear why that problem will arise. If the sea route gives contemporary displacement its temporal continuity, the next question cannot simply be where people are going. It must be what kind of subjects are moving along this route, and why their mobility

resists the stable names that protection law prefers.

Compound Displacement and the Naming Problem of Refugee Law

The argument now turns to its second dimension: subject structure. The novel's most important intervention in migration discourse lies in the kind of mobile subject it constructs. The figures moving outward from Bengal are not most accurately described as either paradigmatic "economic migrants" or paradigmatic Convention refugees. Their departure takes shape within an environment where ecological deterioration, shrinking livelihood possibilities, generational pressure, and aspirational exit are tightly entangled.

Moyna's account of the aftermath of Cyclone Aila makes this clear in unusually concrete terms. After the embankments were destroyed and salt water rendered large areas uncultivable, "the exodus of the young was accelerating every year"; traffickers "descended in swarms"; boys and girls were "borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere," crossing into Bangladesh, joining labor gangs, or paying smugglers to take them by boat toward Malaysia or Indonesia (Ghosh 53). The result is not a cleanly classifiable narrative of free labor mobility, but neither is it a straightforward persecution narrative in the sense preferred by refugee law. *Gun Island* insists on a more unstable experiential structure: mobility is experienced as necessary before it becomes legally nameable.

Moyna's authority in this account is itself revealing. She speaks not as someone who has left, but as someone who remains: a nurse trained by Nilima's foundation, married into a household scarred by her husband Fokir's death years earlier, and now positioned to watch her son Tutul grow up in conditions she knows are deteriorating. Her perspective therefore introduces a structural asymmetry that refugee categories rarely accommodate: those who depart and those who stay are bound together by the same compound pressure, but only the former enter the field of legal classification. The young men and women whose names she does not list, who borrow and steal to pay agents, are absent from her testimony precisely because they have already become mobile; their absence is what gives her speech its weight. The novel here makes visible something that protection law structurally cannot see: that compound displacement is also, and inseparably, a story about those who remain in the place from which others must depart.

This article describes that structure as "compound displacement." The term is used here analytically rather than doctrinally. It does not propose a new formal legal category, nor is it simply a more fashionable synonym for "mixed migration." More importantly for the present reading, compound displacement names a narrative

structure before it names a policy problem. *Gun Island* distributes pressure across weather, land, debt, family expectation, digital aspiration, smuggling knowledge, and border violence. No single element explains departure on its own; each becomes forceful because it is narrated in relation to the others.

The term therefore differs from several neighboring vocabularies. “Mixed migration” usefully describes routes on which people with different statuses, motives, and protection needs move together, but it does not by itself explain how forcedness is produced or narrated. Alexander Betts’s influential concept of “survival migration” comes closer, since it names persons outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they lack access to domestic remedy or resolution (Betts 4-5). Yet Betts’s concept is primarily a normative category for identifying a protection gap; compound displacement is a literary-analytic description of how multiple pressures become narratively entangled before any legal category can receive them. Nor is the term reducible to Nixon’s “slow violence” (2). Slow violence clarifies why gradual environmental harm is hard to perceive, but in *Gun Island* environmental attrition is only one strand in a wider structure of livelihood pressure, brokerage, aspiration, debt, and border governance. The problem is not simply whether damage can be seen. It is whether a dispersed field of damage can be compressed into a claim that institutions know how to read.

Tipu’s trajectory is crucial here because the novel refuses to make him a transparent victim. Returned from Oregon, expelled after being mocked as someone from a place where “only servants and whores came from the Sundarbans,” and increasingly convinced that he can “learn more on the Net” than in school, he is formed at the intersection of precarity, aspiration, humiliation, and digital mediation (Ghosh 55-56). His speech often sounds entrepreneurial, even abrasive, but that tone does not cancel the pressures around him. It complicates them. Ghosh thereby avoids the sentimental grammar in which mobility becomes legible only when the migrant appears passive, wounded, and morally uncomplicated.

The Bengal chapters are especially important because they show how forcedness emerges before any formal crossing into the legal vocabulary of protection. The pressures described there are cumulative rather than spectacular, closer to what Nixon calls “slow violence” than to a single catastrophic rupture. Ecological instability gradually thins out the conditions under which life can be reproduced; economic difficulty becomes tied to the sense that younger people must leave; migration networks give pressure a route, a price, and a risky horizon of expectation. Tipu says as much, albeit in his own idiom, when he describes his work as part of “the people-moving industry” and explains that “the fish catch is

down, the land's turning salty," the forests are increasingly inaccessible, storms keep returning, and "if you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out" (Ghosh 65). The phrase "find a way out" is crucial. It makes departure sound at once pragmatic and coerced, chosen and compelled. The novel thereby captures the pre-legal life of forcedness: a subject can be pressured into motion long before that pressure acquires a stable legal name.

This point matters because the novel stages a clash between lived narration and institutional narration. Refugee law remains organized around a story of individualized fear, persecution, causal attribution, and Convention grounds¹. *Gun Island*, by contrast, gives readers stories that are layered, dispersed, and unevenly voiced. Moyna speaks as a local witness to ecological and social attrition; Tipu speaks as a broker who has learned the market in routes and stories; Rafi speaks in the quieter register of someone who knows he may have "no choice" but to leave (Ghosh 68, 95). The mismatch is therefore not only conceptual. It is built into the novel's distribution of voices.

This distribution of voices is itself a political and formal choice. Ghosh does not place the meaning of displacement in the mouth of a single authoritative narrator, nor does he allow one character to stand as the transparent representative of climate migration. Moyna's account is grounded in village memory, damaged embankments, salinized land, and the visible departure of the young. Tipu's account translates that same pressure into the language of networks, fees, scripts, and opportunity. Rafi's account is more hesitant and inward, registering necessity as something anticipated before it is fully acted upon. The novel's refusal of a single explanatory voice matters because it formally resists the kind of single-stranded account that institutional recognition often prefers. Compound displacement is therefore not simply what the characters experience; it is how the novel distributes the work of explanation among them.

Tipu's own account makes this clash brutally explicit. For those applying for asylum in Europe, he says, starvation after flooding, poisoned groundwater, or debt violence "none of that shit matters"; "politics, religion and sex is what they're looking for — you've gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you" (Ghosh 67). The vulgar directness of the sentence is part of its force. Tipu reduces asylum narration to a teachable script, but the reduction is not merely cynical. It reveals that a life shaped by gradual environmental and economic pressure may have to be retold as a more recognizable story of persecution before it

1 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

can be heard.

The choice of register matters here. Ghosh could have framed this insight in the analytic prose of an authoritative narrator; instead he allows it to surface through Tipu's profanity. The vulgarity is not incidental ornament. It marks the friction between the bureaucratic vocabulary of "Convention grounds" and the lived vocabulary of those who must navigate them. By placing the diagnosis of asylum's narrative requirements in the mouth of someone whom asylum adjudication would itself find awkward to process, a young man who is ironic, mercenary, and aware of the script. Ghosh draws attention to a further asymmetry. Those most likely to articulate the structure of the legibility crisis are also those least likely to be heard inside the institutions that produce it. Literary form here performs an analytic operation that doctrinal commentary cannot easily reproduce: it lets the critique come from inside the position it describes.

This mismatch helps clarify why the article frames the issue as a naming problem rather than a simple definitional deficiency. A naming problem is not just a matter of saying that the law is too narrow. It is a matter of showing how certain experiences must be translated before they can be heard at all. The novel therefore does not simply ask readers to sympathize with migration. It asks them to notice the violence of compression: a dense field of relations must be narrowed into a story that institutions can process.

At this point, compound displacement becomes inseparable from the article's account of legibility. Tipu is proud of tailoring "stories like they want to hear," while Rafi, from a different social location altogether, quietly remarks that his grandfather had long ago warned him that conditions in the Sundarbans were changing "so much, and so fast" that "one day I would have no choice but to leave" (Ghosh 68, 95). The contrast between these voices is one of the section's key literary effects. Tipu treats forcedness as something to be packaged; Rafi speaks it as a future that has been approaching for years. Between them, the novel presents migration as a layered structure in which ecological deterioration, livelihood precarity, route dependency, and border pressure intensify one another.

Tipu matters here not only because he voices the mismatch, but because he has learned to operate inside it. He understands that institutional hearing comes at the price of narrative rewriting: experience must be translated into the idiom that asylum systems are prepared to recognize. In that sense, *Gun Island* shows more than a failure of institutions to read complex mobility. It also shows subjects being pressured to rewrite themselves in order to become readable at all. This is where the argument approaches *Slaughter* from the other direction. Where *Slaughter*

shows how human-rights discourse co-produces the recognizable rights-bearing subject through its preferred narrative forms, *Gun Island* shows the underside of that same process: subjects whose forcedness exceeds those forms must either rewrite themselves into recognizable shape or remain institutionally unreadable.¹ The legibility crisis, in other words, is not only a failure of reading; it is also the production of strategic self-narration as a condition of being heard at all.

The structural reasons for this pressure can be stated briefly. Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention demands a well-founded fear of persecution that is individualized, attributable to one of the five Convention grounds, and tied to the failure of the country of nationality to provide protection². Each of these requirements presupposes a narrative form: a single threatened subject, a recognizable agent of harm, and a causal chain that runs in one direction. *Gun Island* organizes its account of forcedness in almost the opposite key. It distributes pressure across multiple voices, refuses to localize harm in a single persecutor, and weaves environmental attrition into the slow erosion of livelihood, family, and community. The mismatch is therefore not an accident of representation but a clash between two narrative grammars: one centered on attribution and one on accumulation. This does not mean that refugee law is wholly static or incapable of recognizing cumulative forcedness. UNHCR has stressed that climate- and disaster-related claims may, in specific circumstances, fall within the 1951 Convention, and broader regional instruments such as the OAU Convention and the Cartagena Declaration extend protection to persons fleeing events or circumstances that seriously disturb public order³. The point, however, is that even these more capacious frameworks require compound pressure to be narrated as a recognizable claim. Their breadth therefore does not displace the article's argument; it clarifies why the difficulty is a naming and legibility problem rather than a simple definitional deficiency.

Once the naming problem is understood in these terms, the article's turn to the maritime border becomes logically necessary rather than merely dramatic. If forcedness is already difficult to stabilize on land, the difficulty becomes sharper

1 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

2 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Legal Considerations regarding Claims for International Protection Made in the Context of the Adverse Effects of Climate Change and Disasters* (1 October 2020), paras. 5, 9, 13, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2020/en/123356>; OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, adopted 10 September 1969, entered into force 20 June 1974, 1001 UNTS 45, art. I(2); Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, adopted 22 November 1984, conclusion III(3).

once mobile subjects enter a space organized simultaneously by rescue imperatives, border enforcement, and uncertain disembarkation. The sea does not create the crisis of legibility from nothing. It intensifies a problem already present in the structure of compound displacement. The next section therefore turns to the Blue Boat episode, where the instability of naming becomes a more visible instability of protection.

Blue Boat, Maritime Spectatorship, and the Border at Sea

The third dimension of the argument is spatial exposure. If the previous section examined how compound displacement resists stable naming, the Blue Boat episode shows how that instability becomes visible at sea. The scene matters not merely because it is dramatic, but because Ghosh stages the maritime border as a crowded theater of competing ways of seeing. Before the boat itself comes into view, it arrives through reports, satellite images, rumor, and digital circulation: Gisa traces its departure to the Sinai, where refugees had been held in a subterranean “connection house,” a trafficking hub associated with organ harvesting, until a storm destroyed the structure and the captives seized phones, hard drives, and eventually the boat itself under the guidance of a tall Ethiopian woman (Ghosh 285-86). By the time the vessel reaches the Mediterranean theater in which the Lucania and other charter boats are waiting, it is already more than a vessel. It is a moving archive of captivity, evidence, speculation, and risk.

The scene is also carefully choreographed as a problem of spectatorship. The Blue Boat does not arrive in empty waters. It is preceded by “a motley flotilla” of chartered vessels carrying activists of many stripes, and when it finally appears it is “a forlorn little fishing boat with its clinkered hull and flaking coat of blue paint,” shadowed by coastguard ships flying different flags, greeted on one side by cheers and on the other by roars of “Go back where you came from” and “Europe for Europeans!” (Ghosh 297, 301). The boat is thus framed by voices before it can speak for itself. It is cheered, denounced, filmed, pursued, and symbolically claimed. When the engine dies and the vessel begins to drift, Rafi suddenly sees Tipu “right there, by the smokestack,” collapsing the distance between public spectacle and known life (Ghosh 302). That recognition is one of the scene’s crucial formal turns: the migrant mass becomes a face, but only through a personal relation that interrupts the media field surrounding the boat.

Law enters this scene not as the master frame but as a subsidiary clarifying register. The duty to rescue under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explains why distress at sea cannot be treated as a matter of political

preference¹. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) further operationalize that duty through search-and-rescue arrangements². The later guidance on place of safety clarifies why rescue is incomplete if people are merely removed from immediate danger without being brought somewhere their basic needs and onward protection questions can be addressed³. Yet Ghosh's interest lies less in expounding these rules than in dramatizing the interval they cannot by themselves resolve. The Blue Boat is no longer simply invisible, but visibility has not become arrival. The people on board have been located, watched, and surrounded; they have not yet been received.

The concept of place of safety deserves a closer look here, because it captures with unusual precision the gap between rescue and reception that the novel dramatizes. Under the IMO Guidelines, a place of safety is not merely a port at which people can be physically unloaded; it is a location at which the rescue operation can be considered terminated, basic human needs are met, and onward arrangements can be made, including, for those who may need international protection, access to fair status determination procedures⁴. A vessel itself can

1 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994, 1833 UNTS 3, art. 98(1).

2 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), adopted 1 November 1974, entered into force 25 May 1980, 1184 UNTS 278, reg. V/33.1; International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, adopted 27 April 1979, entered into force 22 June 1985, 1405 UNTS 97, annex, paras. 1.3.2, 2.1.10.

3 International Maritime Organization, Resolution MSC.167(78), "Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea," IMO Doc. MSC 78/26/Add.2, annex 34 (20 May 2004), paras. 6.12-6.18; International Maritime Organization, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and International Chamber of Shipping, *Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice in the Context of Refugees and Migrants Movements* (revised ed., IMO, 2026), pp. 8, 12-14, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/operational/imo/2026/151482>. The 2026 *Rescue at Sea* guidance is a soft-law instrument that interprets, rather than supplements, the existing treaty framework on rescue and disembarkation.

4 International Maritime Organization, Resolution MSC.167(78), "Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea," IMO Doc. MSC 78/26/Add.2, annex 34 (20 May 2004), paras. 6.12-6.18; International Maritime Organization, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and International Chamber of Shipping, *Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice in the Context of Refugees and Migrants Movements* (revised ed., IMO, 2026), pp. 8, 12-14, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/operational/imo/2026/151482>. The 2026 *Rescue at Sea* guidance is a soft-law instrument that interprets, rather than supplements, the existing treaty framework on rescue and disembarkation.

serve only as a temporary place of safety; lingering rescue at sea is, doctrinally, an unfinished rescue. The Blue Boat episode is staged precisely in this unfinished interval. The boat has been found, watched, and surrounded; the rescue has been declared; yet the question of where, and as whom, its passengers will arrive remains suspended. Ghosh's narrative pacing converts this doctrinal interval into a literary scene of extended attention. The novel slows the moment in which protection should have begun, and in slowing it, exposes how much institutional uncertainty that moment can hold.

