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The Decision to Publish a First Novel: Howard Jacobson's *Coming from Behind* and Chatto & Windus, Ltd.

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Abstract Although there has been discussion of the University based fiction, there has been little if any of a specific publisher's decision to publish such a novel, the decision to do so from a relatively unknown writer's first novel as is with the instance of *Coming From Behind: A Novel* . Access to publisher files now make this possible and provide insight into the publisher's response to the submission of a very early, in fact the first novel of a future Man Booker prize winner (in 2010 Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, Bloomsbury).

Keywords First novel; readers' reports; publishing decisions; hitherto unpublished publishers files.

Author **William Baker** is Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, Northern Illinois University. He co-edits *The Year's Work in English Studies* (English Association: OUP), *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* and *STYLE* (PennState UP). Author or co-author of upwards of 185 articles in refereed journals and more than 25 books, he has published extensively on Shakespeare, Victorian Literature especially George Eliot, George Henry Lewes and Wilkie Collins,on Modern British Drama, especially Pinter, and Stoppard and on Ethical Criticism.

Publisher Readers' Reports

Established in 1855 the London based Chatto & Windus was acquired by Random House in 1987 and currently is part of Penguin Random House. In the immediate second world war period the house published notable work of literary criticism including F. R. Leavis's and others. 1978 saw the Chatto imprint of Howard Jacobson's first published book, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*. Four tragic heroes, their friends and families, co-authored with Jacobson's former colleague, Wilbur Sanders, Fellow of Selwyn College and University lecturer in English, 1967-2001 who died in 2002. Not primarily noted for their fiction list, in 1983 with the Hogarth

Press they published Howard Jacobson's initial fiction *Coming From Behind: A Novel* in an attempt perhaps to cash in on the then fashionable campus novel generated by Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* first published in 1954 by Victor Gollancz, the 1975 publication by Secker & Warburg of David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* and by the same publisher and year, Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*.

Although there has been discussion of the University based fiction,[1] there has been little if any of a specific publisher's decision to publish such a novel, the decision to do so from a relatively unknown writer's first novel as is with the instance of *Coming From Behind: A Novel*. Access to publisher files[2] now make this possible and provide insight into the publisher's response to the submission of a very early, in fact the first novel of a future Man Booker prize winner (in 2010 Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, Bloomsbury).

The Chatto & Windus files at their archives housed at the University of Reading provide details of readers' reports for what became *Coming From Behind*.[3]

1 Recently there seems to be a diminution of interest in the subject however for an insightful discussion of the Campus novel see Ken Womack's "Negotiating the University Community: Lucky Jim and the Politics of Academe" in his Postwar Academic Fiction. Satire, Ethics, Community (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan,2002), pp.27-42 and his "Academic Satire: The Campus Novel in Context" in A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000 ed. Brian W. Shaffer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2005), pp.326-39.

2 Thanks are due to Howard Jacobson for his co-operation and assistance in granting permission for accessing and publishing material concerning his work and also the Chatto stock books and correspondence concerning publication of "Coming from behind / by Howard Jacobson (1983)" Part of Correspondence files 331/1-340/3 sub-series CW 331/1-340/3CW 333/4. Thanks, are also due to the staff at the University of Reading, especially D. Corfield, Chatto and Windus Archive and to staff-Daisy Watt and others-at Howard Jacobson's various publishers including Penguin Random House, Transworld and Bloomsbury for granting permission to access materials, to use them, and for sending them.

3 For an assessment of critical reactions to Jacobson's work and the influence of Leavis on him see William Baker and Jeanette Roberts Shumaker, Jewish Writing: A Reference and Critical Guide to Jewish Writing in the UK, 2 vols., Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2019, 2:157-79, and David Brauner, Howard Jacobson (Manchester UP, 2020), especially p.224 for detailed discussions of Coming from Behind. Page references to the novel are to is first edition published by Chatto (The Hogarth Press) in 1983. Given the success of Jacobson's later novel's and especially the attention to his Booker Prize winning novel The Finkler Question (2010), Coming From Behind has been critically neglected as have Jacobson's other earlier novels. An exception is Glyn Turton's "Howard Jacobson (25 August 1942-)" in British Novelists Since 1960: Third Series, ed. Merritt Moseley, vol. 207 (Detroit, MI., Gale:1999): pp.157-58: "Coming From Behind is probably the richest of all Jacobson's novels" (p.157).Jacobson's latest novel, Howl, a bleak vision of the London landscape and urban prejudice published by Cape in 2026, has received most favorable reviews: see for instance Alex Clark, in the Guardian,14 March 2026: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2026/mar/16/howl-by-howard-jacobson-review-a-tragicomic-portrait-of-a-jewish-mans-despair accessed 20 March 2026.

According to Danni Corfield[1] at the archive "details of the submissions can be found in the manuscript entry book for 27 June 1978-17 Oct 1983 (CW E/23)." The work "was first submitted as 'Untitled novel' in August 1981 and rejected (MS entry #52884 on page 172) and re-submitted in March 1982 and accepted (MS entry #53234 on page 203). There is one readers' report for #52884 and 4 readers' reports for #53234." These reports anticipate much of the contemporary largely newspaper-based reception and subsequent reception of *Coming From Behind.* The internal Chatto report is signed by initials: "JML", two "RAS", "DJE" and an illegible set of initials probably belonging to "Jeremy" mentioned in one of the reports. One of these is identifiable, "DJE" being the initials of Dennis Joseph Enright (1920-2002) who from 1974-1982 served as a Director at Chatto & Windus.[2] As well as throwing considerable light upon the gestation of Jacobson's novel into print, the reports are of additional interest as such documents in publishing history are ignored, possibly owing to their unavailability.

Treating the reader's reports in chronological order, paraphrasing and citing directly from their central content, the first is from "JML", dated "1 Sept 81" and recorded as "#52884." It consists of four single spaced paragraphs responding to an "Untitled Novel by Howard Jacobson". At the top in hand is a note to Enright from the reader: "Dennis Hope this is helpful. What do you think? Jeremy." The first paragraph is an account of the novel focusing upon its main character. "JML" appropriates words that subsequently appear on its blurb on the front jacket flap and repeatedly in the reviews: "Sefton Goldberg is in his thirties, he teaches English at an undernourished polytechnic in the West Midlands and—knowing himself to be small and sweaty and defiantly unappreciative of beer, Nature and organised games—is touchily and repetitively aware of being a Jew islanded in a sea of goyim." The final part of this sentence reading on the blurb: "is gnawingly aware of being an urban Jew islanded in a sea of country-loving Anglo-Saxons."