What the Blue Boat episode finally exposes is a regime of maritime spectatorship: a way of organizing the border in which migrants are seen, claimed, denounced, and filmed long before they are received. Spectatorship in this sense is not the opposite of legal recognition; it is one of the media through which recognition becomes politically expensive. This is why the scene is saturated with delay, noise, and mediation. Journalists rush to "put a human face" on the boat, anti-migrant groups threaten obstruction, and the vessel itself drifts in a corridor already thick with whales, dolphins, military hardware, cameras, slogans, and counter-slogans (Ghosh 302). Ghosh does not present the maritime border as a clean line between law and lawlessness. He presents it as a dense narrative space in which humanitarian pity, nationalist hostility, media appetite, ecological disturbance, and state power occupy the same field of vision. Tipu's reappearance matters because he has already named the narrative script demanded by asylum systems. On the boat, however, he is not telling that script; he is being watched inside one. The earlier problem of self-narration becomes a scene of visual capture.

Gun Island renders this politically concrete when the Italian helicopter finally announces, "We are from the Italian Navy and we are here to organize your rescue," only for cheers of relief to be met immediately by cries of "traitor" from hostile boats (Ghosh 308). The announcement is grammatically simple, but the scene around it is not. Rescue appears inside a field of accusation; humanitarian action immediately becomes political betrayal for those who police the border from the surrounding vessels. The sea is therefore where the gap between being seen, being saved, and being protected becomes hardest to ignore.

The accusation of "traitor" deserves attention as a small but precise diagnostic moment. In the maritime law framework that organizes the scene, the duty to rescue is not contingent on political alignment: it does not ask whose side the rescuer is on, and it does not depend on the political reception that follows¹. Yet the surrounding

1 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994, 1833 UNTS 3, art. 98(1).

boats treat the act of rescue as if it were a partisan choice: an act of solidarity with the rescued rather than the discharge of an obligation owed by all states. The novel does not stage a debate between these two positions; it lets them collide in the same acoustic space. Ghosh thereby exposes a structural feature of the contemporary maritime border that doctrinal description alone struggles to capture: the legal obligation to rescue and the political contestation of rescue have become routinely co-present, with the latter shaping how the former is performed, delayed, or politically taxed. The literary scene shows the cost of that co-presence in real time.

The principle of non-refoulement sharpens this reading, but it does not displace the literary point. The Blue Boat's prehistory, the subterranean trafficking site, the storm-driven escape, and the absent territorial order from which return would itself be a form of harm, constructs a situation in which going back cannot plausibly mean safety. *Teitiota v. New Zealand* is useful only in this limited sense: it suggests that environmental harm may, in extreme circumstances, intersect with non-refoulement obligations, while also showing how high and fragmented the threshold remains¹. In the novel, however, the force of the issue comes less from doctrinal possibility than from narrative arrangement. The story has already made return feel incoherent before law has decided how to classify the people who cannot return.

What "return" would even mean in this scene is far from obvious. The Blue Boat's passengers do not arrive on the Mediterranean from a single coherent point of origin to which they could conceivably be sent back. They emerge instead from a destroyed underground compound on the Sinai peninsula, from chains of brokerage extending into the Horn of Africa, from villages around the Sundarbans whose ecological foundations are themselves dissolving. The legal grammar of non-refoulement, anchored in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Convention and reinforced by complementary protection under international human-rights law, still requires return risk to be attached to a legally cognizable territory and a narratable chain of harm². *Gun Island* does not refute this requirement theoretically; it unsettles it narratively, by accumulating histories of dispersal so dense that "the country of origin" loses traction as a stable reference point. The novel's contribution to thinking about non-

1 *Teitiota v. New Zealand*, UN Human Rights Committee, Communication No.2728/2016, CCPR/C/127/D/2728/2016 (7 January 2020), paras. 9.4-9.14. For a complementary discussion of the rescue-protection nexus, see also United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *General Legal Considerations: Search-and-Rescue Operations Involving Refugees and Migrants at Sea* (November 2017), <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2017/en/120361>.

2 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

refoulement is therefore not a doctrinal proposal but a structural challenge to the geographic imagination on which the doctrine relies.

The ending of the episode returns the legal scene to the novel's mythic and ecological register. Birds circle in a "halo," the water flashes with bioluminescence, and "the creatures of the sky and sea" seem momentarily to rise around the boat before the navy cutters intervene and the refugees are transferred under spotlights. The vessel is then blown up and slowly sunk, while the rescued passengers wave goodbye to it from the cutters' decks (Ghosh 306-08). This is not a simple triumph of rescue. The destruction of the boat is a strikingly ambivalent image: the object that made survival possible must disappear, and with it disappears the material trace of the route that gathered these lives together. The boat's destruction is thus a final figure for the legibility crisis itself: even the artifact through which forcedness became visible is made to vanish. What survives is not the boat itself but the scene of interpretation it has forced into view. The Blue Boat episode thus turns narrative spectacle into institutional diagnosis, but it remains, first of all, a literary scene: a carefully staged convergence of voice, image, myth, ecology, and law.

This is where the present reading most clearly diverges from, while also depending on, recent multispecies accounts of *Gun Island*. Hoydis's reading of the novel as a story of planetary crisis and multispecies migration rightly foregrounds the birds, snakes, dolphins, spiders, and other nonhuman movements through which Ghosh unsettles a narrowly human scale of migration.¹ The Blue Boat ending confirms that insight, since rescue unfolds within an ecological and mythic field rather than a purely legal one. Yet from the perspective of institutional legibility, that very density sharpens the problem. The more fully the scene gathers human vulnerability, animal movement, mythic recurrence, and maritime spectacle, the less easily it can be reduced to the individualized account that protection procedures tend to require. Literary form expands the field of ethical perception; law demands a narrower grammar of readability.

Conclusion

Gun Island should not be read as a novel that simply asks law to widen its categories until every vulnerable mobile subject can be absorbed into them. Nor does it merely provide an ethical supplement to legal discourse by making readers feel sympathy for migrants whom institutions ignore. Its more demanding achievement lies in the literary forms through which it makes forced mobility readable before it becomes legally nameable: the route-form of the Gun Merchant myth, the distributed voices

1 Hoydis, "Parables for Planetary Crisis," 390-408.

of Moyna, Tipu, and Rafi, and the staged spectatorship of the Blue Boat episode.

The movement traced in this article has therefore been from ancient sea routes to the maritime border. First, the Gun Merchant myth and the novel's maritime route-form give present-day displacement a long historical depth, so that contemporary movement appears not as an isolated emergency but as part of a larger continuum of unequal circulation across sea space. Second, compound displacement emerges not only as a description of mixed causal pressure but also as a narrative pattern: environmental attrition, livelihood collapse, brokerage, aspiration, and border violence become legible through the interaction of different voices rather than through a single explanatory cause. Third, the Blue Boat episode turns this naming problem into a scene of maritime spectatorship. At sea, visibility does not guarantee recognition, and rescue does not by itself settle the question of reception.

For that reason, the article's claim is not that *Gun Island* proves its characters are all Convention refugees, nor that current legal frameworks are simply empty. The point is more exacting. The novel stages forms of constrained mobility that are cumulative, dispersed, historically layered, and formally difficult to compress. Law helps clarify why such forms may be hard to process, but the force of the argument comes from the novel's own narrative work: its myths, routes, translations, voices, delays, and visual scenes. "Pre-legal," in the sense developed here, was never a region outside law. It is the densely narrated life of forcedness that institutions are eventually asked to read, and that their compressed forms can register only by discarding much of what first made it legible to literature.

This is why law and literature must remain in productive tension in reading *Gun Island*. Legal concepts mark the threshold conditions under which protection may be granted, withheld, delayed, or fragmented. Literary form makes perceptible the pressures that those thresholds fail to register without thereby pretending to solve them. The novel does not offer a program for legal reform, but it performs an indispensable diagnostic function. It makes visible the institutional cost of forcing complex mobility into overly stable names.

The framework proposed here may also travel beyond Ghosh's novel as a tool for reading world-literary migration narratives in which environmental attrition, maritime passage, and institutional recognition fail to align. In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, for example, asylum depends not only on having suffered displacement but on deciding what can be told, withheld, or made readable within an official story of refuge. In Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, the lives of African asylum seekers in Berlin similarly expose the distance between narrative intelligibility and bureaucratic recognition. Such comparisons should not flatten the historical differences among

Indian Ocean exile, Mediterranean crossing, and European asylum procedure. They suggest, rather, that compound displacement and the legibility crisis name a broader critical problem for world literature: the recurring gap between lives that become recognizable to ethics and lives that become readable to law. In doing so, *Gun Island* becomes not a footnote to international law, but a literary site from which the limits of protection can be more sharply seen. If literature has a specific contribution to make to the international protection debate, it lies here: not in supplying new doctrinal categories, but in sustaining attention to the slow, distributed, and historically saturated forms of forcedness that doctrine, by design, must compress.

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Currency of Social Institutions in Amharic Poems Recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew

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Abstract This study examines the social institutions in three purposively selected contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew. Through CDA and textual analysis, it finds that the family, though considered an essential institution in guiding members, lacks the discursive power to maintain closeness and unity among members. Similarly, religions are deemed to lose their power in guarding their followers from rebellion against God. Likewise, followers are portrayed as a seat for deceit, hatred, grudge, revenge, mischief, and insidiousness. Equally, the government is considered a seat of structural injustice, positioning victims without options, exposing them to substantive atrocities. Equally, education is found to lack its instructional power in shaping individuals who can positively influence public opinion and the citizenry's commitment, integrity, and national sensibility. The media serve as a platform for labeling, fueling a deep social divide and social ills that negatively affect citizens' lives and their sense of hope, peace, and happiness. Thus, there is a need for stakeholders such as government authorities, religious leaders, and policymakers to make every effort in capacitating these institutions through collaborative practices and maintaining their guiding ethos in the best interest of the public.

Keywords social institutions; social currency; Amharic poems; CDA; Ethiopia

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Introduction

Ethiopia is a land of diverse communities with a multifaceted tapestry of cultural and religious values, norms, linguistic and ethnic lines, and social institutions.

Through various age-old social institutions, such as religions and social currencies, communities in Ethiopia have been shaping public and familial interactions, promoting peaceful neighborhoods, managing challenges, and resolving conflicts within these social institutions and their associated social currencies (Karbo 50).

However, Ethiopia's legacy of governance and the political playbooks have taken their basis from making use of force and manipulation instead of dialogue and common understanding. Accordingly, the diverse speech communities, their social currencies, and ethnic lines have been shaped by the nature of governance in the country. In light of this, Adamu (24) states that governance in Ethiopia across history has seen issues of diversity caused by socio-political practices; it lacks the balance between maintaining diversity and unity, and this in turn has led communities to face threats regarding national cohesion, tension, clash, and collapse (Østebø 738).

In the course of changes of governance in Ethiopia, there have often been conflicts among elites, which have damaged social fabrics that uphold communities' cohesion and stability. The conflicts among the elites have been shaped by narratives that host historical legacies of hostilities and negative views of groups and out-groups of elites across the country (Asefa 25).

Driven by political upheaval, such differences, especially in present-day Ethiopia, have mounted and led to ethnic tensions and broad violence far and wide, resulting in displacement and loss of lives. Ethnic politics and mindset have fueled further tensions and exacerbated violence and instability. Given this context, webs of discourse (among which poetry is one), given in light of social institutions, can shape public opinion and amount to either a peaceful coexistence or a much graver political environment.

Accordingly, this study considers contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew and explore the currency of social institutions within and among communities in Ethiopia, as reflected in the poems. The study investigates these poems based on the following research questions:

- 1) What is the social currency of social institutions in Ethiopia as manifested in the poems?
- 2) Do the social institutions make efforts to foster a climate of common understanding and mutual respect?
- 3) Do they uphold their social currencies well and promote coexistence and trust among communities, or aggravate polarization and social divide?
- 4) Have they themselves shown significant changes over the decades as a result of the political turmoil in the country?

Conceptual Framework

The study investigates contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew to see the social currency of social institutions such as family, religion, education, government, and media. It explicates how these social institutions manifest their roles and are viewed within the communities.

Social institutions are understood as a basic governing system of society. They are deemed to be social forces that guide the function of societal relations, setting expected values and character traits of individuals (Wondmagegn 198). Likewise, Ferrera (1) defines institutions as regulations and systems that conventionally or casually compel the character of people in communities, combine choices, and organize their beliefs. Similarly, Baral (68) reflects that these institutions are influential in setting communal values and commonly accepted unwritten rules.

Through these shared values and rules, societies maintain social order and coherence. They are commonly considered pillars of society, underpinning healthy social relationships among and within communities. Such institutions can play a key role in shaping individuals to have integrity (Izham et al. 481) and are believed to maintain the social fabric and facilitate peaceful coexistence within communities. As Baral (70) indicates, they set societal expectations for individuals in a society to behave in manners that are deemed suitable. They render regulatory ways for individuals when interacting within their communities. According to Wondmagegn (198), they play an indispensable part in influencing the expected social standards, morals, and the characters or manners of individuals in a given society.

These social organizations encompass a wide range of institutions, including religion, family, media, education, and governance (Wondmagegn 198; Baral 69; Izham et al. 482). These institutions play a significant role in fostering social interaction, learning, and instruction among people. They promote the sharing of essential values, skills, and beliefs that can help maintain society's role. They have a critical role in maintaining the regulation of the code of conduct, enforcement of laws, which in turn ensures social cohesion and civil rights (Baral 69).

Family plays a key role in shaping children. Family heads take the lead to instruct children in ways to behave and communicate with people in an expected manner set by society (Baral 69; Izham et al. 482). Likewise, religious teachings nurture members of society with moral values and norms, and frame individuals to create a sense of belonging in communal life. These instructions can help strengthen the bonds within communities and foster a sense of care among individuals, showcasing a deeper understanding of life (Baral 69; Izham et al. 482).

Altan (3) states that education, as one of the imperative social institutions, could play a part in shaping an equitable and all-embracing society. Similarly, Baral (69) indicates that education, like a religious institution, can help communicate standards and moral values, which include respecting leaders, accountability, and working hard. It imparts insights and historical background about the communities to members, and strengthens familial and religious instructions in a way that individuals can have understanding and skillsets to get involved in societal engagements. Likewise, Izham et al. (482) state that education, as a socio-cultural institution, is essential in establishing and enhancing societal integrity.

In the same vein, media (television, newspapers, and social media) can inform individuals and shape public voices. The information spread through these media outlets can influence individuals' beliefs and moral standards (Baral 69). According to Ferrera (1), the media can be of use to bring about changes in people's choices and moral standards. Similarly, governments, through rules and principles, can help apply shared moral standards informed by strategies. They offer a basis for communal communication, such as ways in which individuals can communicate among themselves and resolve issues of dispute. By this token, they can apply laws and stabilize society, and ensure public cohesion (Baral 69).

To see the condition of social institutions and uncover the ways the recited poems as discourses represent institutional currency, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been employed as a framework. CDA, as a critical approach, emphasizes communal problems. It takes up the communal causes seriously and upholds the practices and views of the disadvantaged groups (van Dijk 96). Likewise, as described by Fairclough (125), CDA can give contexts and insights into uncovering the challenges people face in specific kinds of communal life.

As indicated in van Dijk (106) and Flowerdew and Richardson (1), among other things, CDA can be used to unravel the underlying ideological assumptions, implications, allusions, and suppositions that are constructed in communication events or discourses about social practice. Through the study of language uses, such as rhetorical figures, CDA can help to shed light on the socially shared beliefs or the social power embedded in discourses.

To study discourse, there is a need to consider context and language use as the center of focus. Context, according to van Dijk (109), is a mental representation. It subjectively signifies practices of individuals, specifically the present communicative event, and gives prominence to the representation of communal cultural awareness of common and interactive situations and their partakers.

Statham (9) delineates CDA as a discipline that considers the interconnection

of communicative episodes, underlying beliefs, and control, and pursues to make a textual explication of the difficulties and the influential systems that uphold and strengthen ordered and classified institutions of communities. CDA, according to this author, examines the language use fashioned by a variety of institutions: communication outlets, the justice system, education, and governments. In light of this, CDA exposes the underlying systems of belief that buttress dominating communicative events in a communal environment.

Methods and Materials

This study has investigated contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube to see the social currency of social institutions through the lens of critical discourse analysis. Accordingly, based on purposive sampling, it has selected three poems [ይድረስ ለኛ (Let the message come to us), እባክህን ተወኝ ልጄ (Please, leave me, my son), ለኔ ባል (Say it is my concern)] recited by Getnet Enyew, an Ethiopian Artist who is widely known and watched on YouTube. Accordingly, the poems were carefully transcribed and translated into English. They have been thoroughly read, and excerpts fit to the views of the specific social institutions were identified and organized; the Amharic excerpts and their translations have been placed side by side to ease understanding. The selected excerpts from the contemporary Amharic poems have been qualitatively and textually analyzed. On the basis of the theoretical insights of critical discourse analysis, the study explicates what the persona reflects regarding addressees, their supposed views, deeds or misdeeds, moral grounds, beliefs, and cultural values constructed in the selected poems. Additionally, the study analyzes the language uses such as metaphors and allusions, and exposes meanings that are explicit or implicit. It argues against the grain and critically describes views from different angles.

Results

This study has explored the currency of social institutions, their values, norms, systems, credibility, public interest, responsibilities, and accountability as reflected in the poems recited.

Family as a Social Institution

A family as a social institution is believed to be a prime part of society that helps in setting up values, norms, and beliefs. Drawing multiple values and beliefs from other institutions, such as religion and education, a family takes a crucial step to instruct members with manners, build up its members' social skills, bring up children with culturally supported norms, and substantially shape them to socialize

and maintain peaceful coexistence within and among communities. The belief that parents are responsible for siblings' well-being, and children should follow their parents' instructions, is reflected in the following excerpt.

በዛሬ ክፉ ስራችን	Let not our today's evil deeds make our forefathers feel sad,
የትናንትና አባቶቻችን በልጆቻቸው አይዘኑብን	Let not our posterity feel shame on us,
የነገ ልጆቻችን በአባቶቻቸው አይፈሩብን	Please, brother,
እባክህን ወንድምዬ	Let not our hope perish, our days become dark;
እባክህን ተስፋችን አይርገፍ እባክህ ቀናችን አይጨልም	Our peace is our happiness, our country is our world,
ሰላማችን ነው ደስታችን ሃገራችን ናት የኛ አለም	(Let the message come to us)

As indicated in the above text, the persona reflects that responsibilities are like a relay; he pleads with the current brother, who takes the role of a father, to responsibly meet expectations and duly contribute to the benefit of the coming generation. If responsibilities are not handed off and duties are not passed well, family settings and communities at large will be negatively affected, the persona begs. He asserts that there will be disruption and miscommunication, which will affect continuity, sense of hope, and prospect if the brother addressed does not respond duly. The persona reflects that such a condition will put the forefathers to sadness and the siblings to shame, indicating 'shame' as a discursive power to press the addressee to bring change. The persona considers that the decisive power is in the hands of the current brother to maintain the connecting link.

In contrast to the above, the following persona seems to focus on distancing the child and claiming self-worth. He accuses the child of making excuses and instructs him/her to be his/her own, irrespective of the father's deeds or name. The persona instructs the child to be self-reliant, never to take the father as an excuse for his/her failure or as an enabler for his/her success. The persona states that the child should take himself or herself to account for whatever happens, life or death. Still, family instructions, rebuke as guidance, and hierarchy are normative powers in shaping manners and setting up values.

ባባቴ በአያትህ አጥንት	In the name of your father, my grandfather,
ይችን ውለታ ዋልልኝ ግብርና ስሜ ለኔ ትተህ	Do me this favor, leave my deeds and my name to me,
ራስህን ችለህ ኑርልኝ ራስህን ችለህ ሙትልኝ	And live your own life; die your own death.
(Leave me)	

The persona goes so far as to defend his name even after death and instructs the

child never to vow by his name. The persona, as a father, claims that the child's false vow will amount to a second death to him. He discloses that, at the current time, there are weaknesses and deceits. In light of this, the persona reflects that such practices are never part of his life. He instructs the child, though negatively, to be self-responsible and correct weaknesses and deceit.

ሞቴን በሰላም ልኑርበት	Let me live my death peacefully;
ከመቃብሬ አትቀስቅስኝ	Wake me not up from my grave;
ዘመኔን ኑሬ አልፌያለሁ	I lived my time and passed.
ዳግም አባትህን አትግደለኝ	Do not kill me, your father again;
በዘመንህ ድክመት ቅጥፈት	With the weakness and deceit of your time,
ስሜን ጠርተህ አትማልብኝ	Do not vow calling my name;
ያንተን እውነት ለማስረገጥ	To approve your truth,
አባቴ ይሙት አትበለኝ	Do not say "in my father's name".
	(Leave me)

The persona, as indicated in the excerpt below, takes instruction as a crucial and powerful way to shape the child's behavior and help him/her feel a sense of self-reliance and take personal truth, faith, and knowledge. However, he seems to disregard that such important values should be shared and passed among siblings, and, as such, it is part of parental responsibility.

እባክህን አንተን ሁንልኝ	Please be yourself,
እውነትህን እምነትህን እውቀትህን	Lean on your truth, faith, and knowledge,
ምርኩዝ አርገህ በራስህ ተማመንልኝ	Be self-confident and live on your own,
ራስህን ችለህ ኑርልኝ	Even if you feel sad upon your defeat,
በመሸነፍ ብታዝን እንኳን	(Leave me)
በኔ ባባትህ ስትል ራስህን ችለህ ውጣልኝ	

Though perspectives could vary among generations, parents are responsible for imparting important social values and ways of living together. It is through collective efforts and common understanding that societies can sustain and ensure coexistence. Rallying among different segments of communities and maintaining continuity of social ties are integral to family, education, and religion.

Religious Institutions: Beliefs, Values, and Practices

Even though religious institutions can play an indispensable role in forging ways to maintain core values such as peace, compassion, and reconciliation, they have been bent on the pitfall of ethnic biases which have further undermined age-long social interactions and cohesion, escalated differences and hatred, instigated

fear and threat, impeded possible reconciliatory efforts, and eroded peaceful and meaningful dialogues and the sense of coexistence. Even if they could guide ethical issues, impact political and social impartiality, and foster peaceful social discourse among communities through their religious teachings of Biblical and Quranic verses and narratives, they have been both victims and instigators of grievances.

As described in the following extract, the persona asserts the failure of religious institutions to shape their followers in light of the expected precepts and religious ethos that can connect them to godly life. The persona witnesses that religious followers have rebelled against God, made their bodies the host of a plot and deceit, overwhelmed themselves with hatred, and the intent of grudge and revenge, made their minds and hearts a seat of mischief, and insidiousness. The persona questions the generation in light of the current beliefs and deeds and feels that the new generation, unlike the old one, has been proven to lack the religious values that have been considered to undergird society's shared ways of life. The persona bitterly indicates that the generation has been led astray and has become dishonest to God, showing gross negligence to their country, only to their bitter tears, bloodshed, and demise, and the collapse of a country, a country with an outcry of distress to God, alluding to Rachel's bitter weeping from the Bible.

በጥላቻ የተዘራ በቂም በቀል ለበቀለ ሴራና ሸፍጥ	It's to us invaded by plot and deceit,
ለወረረን	Sown by hatred, grown by grudge and revenge
ከሀይት ቅጥፈት መሰረነት የህሊና ኣይናችንን ልባችንን	To us whose mind and heart have fainted,
ለሰወረን	By betrayal, mischief, and insidiousness;
ከሰውነት ተራ ወርደን ከፈጣሪ ተካክደን	To us who fell out of humanity,
ሃገር ሽቅብ የምትረጨውን እምባና ደም ለማይገደን	And became dishonest to God, negligent to the country,
	Which spouts bitter tears and sheds blood.
	(Let the message come to us)

Based on the entwined public and religious discourses of pressing concerns reflected in the above excerpt, the persona further takes the present generation as rebels against God and even deviant from the expected deeds of the world. He describes the generation's spirit as poisoned with revenge, dictated by grudges and hatred. He termed the generation as cruel beyond expression, stiff-necked, arrogant, and whose hands are blood-stained. He asserts that the present situation has seen the bloodiest clashes and is the most horrific, full of casualties. Against the backdrop of historical good deeds of the past, the present witnesses all evil, indicating that the current generation lacks religious teachings and Godly deeds, and grows small like thistles and becomes lighter than straw, and their situation goes downhill.

ከዘመንና ከፈጣሪ ባፈነገጠ ምግባራችን	Deviant are our deeds from the time, and God;
በጥላቻና በቂም በቀል በተመረዘ መንፈሳችን	Poisoned is our spirit with hatred, grudges, and revenge,
ካፍ ቋንቋ በላይ በሆነው ቃል በማይገልፀው ጭካኔ	Our brutality, words cannot express,
ንዖችን	Our heart is filled with arrogance,
እብሪት በደፈነው ልባችን ደም በተነከረው እጃችን	Stained are our hands with blood,
ከለት ተለት ቁልቁል አድገን	Day after day, we grow low;
የነዛ ዋርካዎች ከፋይ አነስን እኮ ችፍርግ አከልን	From the oaks, we grow small
ቀለልን እኮ ገለባ ሆን	Like the shrub, we become;
	Like the straw, lighter we grow.
	(Let the message come to us)

The persona brings the issue of the egoism of individuals to the fore and invites the readers or listeners to question their rationality and check themselves against the principles of God's precepts, against the deeds and expectations set by religious ethos, mentioning personhood, which is one of the expectations of religious values indicated in the Bible.

Amidst bitter censure, the persona, as indicated in the following excerpt, enquires into the existential crisis the country is suffering. The persona bitterly condemns the generation and points out that the world has become ashamed of the citizens' misdeeds [himself included] and indicates that God is crying over their offenses. The persona pleads with the generation, saying, "Enough is enough," and beseeching them to be a 'person' if not fitting into the Ethiopian identity. The persona vents his profound feelings of discontent and confusion on the fact that the present generation lacks fear of God, conscience, and personhood, which religious institutions are established to nurture followers with. His mention of God's cry over the offence is a signpost of the failure of religious institutions in delivering their due service and functioning as expected to help followers to live up to the values, beliefs, and practices.

ምን አገኘህ ምን አገኘን ወንድምዬ	What has become of you?
ምን አገኘን አለም እኮ አፈረብን	What has become of us, brother?
ሃገር እኮ አዘነብን ፈጣሪ እኮ አነባብን	The world felt ashamed of us.
እባክህን ወንድምዬ በቃ እባክህን ይብቃን	The nation fell into sorrow;
ከኢትዮጵያዊነቱ እንኳ ብንወድቅ	God wept because of us;
እባክህን ሰው እንሁን	Please, brother, let it be enough;
	Enough is enough;
	If we are falling down from being Ethiopians,
	Let us be human.
	(Let the message come to us)

The persona mentions that personhood has been severed because a parochial mindset outweighed religious teachings and has led to the ethnic divide in the country. He metaphorically questions citizens [himself included] that they have been shortsighted, blinded by parochial thinking, which does not go with the current times and practice of the world. Through analogy, he describes the citizens' narrow-mindedness as an expanse of land that is being irresponsibly shrunk to a worrisome land that suffocates dwellers. Unlike people who are deemed to follow religious ethos, the citizenry feed on hatred, led astray by ethnic divide, and fall from the height of humanity and behave like wild beasts.

እንዴት በዚህ ዘመንና አለም እይታችን መንደር	How come our view grows parochial,
ይቅር	Behind the current times and world?
እንዴት በዚች ሰፊ ሃገር በጥበት ጭንቀት እንኑር	How come we live in a narrow, worrisome land,
እንዴት በከምር ጥላቻ አይናችንን በዘር ይጋረድ	When we have a country with an expanse of land?
እንዴት ከሰብዓዊነት ተራራ ወደ አውሬነት ጎሬ እንደንደ	How come we get blinded by race, piles of hatred,
ውረድ	How come we fell down from the mountain of humanity,
	Down to the den of the beasts?
	(Let the message come to us)

This bloody experience, which has rocked the persona to his core, has thrown him into confusion. He has witnessed the horrors he could not bear. He questions what it means to be human. As described in the excerpt of the poem, the persona asserts that cruelty severs brotherhood, which is among the religious ethos. The constant occurrence of conflicts caused by heartbreaking prejudice circulating among different groups in the country, and the downfall and nonstop vicious circle of strife seem to leave the persona taken aback. The persona is baffled by their evil deeds and witnesses the generations' cruelty in putting their brothers to the dagger as unbearable and historically never-before-seen.

እንዴት ወንድም ለወንድም በካሪያ እንተራረድ	How come brothers mow down their brother with a
ምነው ወንድምዬ ምነው አገዳደልም እኮ ቅጥ አለው	dagger?
አሟሟትም እኮ ወግ አለው	Why, my brother?
	Killing has some way;
	And ways to die [Why this much cruelty?]
	(Let the message come to us)

Against the current religious deeds, the persona observes, as mentioned by the following excerpt, which interweaves historical and religious discourse, that

Ethiopia was a land where its people had the height of spiritual life, sound belief, justice, and love of sisterhood and brotherhood. He witnesses that the land was mentioned as exemplary for its respectful welcoming, even to ‘strangers’. The persona seems to look into the distant past; relates the past public good deeds, and, in contrast, showcases the present scenario as morally decaying, as stated in the following excerpt.

እኔና አንተ እኮ ማለት ቅዱሳን መጻህፍት	Don't you and I belong to a country repeatedly cited by holy
በበጎ ስሟን ደጋግመው የሚያነሷት	books?
ታላቁ ነብይ በምሉ እምነት ፍትህ ወደ ሰፈነ	The great prophet in full faith sent people, entrusting them to
ባት	Abyssinia,
ወደ አብስኒያ ሂዱ ብለው የሰው አደራ የላኩባት	A nation reigned with justice, not to our people but to
እንኳን አምሳያ ወገንን እንግዳን በፍቅር አክ	strangers as well,
ብረን	We accepted them with love and respect,
ተቀብለን ዘመድ አድርገን	Made them associates and helped them feel at home.
እንኳን ሰው ወፍ አለምዳለሁ የሚል ክቡር	“Not a person; we could even tame a bird,” as the saying goes.
ብሂል ያለን	(Let the message come to us)

Government as Social Institution: Values, Principles, Systems, and Practices

Like the religious institutions, the government, as an institution, is dictated by presumptions along ethnic lines and groupthink, as pointed out by the persona. The persona observes that the outgroup and ingroup's mind frame is constructed in discourses and universals, such as swift generalization, judgment, and stereotypes, which have been structured as dictating force. He asserts that there is structural injustice that positions some in power and others as victims. The victims, as described by the persona, have been left without options. The persona critiques the Ethiopian government apparatus as failing to meet the minimum needs of the citizenry, such as safety and security. Desperately, he states that the atrocities would not be stopped till the dawn of the day breaks, which metaphorically signifies the victims' inability to liberate themselves, and the hope to be saved by the intervention of other forces. The current substantive atrocities will go on till the cups of death and public trouble brim over -an extreme crisis.