The second paragraph of "JML"'s report indicates the strengths of Jacobson's work with some fine distinctions made. The novel "is stronger on bitter jesting reflections and recollections than on incident or character." The exception is Goldberg. The novel mixes, "predictably but enjoyably -parochial college politics and hints of sex to come." These are "unrealized" with the exception of the opening scene as "Sefton's a born loser." College politics are intertwined with Sefton's "embattled musings." This results in the product being "a cross between the Lodge-

1 D. Corfield e-mail to William Baker, 29 November 2019.

2 See Anthony Thwaite, "Enright, Dennis Joseph (1920-2002)" ODNB (2011):https://doi.org/10.1093/ref: odnb/88732 Accessed 25 January 2026.

Bradbury type of provincial university novel and the kind of rueful, waggish, fast-talking American Jewish novel of which one read so many in the late 1960s." For "JML," "Jacobson is an attractive and frequently witty writer, and he has an extremely, indeed admirably, sharp and ruthless eye and ear to the small ways in which we try to console ourselves and prop ourselves up against our failures to achieve what we'd like to achieve, and to reconcile ourselves to the triumphs of others." Consequently "Sefton Goldberg may well be a self-centered, scab-picking self-portrait, but it's drawn with a harsh and cunning awareness of what its genuinely unattractive hero is up to."

The third paragraph stresses the negatives aspects of the untitled novel that "for all its very considerable virtues of intelligence, articulacy and wit," is unsatisfactory. The reasons given are that "it's too much of a monologue, too little of the novel." The author and Goldberg "doesn't lift his eyes from his navel frequently enough to engage our interest in the other characters on whom the book depends." The result is that the reader is told at great length "about how [Goldberg] gets on with particular individuals or types without having the pleasure of seeing them in action, as it were." Further, nothing much seems to happen in the narrative so that "one tends to forget where one is supposed to be going and why." As a result, "some of the potentially very funny set pieces fizzle out disappointingly"—an example of this is the Cambridge interview for a Fellowship. At the conclusion of the book when Goldberg "plans his revenge on successful literary lightweights and on the sport loving people of Wrottesley—may succeed symbolically but (apart from being very unconvincing) means very little in terms of the reader 's interest, since we've never really been introduced to the character whose death precipitates [Goldberg's] golden opportunity."

In a short one sentence final paragraph "JML" adds that Jacobson's work "is very much better than most, but, very sadly, I think it's too slow moving and too much of a Giant Chip to succeed in its present form. Worth taking some trouble with?" In ink below using his initials "DJE" and dated 30 September 1981 Enright writes "The trouble is the Giant Chip, as JAL says—and the allied over-kill. Moderation would much sharpen the novel's effectiveness as satire—i.e., engage the reader more thoroughly without losing any of the point. I've written to the author -30/9/81." Below this in hand "DJE" writes "Re-submitted. See No 53234. Accepted 30/4/82."

In a five-paragraph report dated 7 April 1982 'RAS"—referred to as "Robyn" elsewhere -and numbered "53234"—comments also on Howard Jacobson: "A Novel" and the revised version that "Dennis" Enright and Jeremy [JML] wrote

encouragingly about. The first paragraph is concerned with the narrative but from a different perspective from that found in the assessment by "JML". According to "RAS" Jacobson has produced "a comedy about being Jewish and the failure, more precisely worrying about being Jewish and a failure—a kind of 'Portnoy at the Poly.'"[1] The central protagonist Sefton Goldberg "is a bright boy" with a degree from Cambridge "squirming under the uninhibitedly public congratulations of his ghastly parents, breezily anticipating an academic future at some suitably stylish establishment of learning—'an elegant little Chair'". However, he settles "for a bleak Midlands polytechnic populated by bovine students and misfit teachers and run by philistine bureaucrats." One of the sub plots is concerned with "the poly's amalgamation with the local football club." Goldberg has "two burning obsessions (apart from being Jewish)." These "are to get out, and to avoid the torture of hearing or reading about someone else's success." This "is defined as having a book published," attending "London literary parties, and meeting Melvyn Bragg" then a well-known literary personality and novelist.[2] In the end Goldberg is "shortlisted for a Cambridge fellowship, and as one by one the other candidates prove unsuitable, he gets it faute de mieux [for want of a better alternative]. But his book on failure fails to find a publisher."

The paragraphs that follow in the "RAS" report are preoccupied with the positives and negatives of Jacobson's novel. "There are many good and funny things about the book." This is illustrated in "the needling rivalry between Goldberg and his colleague Peter Potter"; in the "staples of comedy like embarrassing memories or prolonged misunderstandings; verbal jokes; especially the insights in the Jewish loathing of sports and Nature, envious wonderment at clean-limbed unhairy Anglo-Saxons, need for vulgar display, and obsession with bodily functions." With an eye for details "RAS" instances that "Sefton's mother used to sing 'Oh Susanna' every time anyone threatened to go near the lavatory." Yet, there is an important caveat: "it's all heartbreakingly sabotaged by excessive verbiage and the sluggishness of the plot." For "RAS", "one of the most damaging things is the author's excessive use of flashback. Though often very funny in themselves, they completely block the

1 For Jacobson as "the English Philip Roth" see Mark Brown "Howard Jacobson wins Booker Prize for The Finkler Question." Guardian 12 October 2010: https"//www,theguardian.com/books/2010[oct12/howard-jacobson-the-finkler-question-booker. Accessed 25 January 2026 and see also Ruth Gilbert, Writing Jewish. Contemporary British-Jewish Literature. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave, 2013) pp.106-107.

2 For Melvyn Bragg, Baron Bragg (1939-) see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvyn_Bragg Accessed 25 January 2026.

book's momentum." This reviewer finds that "a flagrant example starts on p.2 [of the manuscript]—far too soon—and goes on for three pages." Jacobson's "use of flashback serves only to emphasize the thinness of the plot, and it detracts from the build-up to the big scenes." "RAS" instances these as "Peter's party and the final ceremony at the football stadium," both of which "fall very flat." Furthermore "the plot is far too obviously a crude framework designed to accommodate the author's set pieces rather than something that actively enlivens them." An example of this is "Goldberg's visit home … there is no reason whatsoever for this visit except that the author has written a funny description of it." The home visit "is funny, but as with many similar instances in the book one isn't inclined to laugh because one is worrying about the direction of the story line."

Additional criticisms are voiced in the next paragraph. For "RAS", "to a lesser extent character is also sacrificed to the author's comic whims," and Sefton Goldberg "seems too much of a mouthpiece, telling us about being Jewish rather than showing us." Furthermore, according to "RAS" "one doesn't really like him all that much; he is too often immature and feeble. Among other, more minor criticisms of the repetition of the same verbal tricks, the abrupt ending of some chapters, the lack of comic-romantic-sexual interest. And the end is very lame." So, this reader concludes that "I don't think it can be published as it stands. Though marvellous in bits, it is frankly tedious as a whole." In spite of such reservations, "however, an English Jewish campus novel is an attractive and commercial proposition, and I think the author has the talent to pull it off. In fact, it would be an awful waste if he didn't." The report concludes that "there are the makings of a Jewish Lucky Jim. But I doubt whether he would do much better if left to revise it again on his own—he gets too easily sidetracked—so it would be a lot of some editor's time and tact to shape it into a tight little bundle of laughs." There is a postscript to this reader's observations to the effect that "I have just read…Jeremy's superior report"—from 1 September 1981.

The third report is from "Jeremy" ("JML)—his second—dated seven days later than that by "RAS" on 14 April 1982. "A NOVEL by Howard Jacobson 53234" has a lengthy opening paragraph followed by shorter ones. Clearly both of these reader's reports are responding to Jacobson's resubmission. In the first the reader expresses the opinion "What a maddening book this is: at its best it's so very good, and yet it remains floored for much the same reasons as both Robyn"—a reference to "RAS"—"and I indicated in our separate reports." "JML" considers Jacobson to be "an extremely funny, accurate and perceptive writer: he uses words with a marvellous (and very refreshing) exactitude, he actually makes me laugh out loud

(something usually reserved for Peter de Vries[1] and PGW [P G Wodehouse]), and he is ruthlessly accurate about the ways in which we shore ourselves up against the achievements of others and our own failure to deliver the goods." Furthermore, and in spite of caveats such as the plot remaining "inadequate and the supporting cast shadowy, Goldberg himself is a marvellous comic character, both repellent and all too uncomfortably familiar." Jacobson's book "works best as a comic monologue, and should perhaps be judged as such." In his opinion the author has "tightened up and improved" whatever plot there is and "JML" approves of "the ironic twist at the end—but the least satisfactory parts of the book remain those in which G[oldberg] raises his head from his navel and allows his gaze to momentarily settle elsewhere."

"JML" would "hate to see so much good go to waste, and such a talented author slip away from us." Consequently, three questions are asked. Firstly: "Can the novel be improved still further without damaging or diluting its good qualities and transforming it into something more conventional but less flavoursome?" The second question is "If so, is the author prepared to put in more work?" Thirdly "If not, is the novel publishable as it stands?" This reader's opinion "is that, flawed as it is, this is vastly superior to much fiction that actually finds its way into print, and would be greatly enjoyed by a good many people for its own sake." The reader however indicates that if Chatto could persuade Jacobson to undertake some additional work on his novel "without spoiling its good qualities, so much the better." "JML" considers Jacobson to be "very talented indeed; people like reading 'university' novels; in a world in which Tom Sharpe's[9 2]ghastly fantasies are regarded as comic fiction, it's a relief to come across that rarest of items, a true comic gift."

Six days later on 20 April 1982 D. J. Enright ("DJE") responds in a report—"Howard Jacobson NOVEL 53234"—that focusses upon specific detail. He tells "JML" that "There's nothing to be done about the plotlessness or the fact that there's really only one character: Sefton Goldberg, or the fact of Goldberg's largely unadmirable nature." For Enright Jacobson's "novel's qualities lie in the unkind but

1 Peter De Vries (1910-1993) "American editor and novelist known for his satiric wit" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_De_Vries 25 January 2026.

2 Tom Sharpe (1928-2013) authored a highly successful series of satirical novels, Wilt (1976), based on his experiences teaching at Cambridge College of Arts and Technology, subsequently Anglia Ruskin University. His Porterhouse Blues (1974) and Grantchester Grind (1995) were based on Cambridge Colleges. The first two were published by Secker & Warburg, the third by Hodder & Stoughton, see Michael Barber "Sharpe, Thomas Ridley [Tom] (1928-2013), novelist." ODNB January 01, 2017. OUP Date of access 25 Jan. 2026, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-106947>

telling insights, the satire, and the deft and comic (though rather coterie) counter pointing of Literature and Life." Enright agrees with "JML" "that it would be a pity to see so much good go to waste, and I think a little more revision should make it publishable." The persistent problem in the work is Jacobson's "habit of hammering away (flogging horses he has already killed): saying things twice, the second time in terms more orotund"—in other words Jacobson's "'excessive verbiage,"—and combined "through relentless, heavy facetiousness and what seems a brutish loss of temper—crossing the line between effective caricature and mere wildness." Enright then highlights "a number of danger spots in the" typescript where "some of the set pieces go on too long, grow heavy, and spoil the initiating joke."

Nine of these are indicated. The first on pp.63-69 of the typescript is "the car park incident." In the published first edition this is found in the third chapter when Goldberg parks his car in the incorrect parking area, belonging to "the Department of Modern Languages for Business" (p.54) and the incident runs for at least four pages. Enright adds that "Tolstoy hardly took more space describing the battle of Borodino!—portentous."[1] Secondly in the manuscript Enright objects to "p.81, a page and a half on Cora Peck's breasts." He adds "Here and elsewhere, when literary allusions come too thick and fast, the common reader will grow bored and the less common will be irritated." Although her breasts are described in the first edition towards the end of the first chapter "Not too much flesh—she wasn't buxom" (p.27) and again at the beginning of the fourth chapter "they weren't that important and they weren't even, as breasts go, all that full or all that round or all that high" (p.65), Goldberg's obsession with her appearance does extend over many pages (see for instance pp.65-80): he also professionally envies her productivity. Literary allusions seem to have been muted too with a few mentions for instance of "Notes and Queries" and "Essays in Criticism", journals in which Cora's contributions may have appeared (p.77). Thirdly Enright draws attention to the Manuscript "pp.113-15 [where there] "are letters going astray: too protracted a set piece." This is no longer prominent in the final published version, neither is Enright's fourth instance found "pp.134-36, on beer-ditto". Fifthly Enright draws attention to "pp.182-5, Sefton's dream." This refers to the sequence at the start of chapter ten which, in the print version, is more than three pages (pp.141-43) occurring before Enright's sixth point:

1 Allusions to Tolstoy's work recur throughout Coming From Behind; see for instance p.159 and the dinner conversation at Holy Christ Hall (pp.175-77). These allusions to Tolstoy reflect F.R.Leavis's admiration for Tolstoy, his War and Peace and especially Anna Karenina, see for instance Leavis's "Anna Karenina: Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work." Cambridge Quarterly, 1 (1, Winter 1965-1966), pp. 5-27.