እናንተም ግደሉ እናንተም እረዱ	You kill, you slaughter,
እናንተም ጨርሱ እናንተም ጨፍጭፉ	You mow down, you massacre,
ደመናው ተገፎ ሌልቱ እስኪነጋ	Till the cloud gets cleared,
ፅዋው እስኪሞላ መከራና ግፉ	And the day breaks up,
	The cups brim over,
	With adversity and atrocity.
	(Say, it is my concern)

The persona has pointedly mentioned those who absolutely misuse power and those who are mercilessly abused categorically. The persona describes that the atrocity is beyond the common kill count and dreadful. He positioned the killers as psychopaths and tormentors who are bent on violence and mercilessly put many to death. Ostensibly, the persona asserts that nothing stops these killers from their deadly acts and from committing mass atrocities. The government, as can be implied from the persona, could not take up the cause of the victims, nor defend citizens from perpetrators. The persona, heavily sad, reveals that there are untold adversities and atrocities; he indicates that the harrowing situation will remain unresolved till it becomes extreme. This implies that the government stands weak and cannot uphold the voices of its vulnerable citizens and bring those who commit violence and cause the defenseless to suffer. The persona, humiliated and in distress, witnesses the reign of anarchy and tyranny in the country. He asserts that the situation becomes favorable for killers to sever the social fabric which binds communities tighter and appears to be the center force of social injustice and a cause for the loss of lives, mass murder. Understood from the persona's remarks, this situation demands much attention and serious concern if justice is to be maintained and to bring the destroyer to law.

The persona's pent-up frustration finds expression in this discourse; baffled by the destroyers' acts of violence on the innocent, he witnesses that the powerless have no voice or protection. They have no one to uphold their cause and lift up their voices; in an environment of lawlessness, the killer is paradoxically positioned as the hearer of the public voice, as described by the persona.

አህያውን ፈርቶ ዳውላውን መግረፍ ሆነና ነገሩ

ሟች ዝም ስላለ ሟች ድምፅ ስላለ

የሟችን አሟሟት የገዳይን ተግባር

ለገዳይ ነገሩት

It is like whipping the sack, fearing the donkey;

For the dead becomes silent; for the dead has no voice;

They told the killer about the death of the dead,

And the deeds of the killer.

(Say, it is my concern)

The persona, as indicated in the following extract, further laments that the situation in Ethiopia is getting deteriorated; he warns that the violation of the periphery would spill over the center and that would lead to deadly consequences - an existential threat which can darken everyone's prospect; the persona in distress urges every citizen to take it as a serious concern and a lesson, or they could pay the ultimate price.

ስማማ ወዳጄ	Listen, my friend;
መች ለሱ ሆነና	It is not for him;
መች ለሷ ሆነና	Nor is it for her;
እኔስ ዋ ለራሴ	It is woe to me;
ዳሩ መሃል ሲሆን	When the periphery becomes the center,
መሃሉ ዳር ሲሆን	The center, the periphery,
ነገዋ ጨልሞ ተጨነቀች ነፍሴ	My soul worries, for its tomorrow gets dark.
	(Say, it is my concern)

Educational Institutions: Moral Values, Professional Commitment

Education is believed to cultivate critical thinking, bring social change, resolve pressing societal issues, foster a culture of peace, and enhance interdependence. It can serve to settle disputes on the basis of dialogue and common understanding, and help maintain peaceful relations among communities. Even so, the persona's reflection in the following excerpt can be a witness that education is not a guarantee.

In the current situation in Ethiopia, the persona asserts that education fails to serve society duly; rather, those who are lettered and have received education unexpectedly bring themselves into hideous deeds, corrupt the political system, and become a cause for bloodshed and the loss of many lives, leading society to a profound crisis.

እውን መማር ፊደል መቁጠር እንዲህ አስከፊ ነው	Does learning and being lettered have an ugly side, as such?
መልኩ	
እውን ለኩልነት ለፍትህ መቆም እስከዚህ ድረስ ነው	Does standing for equality and justice only measure up to this?
ልኩ	
እውን እንደሚባለው ፖለቲካ ይሉት ተግባር	As it is said, is the so-called deeds of politics rubbish to this extent?
እስከዚህ ድረስ ቆሻሻ ነው	
በስንት ንፁሃን ነፍስ ነው ወንድምዬ የምሳችን የሚ	How many innocent bloods do appease us, my brother?
ደርሰው	How many liters, how many barrels, how many gallons
ስንት ሊትር ስንት በርሜል ስንት ፓሎን ንፁህ ደም ነው	of blood?
እድፋችንን የሚያጠፋው	Would wash away our dirt? Enough, brother.
እባክህን ወንድምዬ ይብቃን	(Let the message come to us)

As indicated in the text above, the persona reflects that the outcome of the current education does not meet public expectations and that those who go through education and are lettered do not take up the issue of equality, and stand for justice. Instead, as the persona bitterly judges them, they are stained with moral filth that

does not come out easily and are deemed irresponsible persons who engage in ugly political misconduct and lead to much innocent bloodshed.

Media Institutions: Professional Integrity and Repercussions

The media, as a responsible social institution, is a public platform on which authentic and relevant information is disseminated, and public voices are heard. It is believed to serve citizens in fostering cultural values and norms. As a watchdog, the media responsibly and with integrity plays a crucial role in shaping public views and facilitating debates on relevant issues. Against this backdrop, the persona, in the following excerpt, mirrors that actors [especially those who are engaged themselves as activists] have caused damaging repercussions to the country.

ኣክቲቪስት በሚል ማእረግ ዘበናይ ካብ ተጠ	To us who are wrapped up,
ቅልለን	By the rank of an activist, a modern cloak,
ካገር በላይ ከሰው በላይ ከህግ በላይ ተቆልለን	To us who take pride in ourselves over the country, over the people,
ሰዎችን ከንሮ ነቅለን ፍትህ ጫማችን ስር	And over the law,
ጥለን	Uprooting people from their lives, putting justice under our feet;
በሃገር ላይ ፍቅር መግደል	It's easy stuff for us,
ተስፋ መግደል ደስታ መግደል ሰላም መግደል	To cause hope to perish, and kill love, happiness, and peace.
እንደ ውሃ ጥም ለቀለለን	(Let the message come to us)

The lines in the above text uncover the levels of unethical engagement in spreading misleading information that can seriously damage the citizens' sense of hope, peace, and happiness. The persona exposes that activists are unethical; their misdeeds, as stated in the text, uproot people's means of living, put justice underfoot, and undermine law and order. The persona exposes the activists' tragic flaw and failure to maintain integrity when disseminating information.

The elites, like the activists, feed the media with labeling, fueling a deep social divide, causing social ills that negatively affect individuals' lives and the social and political systems. Such views are reflected in the ensuing text:

የዚህ ሰፈር ኤሊቶች የዚያ ሰፈር ኤሊቶች እየተባባልን	The elites of this place, the elites of that place,
በህዝብ ስም እየማልን በወገን ስም እየማልን	We label each other,
ሀገር ኣቃጥለን ለምንምቅ	In the name of the public, we vow, and of a group, we vow,
በናቶች ሃዘን ሰቆቃ በኣባቶች እንባ ለምንስቅ	And warm ourselves, setting the country on fire.
	To us, who laugh at mothers' sorrow and lamentation,
	And tears of fathers.
	(Let the message come to us)

The persona in the above excerpt seems to assert that groupthink prevails over independent and rational thoughts; dictated by a political line that favors relationships along linguistic and ethnic lines, the groupthink propagates stubborn ethnic issues, drives divisive views about outgroups, influence public opinion and immorally drag groups into rigid ethnic frame of mind, and make mutual trust, coexistence, interdependence, and free voice impossible or challenging to achieve.

Discussion

This study scrutinizes the currency of social institutions in contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew. It examines the currency of family, religion, government, education, and media in light of the public interest in Ethiopia.

Thus, it finds out that the family, as an essential unit of societies, can play a crucial role in instructing its members with the age-old social values that can help maintain social coherence and in shaping them to take due responsibilities and hand them off to siblings, establishing continuity. Likewise, Arora (1) states that family constituents are unified by attachment, collaboration, and shared love, with arranged responsibilities that enable communal steadiness. Similarly, according to Zeybek and Kasap (306), the family takes the responsibility for nurturing children with shared love, due regard, and intimate attachment. The family makes sure that members of the family care for each other and live in harmony. As indicated by Girma (29), in Ethiopia, heads of households, including grandparents, were given due regard by members of the family as parents and grandparents were taken to be providers of the living, and the basis for getting knowledge, and who they are.

However, given the current condition of Ethiopia, the poems witness that family members lack closeness and unity. The father is positioned in pleading with the child, and the child is located in making excuses for his/her failure and insincerely covering his/her weakness. Likewise, Ganiyeva (1579) concludes that the family as an institution is facing a crisis itself. Family ties are declining, and the family has been strained by the current cultural practices, the economic condition, schooling, health issues, and the dissemination of information. Ganiveva further suggested that morals altogether are eroded, and the family as an institution is deteriorating. Similarly, in Ethiopia, as reflected by Girma (29), the family ethos that holds family members to live in peace has been put to the test. Children begin to lose the sense of obedience and respect for their family heads these days. Unlike the findings from Girma, this study finds that the father, as a parent, is distant and sensitive about his self-worth over the child's condition.

As with family, religion as a social institution could not meet public

expectations. Østebø (723) acknowledges that there are religious conflicts in Ethiopia, and these conflicts are entwined with ethnic divide, both reinforcing social divisions. Still, this current study finds that religious followers have been located as rebelling against God, making their bodies the host of a plot and deceit, overwhelming themselves with hatred, and the intent of grudge and revenge, making their minds and hearts a seat of mischief and insidiousness. This can show that religious institutions lack the commitment to give religious teachings that are considered vital to undergird society's shared ways of life. As the poems witness, followers are led astray and have become dishonest to God, showing gross negligence for their country.

Furthermore, the government, as a social institution, is considered a seat of structural injustice that positions some in power and others as victims. The victims are positioned to have been left without options. In light of this, the government apparatus is failing to meet the minimum needs of the citizenry, such as safety and security. As a result, people are exposed to substantive atrocities and an extreme crisis, and victims are unable to liberate themselves and maintain their peaceful coexistence. In line with this, as indicated by Girma (31), even though the system of governance is purported to play its role in maintaining the family ethos and ensuring societal ties, the government in Ethiopia has begun to lose its power to regulate matters and maintain stability. The government is profoundly affected by deeply-seated corrupt systems and mismanagement. Likewise, Asefa (3) asserts that "at the center of the institutional failure in Ethiopia is the historic problem of governance, which has been characterized by a concentration of power among a few elites, engaged in arbitrary use of power over the silent majority of the population."

Like the government, education could not play its crucial role; it fails to shape informed individuals who can influence public opinion and shape citizens with commitment and integrity. Unexpectedly, those who are considered educated are thought to have little to no contribution to national sensibility. Rather, they are positioned in the discursive space as bringing themselves into misdeeds and political misconduct that can lead followers astray and stir up violence and bloodshed, leading communities to a harrowing crisis. In light of this, Worku (63) notes that the system of education in Ethiopia is largely knowledge-focused, failing to adequately address the concerns of preparing the citizenry's moral foundation and society's pressing social and ethical needs.

The media, as a social institution, is no different from the others. Irrespective of given media ethics, the activists and elites take media outlets as a platform to engage in labeling, fueling a deep social divide, and causing social ills that negatively

affect citizens' lives. Media outlets are deemed as a landscape for social forces that propagate unethical engagements in spreading misleading information that can seriously damage the citizens' sense of hope, peace, and happiness, putting justice underfoot, and undermining law and order. Driven by linguistic and ethnic lines, these media outlets propagate groupthink, stubborn ethnic issues, and divisive views about outgroups; they influence public opinion and immorally drag groups into a rigid ethnic frame of mind, making mutual trust, coexistence, interdependence, and free voice impossible.

In light of this, Moges and Terje (24) reported that the media landscape in Ethiopia, including the state media, has gone off the established media ethics and become a landscape for political manipulation, ethnic polarization, and propagation of biases about religious issues and conflicts, which led to losses of lives, displacement, and destruction of buildings. Correspondingly, Adamu (19) points out that social media, given its positive value in raising social consciousness, has become a landscape to propagate social flaws through unfounded information, false narratives, personal biases, hate speeches, and ethnic-motivated information that can instigate ethnic violence and dangerously affect communities' stability. Likewise, Dessie et al. (22) delineated that community-based private media (which lack the guidance of media laws to set expected media conduct, trustworthy and autonomous civic organizations, and political willpower to ensure social order in the country) have severed the interconnection of ethnic communities and played a significant negative role in destabilizing the country and in fueling violence. According to these authors, such unethical media practices have been supported by people in government positions.

Conclusion

This study investigates the currency of social institutions in contemporary Amharic poems recited on YouTube by Getnet Enyew. Through exploring these poems, this study has elucidated the role of social institutions within the communities. In light of this, the study finds that the family, as a social institution, is viewed to play an essential part in guiding members with time-tested social values that can maintain healthy communal solidarity; it has a bearing on them to take expected responsibilities. The study showcases that such values have been handed down to siblings, setting up persistence. Even so, in light of the current condition of Ethiopia, the poems witness that the family as an institution lacks the discursive power to maintain closeness and unity among members. The father, though culturally taken as symbolic power, is positioned in the discursive space as a pleading agent to

the child. Within the discursive landscape, the father is portrayed as distant and very sensitive about his self-worth over the child's condition. Likewise, children are labeled feeble and marked as failures, who insincerely cover their weaknesses with excuses. As with family, religion is found to lack the public expectations. It has been deemed to lose its power in instructing and guarding its followers from rebellion against God. Followers are portrayed as a seat for plot and deceit, hatred, and the intent of grudge and revenge, making their minds and hearts a seat of mischief and insidiousness. It has been described as lacking in the commitment to undergird society's shared ways of life. Equally, the government is considered a seat of structural injustice, positioning victims without options, exposing them to substantive atrocities, and an extreme crisis, and failing to meet the minimum needs of the citizenry, such as safety, security, and peaceful coexistence. As in the government, education is found to lack its instructional power in shaping individuals who can positively influence public opinion and the citizenry's commitment, integrity, and national sensibility. Even the educated are portrayed as having political misconduct that can stir up violence and bloodshed. The media is no different from the other social institutions; media outlets serve as a platform for labeling, fueling a deep social divide, and causing social ills that negatively affect citizens' lives. They propagate unethical and misleading information that can seriously damage the citizens' sense of hope, peace, and happiness.

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Rawi Hage's Contemporary Dystopia in *Cockroach*

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Abstract This research examines Rawi Hage's portrayal of Montreal as a contemporary dystopia in his novel *Cockroach* (2010). Contrary to its standard scholarly definition, the novelist sets his nontraditional dystopia in a realistic setting to communicate the struggle of the poor and traumatized immigrant protagonist in the multicultural Canadian city. By using Lyman Tower Sargent's insights on dystopia and satirical utopia, this study contributes to a broader understanding of dystopia in the diaspora. It finds that Hage's novel displays, on the one hand, a contemporary dystopia for the alienated immigrant minority. It regards Montreal as an unconventional dystopian setting, whose capitalist agenda solidifies the exclusion of the marginalized immigrant group. While the text displays a variety of Eastern immigrant characters, the main protagonist's inability to integrate stems from the city's intensification of his already marginalized psychological and social status. On the other hand, this article amalgamates Sargent's approach with a Deleuzo-Guattarian spatial perspective to interpret the protagonist's metamorphosis and refuge to the underground as a satirical utopia. The unnamed narrator's embrace of the underground, as a liberating space, accentuates not only his rejection of Montreal's imposed hegemony, but also his satire of the capitalist system's biased opportunist agenda that amplifies the social hierarchy between the rich and the poor.