"p.185 onwards, family gathering: the caricature needs tempering." The portrait of Goldberg's Manchester based family occurs as a flashback and extends for the remainder of the tenth chapter (pp.144-154). The seventh Enright query is "p.204, near-sex on BR-just like that?" In the first edition there is mention of Goldberg on the train travelling to his Cambridge interview "prowling up and down the corridors in search of girls reading [Lawrence's] *The Rainbow*, and not finding any." This suggests that Jacobson took heed of Enright's object and cut a "near-sex" encounter on British Railways. In his eighth point Enright draws attention to "p.205 etc.: 'Don Muten' is too close to 'John Newton'[1] for my liking." There is a suggestion that Jacobson made changes here, for "Don Muten" becomes "Derek Muten" (pp.158-160 and also p.174). Enright's final point is in the form of a question "Then, on p.251, why does Fledwhite attack Sefton?" In the printed version, this happens in the final chapter of the novel and has been a long time coming: there are sexual and professional disagreements between them and Fledwhite has also applied for the Holy Christ Hall Fellowship. The incident is limited to a brief paragraph at the end of the chapter: "so he didn't see, until he was almost upon him, Walter Sickert[2] Fledwhite, pursued by six policemen, waving his arms in the air, and mouthing incomprehensible insults and allegations. He didn't even know that Fledwhite had been throwing things at him and missing" (p.199). Another hostile encounter between the two occurs much earlier in the novel in the third chapter following the car parking incident (pp.59-62).

Enright concludes "In the postscript the author tells briefly of what happens to some of the other characters. I think he should extend this to cover Cora & Wenlock (in whom, after all, the reader has developed some interest), possibly even Jacqueline and Jelley." The printed version doesn't include such detail, focusing instead on the reasons why the "Fellowship Committee of Holy Christ Hall" appointed Goldberg. The final paragraph of the novel focusses on Goldberg's frustration: "he still hankered after greater fame, and he still had ambitions for his manuscript" (pp.201-202). Enright adds "Incidentally, some of the paragraphs need breaking down." Until the manuscript is consulted whether in fact this took place cannot be determined, although of course there is considerable discrepancy in length between Enright's manuscript page references and the pagination of Jacobson's published novel.

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1 John Newton, then a Cambridge academic, was closely associated with Leavis: see David Ellis, Memoirs of a Leavisite. Liverpool: Liverpool UP., 2013, p.13.

2 Walter Sickert (1860-1942) the post-Impressionist painter might well have been regarded negatively as "flaky", as too aesthetic, by some of Leavis's students.

The final report signed with illegible initials[1] is dated three days after Enright's on 23 April 1982, seven days before Enright's publication acceptance on 30 April 1982. It is headed "Howard Jacobson NOVEL 53234" and in ink at its conclusion "cross-reference No 52884 first submitted 1981". The three-paragraph report starts "Nothing to add to what the others have said about this." This is followed by "But I do think Jacobson is so good that we would be foolish to let him slip through our fingers. Writers who can make you laugh at all are rare enough, and comic novels are almost by definition too long and self-indulgent." There are however caveats expressed in the longest and middle paragraph. "However, I think that something can be done about length and the prolixity, if a good editor can be set to work chipping away, taking apart bit by bit and putting it back together again." Judging from Enright's previous observations and page references to the submitted manuscript this appears to have been the case as Coming From Behind wasn't published until March 1983. The report continues: "There's nothing to be done about lack of plot, but after all it's only when you're bogged down that you notice things like that; if you're being whizzed along at great speed it doesn't matter that much if nothing much is happening." The review comments upon Chatto & Windus' rival publishing House, Secker & Warburg's success with publishing another novelist: "One of Tom Sharpe's less dubious virtues is that he never wastes time with digressions or lets any grass grow under his characters feet." He also refers to another successful first novel appearance: "Same goes for Good Man in Africa,[2] which isn't in truth all that funny but does have pace." The conclusion from this is that "It would seem that people are so grateful for anything that's even halfway comic that they are prepared to shower prizes on it, paid huge sums for paperback rights etc. provided they aren't bored." The recommendation from this reviewer is then a practical one: "So let's buy it (shouldn't cost much, surely) and be prepared to spend a bob or three on someone who can knock it into shape. I don't think any of us has the time. Anything which combines the comic intelligence of Lodgebury with the biliousness of early Amis must be worth our while." How right the reviewer proved to be as may be seen from Jacobson's subsequent career although this is the only time that he published fiction with Chatto & Windus.

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1 A possible contender as reader in this instance is Norah Smallwood who became Managing Director at Chatto & Windus: see John Charlton "Smallwood [née Walford], Norah Evelyn (1909-1984)" ODNB (2004) https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31693. Accessed 24 April 2026.

2 A reference to William Boyd's (1952-) first novel, published in 1981 by Hamish Hamilton which in that year won both the Whitbread Book award and the Somerset Maugham Award.

Appendix

Malcolm Bradbury's review, *Books and Bookmen* May 1983, p.7: "The only novel" not found in his bibliography, expresses many of the caveats and positives, found in the reader's reports.It is republished with the permission of the late Sir Malcolm Bradbury's Agents Curtis Brown .

"Writers are not always terribly cheered by having their books defined according to the places in which they are set. It is doubtful if Thomas Mann would have taken much pleasure in having The Magic Mountain called a Hospital Novel. But there are some kinds of fiction that seem inescapably fixed in this way; and one of them is the University Novel. It so happens in my case that my own novels -comic endeavours of, naturally, great seriousness, and of, I believe, reasonably experimental form and creative enquiry -have regularly attracted the label, and it is true that three of them are located around and sometimes even in various institutions of higher learning. I can only explain my aversion to the definition by saying that there is a kind of University novel I sincerely do not want to write—that kind of roman à clef which serves, like some sad Old Students' Association, to recall the bright days of academic study, when the undergraduates were wild, the teachers mad and depraved, the love affairs notorious, and the portrait of Professor X is just like him. Defeated by the label, I have set my last novel quite elsewhere, in an imaginary, totally fictional Eastern European country-though, it must be admitted, there are those already were saying that that bleak imaginary country is just like a University.[1]

But it is true that literal-minded readers—especially thesis writers from Germany-can profitably scour contemporary British fiction for a portrait of the new social landscape that has made institutions of higher education so important a part of our world. If you read fiction for reality, that is the kind of reality you can now find. And evidently things have been changing. At one time the University novel was almost inevitably about Oxbridge; now we have red brick novels; now we have redbrick novels, American campus novels, and novels about sociologists in new universities. The logical next step was clear, and Howard Jacobson is going to get himself congratulated on taking it; Coming From Behind is undoubtedly the Polytechnic novel, which is the university novel one step down, so to speak, and one step further on. I wish him well in the disputes he will now enter about whether he has got it right, and whether his tone is elitist(happily it is), and whether

1 Probably Rates of Exchange(1983) which centres on an English linguistics professor, on a lecture tour behind the Iron Curtain in the fictional communist nation of Slaka.

the saddened landscape of defeated faculty ex-Lawrentians and struggling female students, making an effort to get away from the nappies and crying when their commas are removed, is a true one. A possibly indiscreet biography on the jacket indicates that the author has had some familiarity with this world, and even that a curious intimacy of life-story exists between himself and his comic hero Sefton Goldberg.[1] I naturally propose to regard all such matters as entirely irrelevant.

The important thing about Coming From Behind is that it is a very funny, bitterly intelligent comic novel worth anybody's attention, whether the troubles of Polytechnic life concern them or not. Sefton Goldberg, 35 years old, is a failure, rich in envy of any intimation of success in anyone else. He is Jewish, with a card-trick-playing father and an agrophobic mother who wishes not only not to be seen but not to be heard. He teaches at Wrottesley Poly in a debased Midlands where the nights resound with barbaric yawps. The curious institutions of gentiles—their crazed love for nature and sport—contend with his own tastes,which are largely for indoors and sex, not in the head but in the place where it satisfies most. He teaches English literature, now mysteriously converted into something called Twentieth Century Studies, and gradually being displaced from an institution that is proposing to twin itself with the local football club, with which it shares a problem of falling attendance. He has taught it in various academic institutions, in a descending series; the nagging to succeed, to publish, to be at Cambridge, dominates his days. Literature belongs in other hands, mostly despicable, and he rakes through history for examples of famous people who were failures. Badgewearers, homosexuals, post-structuralists, experimental women novelists dressed as parachutists, do not attract him; nor does the famous salty unpretentious good-naturedness of the Midlands working class, that fantasy disguising naked aggression. Nonetheless the essence is survival; Sefton will betray almost anything or anyone to turn Wrottesley failure into success.

There are a lot of grand old comic principles here, but they nicely cross with the agony tale of the modern Jewish male, and it is the crossing of the two stories that energizes a book that from time to time begins to slide a little in plot, but keeps its bitter comic vivacity going throughout. Its apparently alien portrait of British culture is actually knowing and detailed, and its characters—the novelist Cora Peck,

1 The "Howard Jacobson" bio on the inside back flap reads: "Howard Jacobson was born in 1942, brought up in Manchester and read English at Cambridge. He has taught English at Selwyn College, Cambridge, Sydney University and a Polytechnic in English Midlands, and is the co-author—with Wilbur Sanders -of Shakespeare's Magnanimity (Chatto & Windus, 1978). Very much to his own amazement, he now lives in Cornwall."

undergoing some complicated hormonal battle within, the teaching colleague Nick Lee who sends telegrams from Montevideo, but whose marked essays some—how magically appear daily on his desk, the dons of Holy Cross College in Cambridge, where Sefton, who applies for every vacancy in every field, hopes to become Disraeli Fellow-make an up-to-date satirical gallery. But Coming From Behind reads best as a cumulative pastiche-parody. Hence at one point, the writers who conspire against Goldberg appropriately retire to Bradbury Lodge, but there is also throughout a constant bellow of Roth. Literature, Philip Roth's Peter Tarnopol[1] once complained, got me into this mess, and literature is going to have to get me out of it. Jacobson's novel is a book, and like any intelligent novel it says it is. And a very good first book too; do read it.

1 Roth's alter ego who appears in the second part of My Life as a Man (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).

Narrative of Residence and Politics of Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract In Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, residential space serves not merely as a narrative backdrop, but as a core medium through which British Pakistani immigrants enact flexible resistance against the intertwined forces of race, class, and family, while reconstructing their individual identities. Drawing on the theory of spatial production, this paper examines the representations of residential space in the novel and argues that the spatial opposition between shabby immigrant enclaves and refined middle-class residences functions both as a material manifestation of power constraints and as a carrier of immigrant identity anxiety. Transitory spaces such as Charlie's attic and the Kensington West apartment, defined as hybrid spaces exclusive to migrant identity construction, not only enable characters to break free from institutional power discipline but also provide practical fields for immigrants to advance their identity cognition from evasion to confrontation. Through a micro-analysis of residential transformations and everyday spatial practices, this paper elucidates the bidirectional interactive mechanism between spatial production and identity politics. It further proposes a daily-practice-centered research paradigm for postcolonial immigrant subject studies, shifting critical focus from grand political discourse to micro-level lived experience.

Keywords *The Buddha of Suburbia*; spatial criticism; narrative of dwelling; politics of identity

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Introduction

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a seminal work of British Pakistani immigrant literature. Set against the specific social context of 1970s Britain, an era intensified by post-war racial tensions and cultural conflicts, the novel traces the protagonist Karim's coming-of-age journey and identity negotiations. It exposes the pervasive racial discrimination and rigid class stratification of British society while depicting the subtle everyday struggles of immigrant descendants torn between ethnic heritage and dominant white mainstream culture. Departing from conventional linear narration, the novel organizes its narrative around diverse residential spaces: shabby, cramped immigrant enclaves in suburban South London, exclusive and refined white middle-class neighborhoods, and transient, unregulated apartments and attics in central London. These tangible spatial images concretize characters' abstract identity anxiety and translate invisible power relations and cultural frictions into embodied spatial experiences. Accordingly, the novel's nuanced and purposeful residential spatial writing provides a valuable textual sample for spatial criticism of contemporary immigrant literature, particularly for exploring the intrinsic correlation between spatial form and identity construction.