Keywords Hage; unnamed narrator; dystopia; diaspora; satirical utopia

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Introduction

Diasporic narratives cannot be detached from contemporaneity. These texts often

mirror their surroundings by representing the grappling of real life-like characters, who find themselves seeking validation and integration in the host country. Being said, writers living in the diaspora have attempted to dig deeper into the creation of the hybrid self as a persona that combines Eastern and Western features of cultural identification. Ward et al. contend that hybrid identities often amalgamate features from both cultures to assimilate into a particular setting. The latter bestows the hybrid persona with both “dynamism” and “flexibility,” in navigating new forms of integration (4).

Rawi Hage is among the authors who investigate related matters to the diasporic persona. He is a Lebanese-Canadian novelist, journalist, and photographer who currently lives in Canada. He has published several titles including *De Niro's Game* (2006) which enabled him to win the International Dublin Literary Award. He later published *The Cockroach* (2010), *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018) and finally *Stray Dogs* (2022) which earned him a fourth nomination in the Giller Prize. His novel *Cockroach* (2010) investigates the extent of assimilation of different Eastern immigrant characters. Set in Montreal, Canada, the novelist represents the struggle of an immigrant protagonist in finding himself in the big city. The novel, while entering the ongoing discourse on hybridity for immigrant minorities, introduces social class and psychological instability as main factors that exasperate the struggle of the unnamed protagonist, which eventually leads him to committing suicide. Later, he is condemned to therapy. In these sessions, he explains the atrocities of his childhood trauma and his use of the cockroach metamorphosis to escape the corrupt human world.

Hage's *Cockroach* (2010) has elicited controversial feedback from the early phases of its publication. For some, the novel represents a form of resistance to Western oppression. Marchi argues that the protagonist's metamorphosis alters the denigrating representation of the cockroach as a filthy animal to “a powerful tool of self-affirmation and liberation” (53). Similarly, Baron affirms that the text is built on the representation of a “collective trauma” of refugees, including that of the narrator, who despises Western “cures” for he sees them as a new form of “imperialism” (133). While the novel clearly demonstrates signs of resistance to Western hegemony, it also critiques the so-called norms of the human world, whose ethics are constructed to maintain the superiority of the rich over the inferiority of the poor. Other critics have elaborated on the inferiority of the main protagonist on the Canadian soil. Poray-Wybranowska regards food as a motif that intensifies the protagonist's impoverished status and highlights the “consumption practices” to denote social position and Bourgeois attitudes (195). Kraus affirms that the novel's

protagonist personifies “the pure man” (113) due to his inability to be seen as equal to Canadian citizens. The critic maintains that the narrator’s suicide attempt deconstructs the façade of Canada as a land of opportunities for immigrants (Kraus 114). While these perspectives are valid, the critics have failed to contextualize the text as a microcosm of the contemporary society’s defects that widen the social gap between the superior rich and the inferior poor.

While several critics have discussed Rawi Hage’s novel from its socio-cultural implications, no research has attempted to interpret it as a reflection of a contemporary dystopia. The present article, therefore, contributes to both diaspora and dystopian studies. It argues that Montreal is portrayed as an unconventional contemporary dystopia that intensifies the social and psychological exclusion of the poor traumatized immigrant minority. In this sense, Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* (2010) exposes and at the same time critiques the fallacies of the capitalist society that amplify social hierarchies and accentuate psychological dilemmas of the already excluded immigrant minority.

Montreal’s dystopia, in Hage’s novel, is nontraditional. It is a dystopia that communicates the reality of the marginalized, excluded and alienated minority in the diaspora. It highlights their lack of assimilation into a capitalist-driven culture that intensifies social hierarchies and revives unhealed wounds of the past. The main protagonist’s struggles in the Canadian city accentuate the social inequality between the rich and poor. The character’s marginalized social status, as a poor traumatized immigrant, contributes to dissocializing him from both Western and Eastern immigrant characters. As a result, he takes refuge in the underground as his solace from the corrupted human world. While the mainstream in the West regards the underground as representative of hell (Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt 5), to the narrator, it is a space of freedom and liberation from social constraints. He regards the underground as a safe resort to hide from the everyday misery he encounters in Montreal. In this sense, the underground is both a space of resistance and a satirical utopia created by Hage to comment on the status of immigrant minorities living in the diaspora.

To articulate the article’s main thesis, the study is structured as follows. It starts by contextualizing the meaning of dystopia in fiction, then moves to analyzing Hage’s novel through two main lenses. On the one hand, it scrutinizes how the text represents an unconventional contemporary dystopia for the marginalized poor immigrant protagonist in *Cockroach* (2010). On the other hand, it interprets the unnamed narrator’s resort to the underground as a form of resistance to Montreal’s imposed hegemony, which is regarded, in this paper, as a satirical utopia.

The Dystopian City in Fiction

The word “dystopia” summarizes the defects of the postmodern society. Etymologically, the word originates from the Greek language, *dus* and *topos* “meaning a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavorable place” (Claeys 4). The term comes to represent a diverging image from a utopian city and brings forth an apocalyptic vision of the world, where chaos seems to be the result of years of crime and dehumanization. Andrew Feenberg writes that the aftermath of WWII has led to an ever-growing doubt awaiting the human race as “prophecies of doom have become clichés on everyone’s lips” (41). The effects of constant wars and death have stimulated the convergence to writing about dystopia. In this, Isomaa et al. regard the term “dystopia” as inclusive of different literary genres that project a certain “apocalyptic” aura. They contend:

We understand dystopian fiction as an umbrella term; it gathers together thematically close genres that often intertwine in individual works of fiction, whatever the medium. As we see it, dystopian fiction accommodates the different historical phases of the genre of dystopia, dystopian narratives of apocalypse, and post-apocalypse. (xi)

To put it differently, and in contrast to the previous readings that originally distinguish dystopia and dystopian fiction from apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction (see Booker and Thomas’s *The Science Fiction Handbook*), Isomaa et al. intensify their interconnectedness in the representation of the modern time’s concerns which epitomizes “negative futures for humankind” (xii).

Claeys, for his part, argues that most of what we come to know of the contemporary world is dystopian and pessimistic (4). He argues, moreover, that while dystopia prevails over fictional narrative, it does not separate itself from reality. In fact, it incarnates a “failed utopia of twentieth-century totalitarianism” (Claeys 5). He accentuates that the rise of the dystopian city, be it in fiction or reality, stems from states of “extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery.” He suggests that the world has come to face three types of dystopia: political, environmental, and technological which merge to “dominate” humankind (Claeys 5).

In Literature, drawing a line between dystopian and anti-utopian narratives was quite difficult. It was not until Lyman Tower Sargent’s essay titled “Utopia-The Problem of Definition” that things became clearer. While arguing that dystopia

and anti-utopia are “distinct cultural strategies”, the former denotes a “bad place” as opposed to utopia, while the latter is “against utopia and utopian thought” (Sargent 138). Hicks uses the term dystopian to examine postmodern adaptations of the word in literature and film. He emphasizes that it designates the deficiencies of the urban space and the repercussions of late capitalism (Hicks 2). He further argues that dystopian fiction assesses the socio-political, economic systems, and their influence on the individual’s daily life. He suggests that dystopian fiction aims to foreground these problems and foster positive change and consciousness. Dystopian fiction, thus, comes to highlight social inequality, segregation, and social divisions (Hicks 2-3).

Contemporary novels such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) are primary examples that embody dystopia that surpasses political, social, and economic affairs and reaches the deep soul of humans. Both works make readers question the limitless possibilities of breaking the line that separates humans from animals as both texts test their characters’, and eventually, their readers’ humanity. This tendency in the representation of the apocalyptic descent of the human soul has reached different parts of the world and has influenced works of literature globally including diasporic narratives. Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* sets his new dystopia in a Western setting where his social criticism emanates from the struggles of immigrants from lack of integration in the diaspora.

Diaspora or Dystopia? An Immigrant’s Perspective

Montreal, in Hage’s novel, is portrayed as a dystopian multicultural city that intensifies social inequality. While the novel’s setting is realistic, the portrayal of the Canadian city echoes a “bad place” (Sargent 138) for the alienated and marginalized main protagonist. Sargent, in “The Three Faces of Utopianism,” defines dystopia as a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (9). A dystopia, therefore, despite being imaginary, unveils realities readers are not accustomed to. In this sense, the portrayal of Montreal as a dystopian site is unconventional to ordinary readers. Yet, the immaculate description of realistic details from the perspective of the poor protagonist underscores the hidden agendas of the capitalist city.

The unnamed narrator is unable to integrate into the dystopian Canadian city. After a failed suicide attempt, the narrator feels displaced both at home and in

Montreal. Still having his past interfere in his life decisions in Canada, he reports to the psychiatrist that while he feels “more courageous, more carefree, and even, one might add, more violent”, the new space rejects his presence on its soil as in “this northern land no one gives you an excuse to hit, rob, or shoot, or even shout from across the balcony” (4). The protagonist’s lack of assimilation in the Canadian city stems from the latter’s intensification of his marginalized status as a poor immigrant. The unnamed narrator’s statement illustrates the dystopian city’s “rejection” of the poor and marginalized figures. In fact, it does not offer people like himself many choices for survival. On the one hand, it excludes them because they are socially poor, and on the other hand, it does not provide them with the possibility to seek alternative means to survive.

This feeling of “hopelessness” and “pessimism” is often regarded a key characteristic in the making of dystopia (Zeb et al. 81). The unnamed narrator’s pessimistic attitude in Montreal reveals that the marginalized immigrant poor will never assimilate into a capitalist society, where wealth contributes to acknowledging one’s humanity. His isolation in the “frozen” city does not only emanate from his emotional status, but also from the fact that Montreal, as a dystopian cold space, resembles its weather. It destroys the poor and renders their stay in the city a quest for survival, which indicates the “savagery” of the city’s dystopia (Zeb et al. 83). The unnamed narrator accentuates that despite being in desperate need for food to survive, the multicultural dystopian space does not “excuse” him to seek alternatives to preserve his existence.

Montreal’s dystopia, furthermore, is oppressive and controlling. The unnamed narrator rejects assimilating into a world that is both hypocritical and corrupt in morals and values. He explains to the psychiatrist that his suicide attempt was triggered by a need to “escape the permanence of the sun” (4). In Western and even Oriental mythologies, the sun was perceived as a symbol of fertility, prosperity, and consciousness (Ronnberg and Martin 22). According to Ronnberg and Martin, and in ancient history, sunrays connoted “creativity, prophecy, healing”. For kings, it added to their royalty as they wore sun-like crowns, bestowing a higher level of cleverness. In other narratives, its golden and shiny feature indicates the search for truth and its “nurturing of life” (Ronnberg and Martin 22). In the contemporary era, while the sun still symbolizes hope and prosperity, in Hage’s dystopian Montreal, the sun reminds the protagonist of the corrupt human world. His reference to “the cold, bright city” (6) entails the shivering social inequity in Montreal that excludes the marginalized immigrant poor in the urban space.

Sunrays remind the unnamed protagonist of Montreal’s dystopian diaspora.

To him, any reference to light is connotative of wealth. Zeb et. al. argue that depression and misery are important features in the making of dystopian fiction. They argue that the “hopelessness and misery of the dystopian society” highlight “the difficulties of living in a cruel and merciless world where surviving frequently necessitates suffering constant adversity” (81). In this sense, the protagonist’s suicide attempt is triggered by the “cruel” city that explicitly excludes the poor from its capitalist agenda. The narrator explains that while the sun means hope to some, to him it intensifies his isolation as “nothing made any sense anymore” (32). He states “I saw the ray of light entering my window and realized how insignificant I was in its presence, how oblivious it was to my existence” (32), which indicates that the sun symbolizes good fortune only for the rich, while it does not even consider the isolated poor. The use of words as “insignificant,” and “oblivious” clearly demonstrate the protagonist’s inability to cope to the life with humans, simply because it is not for people like himself. Montreal’s dystopia, in fact, is “oblivious” to the poor and considers them non-existent.

Sargent, in “Do Dystopias Matter,” argues that dystopia “is presented as what has happened as a result of human behavior, of people messing up” (12). Considering this, Montreal is to be read as a dystopian city that does not necessarily emanate from a state of material destruction. It is an unconventional contemporary dystopian setting that is rendered “dystopian” by the consequences of human behavior. Montreal’s dystopia, in this sense, stems from its capitalist-driven agenda that favors the superior rich and excludes the inferior marginalized poor. This is made clear in the novel when sunrays remind the unnamed protagonist of Montreal’s dystopia. His rejection of the sun, I argue, emanates from his opposition to the dystopian inhumane world that denigrates his being simply because he is poor and of a different background. Throughout the development of the narrative, the unnamed narrator associates light with the human world. In one of the instances in the novel, the unnamed protagonist highlights this exclusion, stating the feeling of being “neglected by it” and his solution to escape the sun was to “cease to exist” (Hage 33). Thus, Montreal’s sun provoked the unnamed protagonist’s suicide attempt due to its constant exclusion of the poor immigrant minority.

Montreal’s dystopian aura is similar to Thomas Moylan’s concept of “social hell.” Similar to Sargent’s elaboration on dystopia, the “social hell” provides a sense of estrangement that renders characters feeling lonely due to their inability to fit in. The unnamed narrator is estranged due to his Eastern origins. His inability to integrate into the human world projects itself in his love for darkness. He prefers “dirty and somber corners” over “bright” ones for the latter remind him

of “vampires” (Hage 35). Hage’s use of the word “vampires” manifests itself as another trope that accentuates Montreal’s dystopia. To the unnamed protagonist, the actual “vampires” are not the one depicted in fiction and horror stories, but real human beings who feed on the poor and the marginalized. Indeed, while being hungry and barely having anything to eat, the protagonist needed somebody, who could be “generous enough” to offer him food (Hage 34). However, the constant rejection by the rich reminded him of “the world outside and the cruelty of the cold” (Hage 69). In fact, this immaculate choice of diction in the representation of Montreal accentuates its representation as a contemporary dystopia. The unnamed narrator often associates the city with words such as “frozen,” “shivering,” “cold,” which surpass being mere indications of weather. Similar to Sargent’s reflection of dystopia as a result of human behavior as stated above, this coldness stems from the cruelty of the city and the people living in it. This feeling of hopelessness, and the protagonist’s inability to integrate into the human world reflect rich people’s loss of humanity in a capitalist system that increases wealth at the expense of helping the poor.

In *Thinking Utopia*, Sargent argues that the twentieth century has demonstrated that “utopian aspirations” led to the “creation of dystopias”. He brings forth different historical evidences that illuminate how dreams of post-communist capital, for example, have turned into a dystopia of poverty and corruption (1). Sargent’s statement clearly reflects the unnamed narrator’s sessions with the psychiatrist. Instead of providing help, the psychiatrist solidifies Western stereotypes on the East. He says: “The therapist annoyed me with her laconic behaviour. She brought about a feeling of violence within me that I hadn’t experienced since I left my homeland. She did not understand [...] I am forced to be here by the court! I prefer not to be here” (Hage 5). The protagonist’s rejection of the sessions explain that the Canadian dystopia evokes damage in the psychological state of the protagonist. He feels estranged both physically on the Canadian soil and psychologically as it intensifies the character’s suffering from trauma of both alienation and social exclusion. He often refers to himself as “primitive and uneducated,” which intensifies his inability to assimilate into the “civilized” Western world of humans, where he is regarded a “dirty Arab” (Hage 15). Bright argues that “being the object of the Western gaze”, the protagonist embraces his immigrant status to defy the system that deemed him inferior in the first place (3). He attempts a metamorphosis and converges to the underground to exercise his power as a dirty insect. This metamorphosis enables him to crawl, camp and find “coins under the fridge” as a means to survive (Hage 23). However, this convergence to being a cockroach is controlled by other factors

that most critics have overlooked.