The Buddha of Suburbia occupies a pivotal position in postcolonial and immigrant literary studies. Nevertheless, existing scholarship on its residential spatial writing remains limited. Most studies overlook fine-grained spatial details, such as the interior layout of Charlie's attic and the furnishings of Eva's residence, and lack in-depth interpretations of the power relations embedded within such spaces. Adopting a spatial criticism perspective and grounded in the theory of spatial production, this paper analyzes the thematic significance of residential space in the novel and explores how micro-level residential forms shape and participate in the identity construction of immigrant subjects.

1. Perceived Space: Material Representation and Locational Segregation of Residential Landscapes

As a core dimension of Lefebvre's spatial practice, perceived space constitutes the most intuitive material carrier of racial and class boundaries in the novel's immigrant living context. "Spatiality refers to positioning our own existence according to space and place, which should be the focus of spatial humanities" (Lu 162). Perceived space denotes the tangible environment that people sensorially experience in daily life, materializing abstract social relations and power structures into concrete spatial forms. For immigrant communities, perceived space sustains

daily material existence and provides micro-sites for identity recognition, cultural conflict, and class interaction, where subjective identity cognition is continuously shaped and contested by external spatial environments. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim inhabits a succession of disparate spaces, including white middle-class communities in Chislehurst, impoverished immigrant enclaves and slums, and structurally distinct domestic dwellings such as his family home, Eva's residence, and Jamila's house. Sharp contrasts in material conditions and sensory experience across these spaces visualize the institutionalized class disparities and racial barriers of 1970s British society, revealing the hierarchical living conditions of immigrants under dual racial and class oppression.

1.1 External Space: Physical Embodiment of Class Segregation and Racial Barriers

Immigrant groups tangibly experience urban class stratification and racial exclusion through spatial differences. "Space is not a reflection of society, but an expression of it" (Liu 74). Variations in spatial morphology and environmental features embody class hierarchies and racial power dynamics at the spatial level. Such power operates not through overt coercion but through normalized spatial disparities that demarcate class and racial boundaries, restricting the mobility and social advancement of marginalized groups.

Chislehurst, a representative white middle-class residential area in the novel, symbolizes the exclusive spatiality and privileged living conditions of Britain's 1970s middle class. Kureishi offers meticulous descriptions of its affluent landscape: "The houses in Chislehurst had greenhouses, grand oaks and sprinklers on the lawn; men came in to do the garden" (Kureishi 29)[1]. These details—leisure greenhouses, mature landscape trees, and automated lawn maintenance—attest to the middle class's economic privilege, aesthetic pursuit, and personalized domestic lifestyle. Most significantly, local roads "were deliberately left corrugated with stones and pits, to discourage ordinary people from driving up and down" (29). This intentional spatial design exceeds mere urban planning; it represents a middle-class strategy to privatize public space and consolidate residential exclusivity, blocking unregulated external access and erecting invisible community boundaries. When Karim's immigrant mother "stepped into a pothole" within this privileged terrain, her sudden embarrassment encapsulates the insurmountable material and spiritual divide between stratified social spaces and racialized groups.

By contrast, the slums of Herne Hill and Brixton accommodate London's

1 The original texts of the novel quoted in this essay are from Hanif Kureishi: The Buddha of Suburbia. London: Penguin Books, 1990, hereafter only a page number appears.

disadvantaged ethnic minority communities, symbolizing urban poverty and social marginalization in stark opposition to prosperous Chislehurst. As Karim and his white relative Ted traverse the area by train, Kureishi depicts a scene of profound urban decay: "Victorian houses. The gardens were full of rusting junk and sodden overcoats; lines of washing criss-crossed over the debris" (43). Dilapidated architecture, neglected gardens, and decaying daily necessities manifest systemic material deprivation and state abandonment of minority neighborhoods. Ted's offhand contempt for the area further exposes ingrained racial prejudice: he attributes spatial dilapidation to minority residents rather than unequal social resource distribution, artificially associating ethnic minority identity with urban blight. As Cripps argues, "Through the simple procedure of imposing on individuals the image of how to be a subject, the panoptic gaze exerts a constitutive influence on the subjectivity of individuals in its field of vision" (Cripps 92). The white mainstream's panoptic racial gaze further solidifies dual racial and spatial barriers, framing impoverished residential environments as inherent flaws of minority groups and legitimizing systemic discrimination and marginalization.

Karim's family enclave in suburban South London mirrors such slum-like material deprivation. "Paradise Stores was a dusty place with a high, ornate and flaking ceiling" (50). This decaying commercial space echoes residential dilapidation, exposing structural spatial resource deprivation endured by racialized and working-class immigrants. Karim recalls, "All I materially knew of the war was the thick squat block of the air-raid shelter at the end of the garden which as a child I took over as my own little house" (73). This abandoned wartime structure functions as a spatial metaphor for double marginalization, serving as Karim's sole spiritual refuge within an alienating immigrant neighborhood. Such spatial marginality generates a "sense of loss of the subject in non-home space," a rooted daily experience that fuels immigrant identity anxiety (Fang 109). Urban immigrant marginality is not merely geographical segregation but a socially produced outcome of racial and class power inequalities, fundamentally shaping immigrant subjectivity and lived reality.

1.2 Internal Space: Immigrant Landscape of Sensory Metaphor and Survival Contrast

Domestic spatial layouts and furnishings reflect residents' social status, cultural identity, and inner psychology, faithfully recording stratified living conditions (Zhang, Liu & Cai 1132). Interior material elements externalize invisible class and racial disparities into embodied spatial experiences (Fu & Li 413). In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the shabby, oppressive interiors of Karim's and Jamila's homes stand

in sharp contrast to Eva's clean, refined middle-class residence, vividly illustrating stratified living standards and identity gaps across social groups.

Karim's family home bears distinct markers of working-class precarity: "That the side of the house was getting damp and he wanted Allie and me to climb up a ladder and fix it, with Mum holding the ladder" (19). Its damp, aging structure and neglected condition mirror the dilapidation of the surrounding immigrant enclave, fostering persistent identity unease in Karim from an early age (Yin 69). Such material poverty embodies the systemic marginalization of immigrant communities within mainstream British society.

Jamila's household endures even more severe deprivation, representing the bottom-tier living conditions of 1970s British Pakistani working-class immigrants. Kureishi meticulously depicts its squalor: the room is "Their flat was always a junk shop, with the furniture busted and fingerprints all over the doors and the wallpaper about a hundred years old and fag butts sprinkled over every surface" (58). Broken furniture, unmaintained surfaces, faded wallpaper, and scattered litter construct a chronically neglected, oppressive domestic environment. Jamila's father Anwar wears "a frayed and mouldy-looking pyjama jacket" (59), his shabby appearance mirroring the household's dilapidation and embodying the intertwined hardship of immigrant working-class existence. Within this bleak space, only Chitta's cooking brings fleeting warmth and homeliness, a subtle contrast that further accentuates the precarity and powerlessness of immigrant working-class life. These domestic details are not mere decorative descriptions but symbolic markers of subordinate class status, visualizing the psychological pressure of systemic class disparity. Prolonged exposure to such marginalized spatial conditions fosters deep inferiority and awkwardness in immigrants like Karim when confronting refined middle-class domestic spaces, generating persistent identity rifts rooted in spatial and class stratification.

Eva's middle-class residence presents an opposing spatial paradigm:"Jean got up and walked across the carpet in her high heels. She opened a window and sniffed the fresh garden air" (45). Its pristine, orderly environment sharply contrasts the squalor of immigrant households. Karim "After shaking a few hands I managed to get comfortably settled on a shiny black sofa,my feet on a furry white rug, with my back to a row of fat books handtooled in plastic-abridged versions" (30). Despite its refinement, the space alienates and unsettles Karim. Eva's caution that he might "obliterated the carpet by walking over it twice" (41) reveals latent middle-class exclusion of disadvantaged immigrant groups. As spatial criticism theory suggests, "Spatial criticism explores the positioning of the social and cultural connotations

of geographical landscapes, which also destined spatial criticism to stand in the camp of cultural production, participate in the construction of social thoughts and values, create such and such spatial metaphors, and imperceptibly affect the trend of lifestyles and material forms" (Gao 167). For Karim, middle-class furnishings such as leather sofas and white carpets operate not merely as household items but as symbolic class markers, constantly reminding him of his marginalized immigrant origin and subordinate social position.

These divergent interior spaces embody Britain's rigidly stratified class hierarchy, deeply entangled with racial discrimination. Caught between ethnic domestic spaces and exclusionary mainstream middle-class environments, Karim struggles to secure stable spatial and cultural belonging. This dual dilemma encapsulates the lived reality of British Pakistani immigrants trapped within intersecting class, racial, and cultural conflicts, manifesting the profound identity anxiety generated by material spatial disparity and underlying power inequalities.

2. Conceived Space: Power Operation and Disciplinary Practice in Residential Order

Conceived space refers to abstract, socially constructed space defined and regulated by dominant power structures. It functions as a core disciplinary mechanism that materializes racial, class, and patriarchal power in daily residential environments. By governing micro-level spatial layouts—including room allocation and the division of public and private domains—conceived space not only reflects power-endorsed social order but reproduces and consolidates the unequal power hierarchy of 1970s British immigrant society.

Power operates not merely through static spatial constraints but permeates everyday immigrant life via conceived space, translating abstract power relations into tangible embodied experiences. In the novel, conceived space disciplines immigrants through an intertwined tripartite network of racial, class, and familial power, rather than through isolated institutional forces. Familial spatial power proves particularly complex: marginalized in mainstream racial and class hierarchies, immigrant fathers reclaim lost subjectivity by asserting patriarchal dominance within domestic micro-spaces. Haroon's dual spatial performance exemplifies this compensatory power dynamic: in white social circles, he strategically embodies the exotic "Buddha" stereotype to satisfy mainstream Orientalist fantasies and secure limited social recognition, compensating for his racial marginalization in public space. At home, by contrast, he monopolizes core domestic spaces such as the living room sofa and exclusive private bedroom, asserting absolute patriarchal authority over familial spatial resources to recover the status and subjectivity denied to him in

the external social sphere.

2.1 Racial Power: Residential Stigmatization and Unjust Distribution of Resources

Racial power manifests spatially through the stigmatization of immigrant residential environments and the inequitable distribution of urban spatial resources, forming a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalization. Dominant racial power infiltrates social consciousness through normalized prejudice, transforming systemic discrimination into internalized individual constraints.

At Eva's party, white guests openly deride Karim's father: "Why has our Eva brought this brown Indian here? Aren't we going to get pissed?" "And has he got his camel parked outside?" (12) Such condescending remarks degrade immigrant identity and spatially stigmatize ethnic minority dwelling spaces. The label "brown Indian" essentializes identity through skin color, while the "camel" stereotype embodies simplistic, exoticizing Western imagination of South Asian culture. These normalized prejudices legitimize white occupation of high-quality spatial resources and frame immigrant marginalization as natural and deserved.

Racial discrimination permeates mundane social interactions, most visibly in Jean and Ted's forced renaming of Haroon Amir as "Harry." Dismissing his original ethnic name as "awkward", they impose an Anglicized Allieas to conform to white mainstream aesthetic norms (33). This seemingly trivial act constitutes blatant cultural suppression and everyday racial oppression. As a carrier of ethnic heritage, familial legacy, and personal belonging, an individual's original name embodies rooted cultural identity. By erasing Haroon's ethnic nomenclature and enforcing linguistic assimilation, white mainstream representatives eliminate immigrant cultural markers and solidify the subordinate, marginal status of ethnic minorities (Jena 4-5). Such symbolic erasure deepens immigrant alienation and powerlessness within the host society.

White dominant groups systematically confine immigrants to impoverished, marginal urban zones, and the resulting substandard living conditions are weaponized to justify further discrimination, generating a vicious cycle of stigmatization, resource deprivation, and intensified marginalization. Karim's early insecurity regarding his immigrant identity originates precisely from this sustained structural racial pressure. Prolonged exposure to normalized discrimination leads him to unconsciously internalize mainstream racial prejudice.

2.2 Class Power: Segregation of Residential Functions and Exclusive Rules

Under class-driven conceived space, the 1970s British white middle class constructs refined, individualized residential environments and establishes implicit

spatial exclusionary codes aligned with bourgeois aesthetic and behavioral norms. These unwritten rules frame middle-class spatial standards as universal "civilized" benchmarks while stigmatizing working-class spatial practices as "vulgar," naturalizing rigid class disparities as immutable social facts (Lu 70). This constructed binary between middle-class civilization and working-class vulgarity reinforces cultural and aesthetic class barriers beyond economic inequality, consolidating hierarchical social boundaries.