A comprehensive understanding of the cockroach metamorphosis highlights another dimension of dystopia. It actually demonstrates that the unnamed protagonist's inability to integrate stems from his social and psychological exclusion as a poor traumatized immigrant in the Canadian city. Reza, for example, and despite being a poor Iranian immigrant, is able to assimilate into Montreal because of his musical talent and exotic stories of Sufism. Elina Rahman compares Hage's unnamed protagonist to Kafka's Gregor. She insists, however, that the main divergence between these two characters is that while Gregor sees his metamorphosis "limiting" to his capacities, Hage's protagonist "embraces it because it is the only place he designates as his own in Montreal city" (Rahman 46). Yet, while the unnamed protagonist clearly embraces his metamorphosis, he does manifest it only in front of the restaurant owner, Tony or rich people. This shows that the embrace of the cockroach metamorphosis and the underground space is both temporal and limited. This will be explained in details in the coming sections.

Interestingly, the choice of the cockroach as an animal is quite significant in the text on different grounds. Culturally and quite politically speaking, the unnamed narrator's choice of this insect, in particular, stems from the fact that he embraces his Eastern origins, which have often been associated in Western literature with certain derogatory stereotypes. Edward Said in *Orientalism* argues that the East and West have always been analyzed as "complementary opposites since antiquity" (58). He affirms that throughout history, the representation of the Orient has always been connotative of recurring stereotypes. These include primitiveness, dehumanization, backwardness, barbarism (Said 150), and, most significantly to Hage's novel (33), dirtiness or "dirty work". The unnamed narrator, while using the pronoun I, refers to himself as "primitive and uneducated" which intensifies his inability to cope with the "civilized" Western world of humans, where he is referred to as a "dirty Arab" (Hage15). Hence, the cockroach, despite being a dirty insect, manifests its power in the underground as an alternative space of resistance, which shows that the unnamed narrator happily embraces the Orientalist stereotypes to recreate an entire system based on the domination of the underground over the world of humans.

According to Dobson K. (2015), the protagonist regards the human race as the "degrading aspect of his being." He insists that being human ultimately leads to converging to violence as an instinct of survival under the liberal state (265-2666). Daniela Ladiana argues in her article that the recent policies of the neo-liberal capitalist city have created a "space" that intensifies social inequality and creates new manifestations of "power" dynamics. She contends that the latter shapes a

space of "exclusion" as "new structures are created and existing ones consolidated to organize and control forms of social interaction" (260). Applying this to the *Cockroach*, the city of Montreal is a dystopian space that does not only exclude the narrator but also dehumanizes him. The dystopian city deprives the protagonist of human interaction and urges him to steal to survive. In this sense, the dystopian city consolidates forms of exclusion for immigrants and is the first stimulator of crime namely robbery and theft.

Hence, Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2010) is a dystopian diasporic novel. Alongside the main canonical Western dystopian novelists including Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, Golding, Nabokov, and others (see Moylan 142), Rawi Hage comes to navigate a "new map of hell", as coined by Kingsley Amis (1960) in his book *New Maps of Hell*. Similar to Orwell and Huxley's social criticism and anti-capitalist inclination, Hage (2010) constructs a protagonist who despises capitalism. The hatred he has towards humans and the sun stems from the hidden agendas that the capitalist society has penetrated in the life of humans rendering them inhumane. While the ideal situation would be helping those in need, the capitalist society has widened the gap between the rich and the poor consolidating a form of social hierarchy and inequality. Hage's narrative (2010), therefore, questions whether diaspora for immigrants is a blessing or a curse. As a new map of hell, the author depicts the struggle of Arab immigrants in Canada who were consumed by the utopic tendency of the land of opportunities. In reality, however, and under the capitalist system, this vision is merely dystopian.

The diasporic experience, as encountered by the unnamed narrator, is dystopian *par excellence*. It shows the human hypocrisy and life in the multicultural dystopian capitalist city as a land of opportunities for either those who are wealthy enough, or those who can manipulate their talents to adapt in the multicultural city. To poor and psychologically traumatized immigrants, however, Montreal is a land of misery as it keeps reminding them of psychological alienation, isolation, and social exclusion. To Charles Taylor the identity of any human being is molded by its "recognition" from the other. Any misrecognition from both parties may lead to "real damage, real distortion [...] inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (25). Here, it is likely to state that the protagonist's inability to assimilate into the "cold bright state" (Hage 6), adds to his childhood trauma. His inability to have what Charles Taylor terms "the human need of recognition" (26) puts the protagonist in a crisis in which he neither adheres to humans nor Canadian weather.

Montreal's dystopian diaspora alienates the protagonist, causing him a severe

existential crisis. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist finds himself unable to determine the purpose of his life and existence in Canada. He says: “Where am I? And what am I doing here? How did I end up trapped in a constantly shivering carcass, walking in a frozen city with wet cotton falling on me all the time? And on top of it all, I am hungry, impoverished, and have no one no one [...] I am doomed!” (Hage 9). This statement intensifies the claim this article is trying to make. The dystopian aura of Montreal is nontraditional. It is a social dystopia built on the exclusion of the poor immigrant minority. The unnamed protagonist feels displaced, alienated, and excluded in the “frozen city” not only because of his Eastern origins, but also because of his impoverished status as a poor immigrant. The significance of the word “doom” here demonstrates not only Montreal’s dystopian diaspora, but an apocalyptic image awaiting poor immigrants living in the diaspora of exclusion. Taylor (1992) asserts that a key component to achieving a successful multicultural experience is maintaining a dialogic approach “unshaped by a predefined social script” (36). Hage’s protagonist finds himself alone, unable to belong to a group of identification, which accentuates his status as an outcast in the city. Unlike the restaurant owner’s strife for recognition, the unnamed narrator does not seek integration. He hates Eastern immigrants’ ability to act like Westerners, and abhors the latter’s hypocrisy.

To survive in the “frozen” dystopian diasporic city of Montreal, the protagonist resorts to stealing food to remain alive. He becomes a *flâneur* or a dweller in the Canadian city and seeks shelter and food before he “starves to death” (Hage 17). The protagonist, in fact, heavily criticizes those in Montreal who consider themselves “vegan” in their eating habits by adopting a certain lifestyle while having “bigger spoons and dig up the earth for their fathers’ and mothers’ inheritances” (Hage 21). This statement again intensifies the inequality in Montreal’s dystopia. To the protagonist, people who have the chance to choose a lifestyle cannot possibly fathom the struggle of a poor immigrant who “will wait for the wind to shake the branches and drop us fruits” (Hage 21). By highlighting this affinity, the protagonist severely criticizes the capitalist system that has made a lifestyle that widens the gap between the rich and the poor. This social hierarchy is not only between the Western rich and the Eastern poor, but also between Easterners themselves as social inequity and the psychological factor play both a role in rendering Montreal a dystopian diasporic space for the protagonist, as exemplified earlier in Reza.

Jesse Hutchison writes that any immigrant might doom his experience to failure if he tries to become “too authentic” and assimilate into the new culture as a regular inhabitant (Hutchinson 7). Reza, an Eastern immigrant himself, uses

his musical talent to seduce females by intermingling his non-conformity to Sufis' teachings. The latter raises Western female's compassion to his struggles of performing his "love for music" in a rigid society (25-26). Reza's adaptability in Montreal, therefore, is based on the manipulation of his "exotic" features to conform to the expectations of the Western society. The protagonist says "The exotic has to be modified here-not too authentic, not too spicy or too smelly, just enough of it to remind others of a fantast elsewhere" (Hage 20). In other words, the immigrants in the novel should always maintain a safe margin in order not to overdo the Canadian experience and fail in their conditioned integration. I refer to conditioned integration as a state of imposed hegemonic domination subjected to immigrants of Eastern descent to be recognized as a group in the West. The identification is conditioned by maintaining a state of so-called hybridity in which the Oriental part must always be shown to keep the power dynamic of superior-inferior intact. To put it differently, the integration in the West is conditioned by assuming the role of an inferior Other. The protagonist, throughout the narrative, insists on his inability to tolerate this Westernized Canadian perspective, which again makes us, as readers, question this diverging approach to creating a hybrid self. Adding to the fact that the narrator cannot fathom the Canadian city's lifestyle, its weather adds to the place's dystopian aura.

Resisting Hegemony in the Underground

To cope with his surroundings, the protagonist deconstructs the human world and creates an alternative place of belonging. The latter allows him to live a life where he takes it upon himself to be deemed a master instead of a mere outcast. Being unable to live in the world of humans, who consider him both primitive and uneducated, the narrator converges to a new alternative space where he refers to himself as the "master of the underground" (23). He bestows his ability to control the area and boosts the skills, which the human race cannot do. He says, "I crawled under beds, camped under tables; I was even the kind of kid who would crawl under the car to retrieve the ball, rescue the stranded cat, find the coins under the fridge" (23). This illustration shows the unnamed protagonist's flexibility as a cockroach in the underground. This place provides him with the possibility to belong without considering the stereotypical image or inferior social status humans associate him with. He refers to the underground as a "world of its own" and says that it emanates from the ruthlessness and injustice of the physical reality. The underground, thus, is an alternative space of existence where the poor find solace from the harsh capitalist society.

By escaping into the underground, the protagonist takes refuge from the dystopian city, and heal his childhood trauma. He says: “I reminded myself that I can escape anything. I am the master of escape [...] I disappeared [...] like thunder [...], I fanned my cockroach wings [...] I escaped most when I stole sweets, pens, chewing gum, and, later on, cameras and cars” (Hage 23). The alternative space of belonging the protagonist resorts to enables him to “disappear” and “escape” from the corrupt human world. This “escape” frees the protagonist from Montreal’s dystopia. In fact, by turning into a cockroach in the underground, the character is not only able to break loose from the human gaze, but also to practice the behaviors considered illegal as stealing. The underground, therefore, is an entity on its own that provides an alternative reality to the narrator and brings insights into the ground’s naturalistic endeavor. The protagonist “pass[es]-through” the corrupt human world to recreate a utopian alternative, where poor dwellers of different backgrounds would eventually belong (Hage 24). The truthful perspective here, and according to the protagonist, is a lens seen by the poor rather than by hegemonic groups. This alternative emanates from revisiting human constructions and correcting them by providing criticism from inside the system not outside it. Again, this article does not seek to represent the protagonist as a character beyond human follies. While stealing cannot be possibly justified by all means, in the context of the dystopian diaspora, this can be interpreted as a satirical utopia.

In “The Three Faces of Utopianism,” Sargent contends that dystopias warn about the status quo. He argues that while the main tendency in the making of dystopia stimulates “pessimism,” hinting at “the idea of the original sin,” many dystopias are indeed “self-consciously warnings” (Sargent 26). He contends that instead of showing a final descent into the abyss, warnings in dystopia usually stand for “choice, and therefore hope, are still possible”. This comment fits the novel’s context. While Rawi Hage’s intention in writing his narrative is prone to different interpretations, his text can be seen as a warning of the current situation in an attempt to reform contemporary society. The author shows his critique of the status quo in hopes of raising consciousness of the social calamity faced by poor immigrants. Instead of building his narrative with an anti-utopian tendency, Hage uses the underground as an alternative where the marginalized poor could belong. The unnamed narrator’s metamorphosis shows his severe criticism of the rich who look down to those below them. This instance symbolizes his criticism of the human foundations, which are strictly biased toward serving those with power.

Sargent defines utopia as a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and place” (9). He argues that while this is

considered a more standard definition, he still elaborates on different kinds of utopia including positive, negative utopia, utopian satire, and critical utopia. Although Sargent clearly distinguishes the aforementioned types, he contends that labeling a text as exemplary of one type is quite difficult. The latter, he affirms, solely depends on understanding the writer's real intentions. From the development of Hage's narrative, it can be assumed that the novel shows an affinity with satirical utopia. In "The Three Faces of Utopianism", Sargent argues that satirical utopia is a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and place that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of the contemporary society" (09). Thus, the aim of a satirical utopia is to critique society to promote awareness and change in the status quo. Indeed, while the writer's intentions remain questionable, some features of satirical utopia can be applied to Hage's novel. Sargent states in "Utopia- The Problem of Definition" that satirical utopia reflects on a "non-existent place, the major focus of which is satire" (144). Hage's narrative demonstrates Montreal's dystopian diaspora to satirize and at the same time criticize this social hierarchy created by the city's capitalist system. While this article defends the creation of satirical utopia in *Cockroach*, a thorough investigation is required simply because, and according to Sargent, utopias often contain a degree of satire (The Three Faces of Utopianism 144)

In the novel, the protagonist makes it clear to the readers that the underground symbolizes the resistance of the oppressed. As an alternative space, the underground provides a chance for social integration and belonging. Sargent, in "The Three Faces of Utopianism," states that one marker of utopian satire is that "there is no simple good/bad distinction" (8). In fact, the representation of Montreal and the underground depends on the character. Thus, poverty and richness are determining factors in associating a place with good or bad qualities. The unnamed narrator's hatred of Montreal is altered by a convergence to the underground. Being confined in the limited ground occupied by humans, the narrator states that "change is coming[...] and only cockroaches and their earthly kingdom shall survive the last deluge of fire" (30-31). This statement reflects the convergence to a new approach that values the life of the poor in society and renders their rights for equality a valid quest. The novel's severe criticism of capitalism is intensified further when the narrator refers to the standard regulations a servant should comply within a restaurant. An "impoverished presence" is considered a threat to the owner's business; therefore, certain regulations must be met to ensure human hospitality in the rich's doctrine (Hage 85).

Moreover, Hage's satirical utopia is highly critical of socialism, which fails to

identify itself with the poor. The unnamed narrator insists that even if he belongs to society's lowest group, it does not diminish his right to exist. The protagonist accentuates that gaining access to perpetual existence is far better than void and nothingness (Hage 122). In this sense, the protagonist creates a temporary space of existence that enables him to be included within a particular group, which becomes a marker of identification. This space blurs hierarchies and all the already-made human constructions. The protagonist attempts to deconstruct the space of humans, which roams in hypocrisy and bourgeois ideals and recreates a different space in which he finds himself the master of the underground. Again, the narrator here insists that the creation of this space is characterized by temporality and non-fixedness. The space created by the unnamed narrator is his territory to mark a change to the unjust world of the ground. The underground offers the protagonist the possibility for integration that he could not achieve in the world of humans. This liminal space becomes a location where the protagonist criticizes both socialist and capitalist approaches from their biased and opportunist agendas. He regards the underground as a place of resistance for the poor, the marginalized, the voiceless, and all the biased constructions made by humans that do not serve humanity.

Deleuze and Guattari elaborate on the major differences between territorialization and deterritorialization (3). While the former reflects a "merely ordered state", the latter is "more rigid and organized" which he labels as a space of integration. Interestingly, this definition serves the purpose of this article for the main reason that the protagonist's deterritorialization is much more elaborate and constructed if compared to the fragile world founded by biased capitalist ideals. In this sense, the reterritorialization of the alternative space of the underground confirms that while the narrator deconstructs a world, he reconstructs a different one to obliterate the possibility of chaos. This marks an affinity with Charles Taylor's approach in which he states that the politics of recognition depend on surpassing orthodoxy and adhering to heterodoxy as an approach to "speak truth to power," if I may borrow Said's words in *The Representations of The Intellectual* (Said 85). The narrator identifies himself with cockroaches rather than human. He favors the space of vermin, insects, and cockroaches rather than the corrupt world of humans. This identification shows how immigration has deeply affected the protagonist, who finds himself unable to be treated according to what Charles Taylor refers to as "the politics of multiculturalism" (25). While Taylor focuses on dialogism as an important indicator to achieve assimilation, the protagonist's monologist approach to the human world has been replaced by a world in which he finds himself able to display all of his skills learned from childhood.

Yet, while the protagonist uses the underground (p.11) as an alternative space, for him, it is always characterized by temporality. This justifies the interpretation of the text as a satirical utopia in the sense that it unveils corruption to raise awareness and promote change. The protagonist resorts to the underground as a space of resistance, but never considers it as an absolute space of existence. In spite of the fact that the unnamed narrator escapes to the underground to resist Montreal's capitalist system, he never sees it as a permanent space of belonging. The character is unable to escape from the codes of the physical territory. He states "change is coming. Repent, you pompous erectile creatures! And, and, I continued [...] Under new management! Special underground menu served by the undertaker" (p.31). This satirical statement reflects the protagonist's resentment towards privileged humans who cannot possibly relate to the struggle of the poor. This commentary indicates a satirical social stance on human corruption, moral decadence, arrogance, and consumerism that have become the motto of the contemporary human race. The underground's creation is based on deconstructing these biased norms that rendered the alienated immigrant protagonist an outcast in the shivering city. It is a temporal space of refuge that offers him safety and comfort. This alternative underground space emanates from a need to belong rather than a static creation of a limited space of existence. In other words, the underground functions as a replacement to the corrupt world of humans that roams in hypocrisy and injustice, but cannot be taken as a permanent stance of belonging. It represents a resisting aura to the already constructed systems of humans that have always tended to cast out the poor from being involved or participating in the country's economy, politics, or the like. Hage's novel unveils the hidden agendas of Western society to highlight and bring forth some changes that might benefit both Westerners and Easterners alike. The narrator's approach stems from deconstructing the world of humans to reconstruct a peaceful space where the possibility of the creation of a multicultural space gathers people coming from different ethnic and social backgrounds.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article contributed to the overall understanding of dystopia within the context of diaspora. Alongside the main canonical dystopian novels, it argued that Hage's *Cockroach* is to be considered as a dystopian diasporic novel, whose concern is to unveil a different type of struggle of the alienated poor immigrant minority. It asserted, on the one hand, that Montreal is portrayed as a contemporary dystopian setting, whose capitalist agenda intensifies the social dehumanization of the poor. Focusing on the immigrant's perspective, the novel highlights the

unnamed narrator's struggle in the "frozen city" that deprives him of his basic needs as a human being. Adding to his stance as an immigrant of Eastern descent, the unnamed narrator's poverty makes him seen as an outcast. The latter leads him to stealing food to remain alive. The article asserted that the contemporary dystopian city regards apocalyptic imagery as not that of physical destruction but rather a descent into the darkness of the human soul. The text highlights how the rich feed over the poor, which adds to the narrator's misery in the Canadian city. The novel, thus, explores the hidden agendas of the capitalist society that creates a system that consolidates forms of hegemony, power, and segregation.

Being unable to cope with humans, the narrator resorts to the creation of a new space in which he finds his solace from famine, hunger, and poverty. This is interpreted in the context of the novel as a satirical utopia. While some of its features are prominent in the novel, terming Hage's narrative as utopian would need further elaboration. Such a claim requires an understanding of the author's real intentions i.e. whether Rawi Hage intended to create a utopia or it was merely part of his criticism and initiation of capital reform. Therefore, future research might consider deepening the understanding of Hage's novel as a satirical utopia, by finding affinities between utopianism as a concept and the novel's context. Indeed, even if the protagonist attempts to integrate into a new space away from the Canadian territory he already occupied, he never sees the underground as a fixed process of deterritorialization to create a valid territory. The underground, to the unnamed narrator, is a temporal space for existence. In this case, it can be deduced that the novel does not solely reflect the features of space theory as it does not maintain the absoluteness of space but rather the liminality of its creation.

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The Ethical Predicament and Choices of Peasants in Nam Cao's Short Stories

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Abstract From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, French colonial invasion transformed Vietnam from a feudal society into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, subjecting its population to profound and multilayered ethical crises. Driven by both Romantic and Realist impulses, Vietnamese literature underwent a decisive process of modernization: Romanticism interrogated the spiritual predicaments of intellectuals navigating new ideological currents, while Realism engaged directly with the existential crises of the peasantry — the overwhelming majority of the population. As one of Vietnam's most accomplished realist writers, Nam Cao (1915–1951) rendered, with remarkable psychological depth, the ethical predicament and moral choices confronting peasants in the period preceding the August Revolution of 1945. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Ethical Literary Criticism, this article offers a systematic analysis of the ethical predicament and ethical choices of peasant figures in Nam Cao's short fiction, thereby illuminating the tragic ethics of survival and the tenacious adherence to humanistic ideals among subaltern subjects living under dual colonial domination and feudal oppression.

Keywords Ethical Literary Criticism; Realist Literature; Ethical Formation; Modern Vietnamese Literature

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南高短篇小说中农民的伦理困境及其选择

内容摘要：19 世纪末至 20 世纪初，法国殖民入侵使越南由封建社会转为半殖民地半封建社会，民众深陷多重伦理困境。越南文学在浪漫主义与现实主义潮流推动下走向现代化：浪漫主义聚焦新思想者的精神困境，现实主义则直面占人口绝大多数农民的生存危机。作为越南杰出的现实主义作家，南高（1915—1951）的短篇小说深刻呈现了 1945 年八月革命前农民的伦理困境与伦理选择。本文以文学伦理学批评为理论框架，系统分析南高短篇小说中农民的伦理选择，揭示殖民与封建双重压迫下底层民众的生存伦理悲剧与理想坚守。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；现实主义文学；道德塑造；越南现代文学

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引论

20 世纪初，法国殖民的入侵与统治，引发了越南社会的剧烈动荡与转型，封建体系瓦解、资本主义萌芽兴起，政治与经济的剧变，推动传统伦理秩序发生着深刻的变革。这一时期，越南文学步入现代化的进程，浪漫主义与现实主义两大思潮并行：前者聚焦新思想者的精神困境，后者直面占人口九成以上农民的生存危机。农民的伦理困境，由此成为彼时越南社会最核心的现实议题。作为越南杰出的现实主义作家南高（1915—1951），其短篇小说表现了 1945 年八月革命前农民的伦理困境与选择。关于南高的文学创作，越南学术界陈登川¹、潘文祥²、阮花鹏³、卢锦纓⁴等学者，分别从现实主义、创作风格、文艺诗学和比较文学等维度展开了一系列探讨，使得南高短篇创作之影响，近于鲁迅在中国的短篇成就样。然其讨论却较少有从伦理视角展开和透视，大多疏忽了南高写作中伦理价值在其小说中的弥散与意义。在越南当下的文学中，虽然武龙侠、阮氏明商曾从伦理视角对南高的小说有过论说和

1 参见 Trần Đăng Suyễn. *Chủ nghĩa hiện thực Nam Cao*. Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội 2001.

2 参见 Phan Văn Tường. *Phong cách nghệ thuật Nam Cao*. Luận án Tiến sĩ, trường Đại học Sư phạm Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2004.

3 参见 Nguyễn Hoa Bằng. *Thi pháp truyện ngắn Nam Cao*. Luận án Tiến sĩ, Viện Văn học, 2000.

4 参见 Lư Cẩm Anh. *Sơ sánh văn xuôi tự sự của Lỗ Tấn và Nam Cao*. Hà Nội: Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, 2021.

析作¹，但总体尚未形成文学伦理学批评框架下的系统性成果。文学伦理学批评，是由中国学者聂珍钊先生提出并建构²，自2016年始，在越南文艺理论界得到回应并逐步成为理论界的重要批评方法³。本文运用文学伦理学批评理论，以南高短篇小说为研究对象，系统剖析南高作品中农民的伦理困境和伦理选择，以及伦理道德的塑造，解析其中的叙事伦理，藉此彰显南高短篇小说批判现实主义伦理书写的独特风貌。

一、文学伦理学批评与越南批判现实主义文学研究

文学伦理学批评作为一种独特的批评范式，在现实主义文学研究领域具有显著的方法论优势。本节拟首先辨析文学伦理学批评的基本内涵与核心概念，进而揭示越南批判现实主义文学与文学伦理学批评之间的内在契合性，以为后文考察南高短篇小说中农民伦理困境及伦理选择提供理论依据。

文学伦理学批评是一种从伦理道德角度研究文学的路径。关于文学与伦理道德关系的研究在西方早已存在，并在十九世纪取得了相当成就。然而进入二十世纪后，随着文本内部研究路径的兴起，从道德角度进行的文学研究一度沉寂，直至二十世纪八十年代，中国社会进入一个新的历史时期，文学与理论也随之新生蓬勃，正是在这一时期，在聂珍钊的引领下，中国的文学伦理学批评走向完善，并以崭新的面貌和蓬勃的生命力呈现出来。为了全面考察这一文学批评方法，聂珍钊展开分析作家与创作的关系、文学作品与社会道德的联系、以及读者与文学作品的关联⁴。尤其在分析和阐释伦理道德问题的过程中，该批评方法注重遵循审美原则，将这些问题视为艺术创造的产物，而非如道德评判样，单一地从道德立场去追长论短。由此可见，文学伦理学批评既重视文学的教诲价值与作家的社会责任，又不忽视文学作品的审美价值。正因为如此，文学伦理学批评，作为一种文学的批评方法，才有了完整的批评学术体系，其中以“伦理困境”与“伦理选择”最为核心。伦理困境（ethical predicament）是“指文学文本中由于伦理混乱而给人物带来的难以解决的矛盾与冲突。伦理困境往往是伦理悖论导致的，普遍存在于文学文本中。伦理困境有多种表现形式，例如伦理两难，就是伦理困境的主要表现形式之一”（聂珍钊，《文学伦理学批评导论》258）。面对伦理困境，文学作品的人物要被迫做出选择，而任何选择又都在两难之间，故事由此而产生，悲剧也由此开始。进而聂珍钊在这一理论中阐明：“在文学伦理学批评

1 参见 Vũ Long Hiệp, Nguyễn Thị Minh Thương. “Luân lí sinh tồn trong truyện ngắn của Nam Cao và Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.” *Tạp chí Khoa học, trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội*, số 1, tập 68, 2023, tr. 13-23.

2 参见 聂珍钊：《文学伦理学批评导论》，北京：北京大学出版社，2014。

3 参见 Đỗ Văn Hiều. “Phát triển phê bình luân lí học văn học ở Việt Nam hiện nay.” *Tạp chí Khoa học trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội*, số 5, tập 61, 2016, tr. 53-58.

4 参见 聂珍钊。文学伦理学批评导论。北京：北京大学出版社，2014。

的术语中，伦理选择具有两方面的意义。一方面，伦理选择指的是人的道德选择，即通过选择达到道德成熟和完善；另一方面，伦理选择指对两个或两个以上的道德选项的选择，选择不同，则结果不同。因此不同选择有不同的伦理价值”（聂珍钊，《文学伦理学批评导论》266-267）。继而聂珍钊又强调了伦理困境与伦理选择之间的关系：“在文学作品中，伦理选择往往同解决伦理困境联系在一起，因此伦理选择需要解决伦理的两难问题”（聂珍钊，《文学伦理学批评导论》268）。可以说，伦理困境与伦理选择是文学人物必须面对的两个基本问题，“文学作品中只要有人物存在，就必然面临伦理选择的问题”（聂珍钊，《文学伦理学批评导论》267）。因此通过研究伦理困境与伦理选择，可以辨识一位作家、一个流派或一个文学阶段的创作特征。

如同十九世纪西方各国的现实主义文学与二十世纪初中国的现实主义文学一样，二十世纪初，越南的现实主义文学致力于真实地再现社会生活，尤其是社会生活的背光处和阴暗面。南高要求作家置身于苦难之中，敞开灵魂去迎接生命的回响。他认为文学必须是“那发自苦难人生的痛苦呐喊”¹。二十世纪初，越南现实主义文学集中书写并揭示了越南人民在一个风雨飘摇的特殊时代——欧风美雨在越南的骤起之旋，人民遭受着殖民者和统治者的双重压迫，传统与现代、本土与外来，彼此激烈的碰撞和扭曲，使得人们的生活，普遍陷入极端悲惨的境遇。缘此占越南人口百分之九十的农民，和一部分知识分子与新兴市民阶层的伦理困境，成为这一时期越南现实主义文学的核心表现。在这一时期的作品中，“人”，在他们所遭遇的困境中痛苦、绝望和挣扎。知识分子崇高的理想在现实中幻灭；人类美好的品质被金钱和权力所践踏；民众在生无可望的现实中苟且度日。比如此时应实而起的吴必素的小说《熄灯》²中的阿嫂，在强权的压迫下，为了生存被迫卖掉狗和孩子；阮公欢的《戏子司卜》短篇小说中的戏子司卜³，在父亲弥留之际因欠债仍不得不上台表演喜剧；元鸿的小说《烂皮》⁴中阿丙从乡下姑娘沦为城市堕落者的悲剧；武重奉《暴风骤雨》⁵中的玄和密，为了拯救家庭而不得不自我牺牲……这一切的一切，都成为文学伦理学批评可以研究开掘的“隐矿”。而在这一隐矿中，南高短篇小说中作为“人”的农民们，他们的伦理困境与伦理选择，一方面具有代表性和伦理审美的厘清之价值，另一方面，则更可以藉此进入二十世纪越南现实主义文学中“农民与人的”伦理选择的核心与内部。

1 参见 峰黎（搜集、选编、介绍）：“明月”《南高作品选集》第1，河内：文学出版社，1987年，191页。

2 参见 Ngô Tất Tố. *Tắt đèn*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Mai Lĩnh, 1939.

3 参见 Nguyễn Công Hoan: *Kép Tư Bền*. Hà Nội: Tiểu thuyết thứ Bảy xuất bản, 1935.

4 参见 Nguyễn Hồng. *Bỉ vỏ*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đời nay, 1937.

5 参见 Vũ Trọng Phụng. *Giống tổ*. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn thanh, 1937.

二、南高短篇小说中农民的伦理困境

文章第二部分揭示了越南现实生活中农民的伦理困境如何在南高的文学创作中得到深化与转化。南高笔下的农民被置于生存与人性的双重重压之下，被迫在异化的现实与维护人格尊严之间艰难挣扎，其伦理处境具有深刻的悲剧意蕴。

回顾历史，1858年9月，法国殖民者开始入侵越南，至二十世纪初已基本完成军事占领，并正式在越南全境建立殖民统治。法国殖民者一边竭力巩固其统治机器，另一边持续进行大规模的经济掠夺。在殖民者对越南殖民地的开发过程中，越南自然资源逐渐枯竭，社会元气耗竭殆尽。严酷的统治政策与残暴的剥削手段，使越南人民的生活陷入极度困苦的深渊。而除法国殖民统治外，1940年，越南又遭日本法西斯的占领。占领着在被占领的领土上，实施了一系列打击经济的政策，并迫使法国殖民者签订多项条约，要求贫困的越南民众每年向日本提供粮食并上缴稻米；禁止粮食从南方向北方运输，限制自由运输；强迫农民拔除水稻改种黄麻，占用农田种植花生。凡此种种，当时日本法西斯与法国殖民者的粮食搜刮政策，加之越南北部平原多省遭遇自然灾害与歉收，直接导致了1945年越南约二百万人口死于饥荒的巨大惨剧（黄芳）。正是在这一历史背景下，南高在这一时期的短篇写作，直面了当时社会与农民的绝望困境，书写了“人”，在这一困境中的伦理二难与选择。

在南高众多的短篇小说中，首先作为“人”的农民们，他们始终生在活着与人性的两难选择中。乡村凋敝，极度贫困，家徒四壁，没有房屋，这是南高小说故事的土壤和人物最穷困的舞台。《衣虱郎中》¹中的衣虱郎中和利婶，因无家可居只能靠四处帮佣住在他人家；《志飘》中的人物志飘，没有房屋只能住在河边的破棚里；小说《穷》中的老鼠弟，有家则家里则已没有一件值钱的东西在，想要吃顿饱饭就只能双眼朝着天空望。在南高的诸多小说中，农民的房子，一方面是人活着的空间，另一方面是人之所以为人的精困境之寓所。在这个寓所内，当活着只是为了填饱肚子时，人就脱离开精神朝着动物的方向走去了。从孩子（《吃不上狗肉的孩子》）到老人（《一顿饱饭》），自年轻的姑娘（《一个纪念的故事》）到壮年男子们（《穷》，所有的人都挣扎在人与生物的伦理困境中。在这个困境中，是选择本能的口腹之欲与生物性生存，还是选择人的尊严、荣誉活得像人样？这一活着的大诘问，把故事中的人物推向了两难的诘问选择里，使得困境成为了南高故事的入口，也成为人之所以为人的精神考察室。

其次，南高笔下的人——农民们，除了面临着殖民者的有声强权，还面临着封建陋习的无声挤压，以及日常生活中人性“恶”的看不见的损伤。正

1 本文南高短篇小说均出自峰黎（搜集、选编、介绍）。《南高作品选集》，第1卷。河内：文学出版社，1987年。下文相关引文仅标注页码，不再一一说明。

是这三者的共同作用，将人——农民们，推入了堕落异化与人之尊严间的另一伦理之困境。《志飘》中的志飘，自出生便被遗弃于旧砖窑，由村民轮流抚养长大。成年后他为多人帮工，最终到霸健家做了佣人。然而在这个故事中，霸健的三太太看上了他，让他为她捏脚捶背。而志飘在这一屈辱与无奈的过程里，他选择了活着与屈辱，结果却被东家霸健知道后，霸健心生嫉妒，设法将他送入了监狱。而志飘出狱后，再次回到村庄时，他整个人都变了个样子：“脑袋剃得光溜溜，牙齿被刮得白晃晃，黝黑的脸孔一幅洋洋自得的模样，双眼目露凶光真是吓人”（98）。在此志飘完全丧失了活着与人的分别，他最终奇怪地成了霸健的得力打手，专事“替人打架斗殴”，致使全村人都怕他，不敢接近他，避之而唯恐不及。只有一个叫氏诺的——一个丑陋不堪、还有些痴呆的女人可以接近他。所以，挨到志飘生病时，正是氏诺为他煮了一碗葱花粥。就是在这种人性极度扭曲的文化环境中，一个女人的关照，即便她丑陋又痴呆，也令志飘深受感动——那碗葱花粥，来自他人、女性的关怀，使志飘渐次清醒，明白了自己面临着伦理困境：是继续做武代村的恶魔？还是重新做一个善良的人？这种选择从肉体会到了精神，成为南高小说更深层的困境。第三，在南高更有伦理选择、也更有代表性的小说《更夫的资格》中，人物阿路原本善良，自尊心强，但却处于生计，接手了一份村里男人都不愿做的、被视为最低贱的工作——专职打扫村庙，每逢宴饮或集会时，负责逐户通知或邀约。在越南乡村的文化中，男人们是宁愿去做苦力也不愿去作侍庙更夫的。而阿路，本来是体面乡绅之子，后来家道中落，妻子又接连生子，就是生活极度困顿，他也从不愿与他人样铤而走险，行盗问窃。可是在阿路最终接下了这份全村无人屑于从事的工作后，因为他勤恳善良，家里的生活竟然渐渐有了起色。于是，人们对此渐生嫉妒之心，暗中串通排挤他和毁辱他。赴宴时人们不与他同席，即便已经坐下，看见他来也纷纷起身。而在其他场合，人们见到他，还要故意挑衅和嘲弄他。路哥为此感到羞愤而屈辱，他被推入了一个难以妥善解决的伦理困境。他不能因为村民的毁辱就放弃那份帮助家庭改善了生活的工作。但若保留那份工作，他又必须忍受难以接受的侮辱。乡野与村庄，这个农民们的生存空间，变成了一个令人窒息的、无路可走的困局。在那里，人们本已为衣食温饱而挣扎，却还要面对无数习俗和人性狭隘、丑陋的“本性”挤压和选择。《更夫的资格》，故事没有《志飘》那么曲折和跌宕，但却清晰的触及着更为深层的“人”与人之本性的对立与选择，再现了乡村文化全灰色的存在图景，唤醒读者对文化与人性的深思与忧虑，替他们思考在更深层的文化伦理困境中的存在与可能。

三、南高短篇小说中农民的伦理选择

在生存与人性的伦理困境中，农民——人，在南高笔下面临着一种近乎无解的伦理抉择。当二者不可兼得时，他们最终选择了生存。无论老幼，抑

或正值壮年者，皆难以超越这一根植于生命深处的本能驱动力。南高正是借助这种“刻意求解”式的叙事者立场——既保持叙述之距离，又主动介入人物的内在逻辑中，给农民——人，在伦理困境中的抉择，给予了深切而克制的人道主义同情。

当人被推入必须在生存与人性之间做出选择时，在南高的小说中，生存的本能战胜了人性。那些故事中的农民，他们放弃了自尊，放弃了荣誉，选择了活着与生存的机会。在这一选择中，人性失败了，生存的本能取得了胜利。这个选择是人之生存之必然？还是南高的审美之必然？在《吃不上狗肉的孩子》中，小儿子“拱进母亲怀里，蜷缩着撒娇道：我饿！妈妈！饿。顷刻，其他的孩子又一次想起自己极为饥饿。他们也不给母亲抓虱子了。他们叹气，他们吞着黏糊糊的口水。他们一脸麻木。他们躺在地上掀起衣服露出肚子。个个的肚子都快饿得前胸贴后背了”（211）。这种极度写实的描述，颇类于中国作家莫言对饥饿的描绘。使得人在选择中朝着动物的方向靠拢和走近。倘若说在困顿中孩子们之所以这样选择是因为他们是孩子，那么在南高的另外一些经典小说中，即使是那些理性而意志更强大的成年人，却也无法战胜人在特定环境中的自然之意志。在短篇《一顿饱饭》里，南高再现了理性的人，如何为了一口食物做出抉择的过程。故事讲述一位年老妇女的悲剧，她一生都非常清晰地知道养儿育女是自己的要务和责任，然而丈夫早逝，她独自抚养儿子，期望自己年老体衰时，能得到儿子的赡养与照顾。然而儿子又突然死去，儿媳很快改嫁，留下她必须抚养孙子。于是她辛勤劳作，奔波于远近集市谋生，但挣来的钱仍不足以养活自己与孙子，老人不得不忍受贫穷、疾病与孤独，直到她开始双手颤抖，身体疲惫疼痛，最终只能乞讨为生，整夜哭泣，哀叹命运。到她连哭泣的力气也没有时，她想到应该去看望到了别人家里做佣的孙子，藉此也许可以讨来一顿饱。于是她在来日走一段，歇一程，待终于见到孙子时，她半开玩笑却又极其认真地说：“我来这就是问树夫人要口饭吃！我快饿死了！”（388）。如此到了吃饭时，她应邀入席，却不知按规定只能吃三小碗饭，吃快了还会被视为失礼。然而，老妇人自管自地吃，一直吃到撑至难受，竟因为“过饱”而死去。小说到此，可谓触目惊心，不寒而栗。而那位有责任并清晰人之责任的老妇人，她“选择”被“撑死”也要吃的屈辱和过程，给我们文学上伦理选择的隐语与暗示，正如中国作家鲁迅的经典小说《药》中的“人血馒头”样，不仅成为一种为活着的警示，而最终也成了越南文学中伦理困境选择的黑寓言。

回望南高的短篇小说，做出这种生存大于一切选择的不仅老人与孩子，还有优雅的女性和城里读书的青年。韩，是《一个纪念的故事》中的城里学生，他在乡下曾送给一位名叫丝的乡村姑娘一块手帕为纪念，并打算择日向她表白爱慕与爱情。然而在他离开乡村后，姑娘在家被逼嫁给他人。一日韩偶然看到集市上那些吃着米糕的乡村妇女和姑娘，他想如果他的丝姑娘也在这里，“肯

定也会蹲坐在那个卖米糕的摊子前。她会叫老板娘切三毛钱的米糕，再单独舀一勺蟹肉汤。她会吃，会吸溜得哗啦作响。而她那双圆润红艳、犹如珊瑚般诱人的嘴唇，蟹肉汤会顺着她那秀气的下巴流下来，让她不得不用袖口去擦……天哪！哪有像韩曾想象的那样美好呢？”（300）在这位城市青年的眼睛中，那些因饥渴而狼吞虎咽的姑娘已不再可爱。甚至他认为，她们“若不是因为饥饿，原本或许是可爱的”（301）。在小说《为何如此？》中，南高讲述了一位妇女嫁人后因饥饿而不得不偷窃食物的故事，后来她离家出走，沦落风尘，又幸运地嫁了一个富人，成为端庄的妇人。作家南高通过作品中丈夫这一人物表达了自己的想法：“一个风尘女子与一个良家妇女并无太大不同。只是境遇不同罢了。境遇一变，很可能人也变，心性也变。”（309）

如此等等，人在饥饿与生存面前的选择，最后都回归于为活着的伦理。这种伦理的生存选择，构成了南高书写与现实、与伦理的道德关系，也构成了南高小说中伦理选择最独有的伦理审美，而最终，随着时间推移与延伸，南高也如同中国伟大的作家鲁迅样，成为了那一时期现实主义写作潮流中最高的波浪和峰顶，成为了越南非鲁迅的鲁迅。

四、南高小说中伦理选择的道德塑造

南高短篇小说中的农民伦理选择，不仅呈现了生存困境下的人格沦陷，更彰显了在极端困苦中对道德理想与人格尊严的坚守。若说前文所述是人——农民，在饥饿与压迫中被迫放弃尊严的悲剧，那么本部分则着重探讨另一类人——农民的道德追求和塑造。面对活着的生死之抉择，他们作为人的存在时，是怎样宁可以生命为代价，也要守护做人的底线与道德之尊严。这一道德追求与塑造，既是南高人道主义精神的核心所在，同时也深刻揭示了越南批判现实主义文学对人的价值与尊严的深切关怀，为伦理叙事的现实主义写作，赋予了更为深沉的艺术感染力与思想力。

面对生存与尊严之间的道德选择，并非南高笔下的所有人物都选择了屈从。在南高的小说创作中，还有相当多故事与人物，因其道德塑造而昂然——或活着，或死去，唯其对人的尊严与道德的坚守而唯一。他们为此所做出的选择及付出的代价是，击损肉体，守住灵魂，让人最终成了可尊、可敬的人。成了拥有人之精神、灵魂的人。在这些小说中，道德不是天生的，而是后天的人生渐成的，是南高的塑造完成的。也因此，这些作品被阅读时，会令读者苦痛而震撼，如同玉碎光闪的美丽般。也正因为此，南高成为了南高，成了在那个年代与同代作家相比更熠熠生辉的笔耕者。而其作品，也才至今都如那些伟大的中国现代作家样，不仅永远活在文学史，而且永远活在读者的内心里。一如短篇小说《老鹤》中的老鹤，他是一个赤贫中极贫人，妻子早逝，儿子因无钱娶妻而出走，成为殖民种植园的契约工，家里只还有儿子离家出走前，留给他的那条小狗陪伴着他的晚年与余生。然而日益窘困的生存与生活，不

仅使他备尝艰辛，而且使他连守住儿子为他留下的那块薄地都艰难。继而一场九死一生的大病后，他变得衰弱不堪、穷困潦倒，甚至连让狗在家里吃顿饱饭活着的可能都没有。于是故事来到了最为平静、又最为惊心动魄处——作为“人之所以为人”的老鹤，他将那条小狗卖掉了，让它脱离苦难了。而老鹤，则将卖狗所得的钱和家里的地，托付给信得过的老师保管着，以期儿子有一天回来了，请老师把这些交到儿子手里去。而他这时他悄悄向村人讨了用来毒死狗的药，以极其惨烈而恐惧的方式结束了自己的生命。老鹤死去了，但一个“人”却永远站在了人们与读者心中了。一种永远不散的“人”的尊严和精神，永远弥漫在了文学里和我们一次又一次的阅读里。短篇小说《穷》，与《老鹤》相比较，不是同样讲述了一个类似的悲惨故事，而是同样为我们通过伦理的选择后，塑造了一个“不朽的人”。作品讲述老鼠弟（真名老二）一家在极度贫困的处境里，经反复踌躇、犹豫后，最终完成了一种卑微而艰难的抉择——老鼠弟病重，妻子四处借贷，又不得不将家里所有值钱的东西都卖掉，然而即便是如此，孩子们也依然每日都饿得嗷嗷待哺，奄奄一息，连糊口的汤饭都无法日日相继。饥饿、疾病，加之目睹家里因自己的身体而日日深陷在生死绝境中，如此老鼠弟，意识到自己是这个家活下去的累赘了。他活着别人就都难以活着了。于是他想到了自杀，尽管他对活着充满渴望和幻想。然而他知道，唯有他死去，妻子、儿女才有可能少受苦难之折磨。在本能的求生与作为丈夫与父亲的道德间，他选择了死亡。这一选择展现的是一个丈夫与父亲的牺牲，塑造的却是人的尊严与道德之力的坚韧和高尚。在南高《穷》《老鹤》等等一批小说中，南高的笔，都从令人信服的伦理选择走到了道德的塑造与确立，使得人的尊严与道德，成为了人之所以为人的准则与理想。也正是这种准则的确立、塑造与完成，让南高和那一批现实主义作家比论时，在人与文学的精神上，超越了武重奉、阮公欢等其他作家而成为了峰巅和旗帜。成为了文学伦理学批评研究最好、最无法绕过的作家和典例。成为了人之伦理在困境选择与塑造的文学百景图。

结语

南高短篇小说中农民的伦理困境、伦理选择与道德塑造，体现了1930—1945阶段越南现实主义文学的典型特征。在这一历史时期里，无论是作为农民的人，还是作为人的农民们，他们的活着与生存，死去与消亡，都不仅是越南的历史与现实，而且是具有与中国历史相似的人类共同的历史与记忆。而产生在这一历史时期的一大批的越南的现实主义之写作，也不仅仅是越南文学至今的记忆与审美，而且还是我们亚洲文学不可或缺的一部分。在这一文学研究中，其研究方向在越南还可以扩展至1945—1975阶段的革命文学、战后文学（1975年至二十世纪最后十年）以及二十一世纪初的越南文学。在这一历史长河中，比较不同文学阶段文学伦理的困境与选择，及道德塑造的不

同与相同，可以认识到农民——人——在现实与文学中的生存存在与精神价值。在研究伦理困境与伦理选择时，作为人的伦理道德的追求和塑造，将成为文学伦理学研究中的一束光，不仅照亮写作与文学，也将照亮人的存在与升华，照亮人类在历史与现实中的理想与光辉，确保文学研究中“人”在审美维度的高度和中心。

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