Eva's residence, equipped with gardens, greenhouses, and spacious reception rooms, accommodates sophisticated leisure and spiritual needs, whereas Karim's modest home only fulfills basic survival functions of eating and sleeping. This functional disparity reveals how the middle class monopolizes leisure and spiritual spatial resources as exclusive class capital, consolidating inter-class boundaries through spatial differentiation.

Beneath functional spatial gaps lie subtle yet inflexible class exclusionary rules. Eva's living room primarily accommodates middle-class peers, and its refined aesthetic layout establishes an implicit threshold alienating working-class immigrants. Middle-class spatial tastes and standardized lifestyles render disadvantaged immigrants perpetually out of place, triggering profound identity inferiority. Eva's reminder regarding carpet maintenance (41) subtly delegitimizes working-class spatial habits, transforming ordinary domestic spatial use into micro-level class discipline. In this way, class power infiltrates trivial daily experiences, achieving invisible, enduring social control.

2.3 Family Power: Spatial Layout of Patriarchical Structure and Micro Resistance

Within domestic micro-spaces, patriarchy operates as a vital component of conceived power structures. Beyond explicit verbal discipline and behavioral regulation, patriarchal norms embed hierarchical power into daily life through unequal spatial resource distribution, subtly shaping children's behavioral and cognitive norms (Messaoudi & Khawaldeh 1316). Karim's family exemplifies such hierarchical spatial politics: his father Haroon exclusively occupies the core living room sofa, a symbolic seat of familial authority, and possesses an independent private bedroom. In stark contrast, Karim and his brother Allie share a cramped, undecorated room with newspaper-covered walls, entirely lacking personal privacy (6). This unequal spatial arrangement materializes patriarchal hierarchy within mundane domestic routines, constantly confronting the children with paternal authority and gradually internalizing familial classed hierarchy into their cognitive dispositions.

In external social spaces, Haroon compromises with white Orientalist stereotypes, "being in full flow about the importance of attaining an empty mind" (12) to secure marginal social recognition under racial oppression. As scholars observe, marginalized minorities "subvert the traditional dualistic opposition value system, explore their identity in all power relations, redefine themselves, and break away from marginalization" (Yang 93). Haroon's performative role as an "exotic wise man" represents a strategic redefinition of identity within white-dominated power structures, temporarily alleviating his social marginality.

Nevertheless, the suffocating hierarchical spatiality of his family home awakens Karim's awareness of spatial resistance. His frequent retreats to Charlie's attic constitute active spatial escape and micro-resistance against patriarchal domestic discipline, deliberately breaking familial power constraints. As Yin notes, "To obtain this unforeseeable experience, we must cross the boundaries of space and mix different things together" (Yin 186). Such cross-spatial mobility paves the way for Karim's subsequent entry into central London's multicultural spaces and enables him to gradually develop independent selfhood beyond ethnic and class labels. These subtle everyday spatial resistances mark the starting point of his liberation from intersecting racial, class, and familial power constraints.

3. The Thirdspace: Identity Fluidity and Subject Reconstruction in Marginal Dwellings

Soja's Thirdspace theory, extending Lefebvre's spatial production framework, transcends the binary division of physical and mental space, constituting an alternative space with dual material and spiritual attributes for resisting mainstream norms and reconstructing identity. Adapted to *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Thirdspace in the novel represents a migrant-specific hybrid identity sphere tailored to the existential dilemmas of second-generation British Pakistani immigrants. Distinct from abstract theoretical Thirdspace, the Kensington West apartment and Matthew Pike's theatre rehearsal room function as concrete everyday sites that enable Karim to transcend the "either British or Pakistani" cognitive binary and integrate dual cultural identities, serving as core spatial carriers for his identity awakening and subject reconstruction. Karim articulates his spatial alienation: "Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood,of here and there,of belonging and not,that makes me restless and easily bored." (3) This pervasive lack of spatial belonging drives his active pursuit of inclusive Thirdspace.

3.1 Identity Confusion: Loss of Belonging under the Pressure of Dual Space

Karim's profound identity confusion stems not from accidental psychological

fluctuation but from structural spatial and cultural alienation under the dual pressures of immigrant familial space and mainstream British residential space. As a British-born-and-raised second-generation immigrant, Karim is perpetually suspended between two contradictory spatial systems, unable to fully integrate into either. On the one hand, his family's immigrant space is saturated with traditional Pakistani cultural norms and familial conventions, constituting his ethnic cultural roots. Yet this ethnic spatiality is systematically devalued and rejected by white mainstream society as backward and foreign. External discrimination alienates Karim from his familial and ethnic origins, fostering shame regarding his immigrant identity among white peers. He resists full assimilation into traditional ethnic culture yet cannot secure mainstream recognition for his cultural heritage, resulting in chronic identity anxiety and confusion.

On the other hand, mainstream residential spaces represented by Eva's residence, though seemingly refined and open, harbor intense structural exclusivity. The insular middle-class social circle at Eva's party—"four middle-aged men and four middle-aged women, all white, sitting cross-legged on the floor, eating peanuts and drinking wine" (11)—perpetually excludes Karim as an outsider. Neither immigrant enclave space nor white mainstream social space affords him stable identity belonging, compelling him to seek more inclusive hybrid Thirdspace.

3.2 Identity Exploration: Game and Cognitive Iteration in Dual Spatial Practice

Karim's identity exploration unfolds primarily within two marginal spaces: Charlie's attic and the Kensington West apartment. These spaces exert distinct influences on his identity cognition, enabling iterative self-adjustment and eventual identity reshaping.

Charlie's attic represents an initial marginal spatial field where Karim tentatively resists intersecting racial, class, and familial power constraints, rather than merely a site of youthful subcultural rebellion. Adorned with exotic mandalas and rebellious musical symbols, the attic forms a semi-enclosed sphere isolated from patriarchal domestic space and exclusionary middle-class space. Its unregulated, liberating atmosphere allows Karim to temporarily cast off immigrant identity labels and evade familial patriarchal discipline. Nevertheless, such resistance remains superficial. By merely escaping identity contradictions within a closed subcultural bubble, Karim avoids confronting his dual cultural situatedness as a British Pakistani immigrant. The emotional relief afforded by the attic is transient and therapeutic rather than foundational for identity reconstruction. Confined within a narrow subcultural circle, he remains limited by fixed social roles and cannot engage

authentically with his complex immigrant identity or systemic social contradictions, achieving only temporary comfort rather than stable belonging.

The Kensington West apartment, by contrast, is a spartan dwelling with minimal furnishings: "There wasn't even a bed for me;I slept on the sofa in the front room. Charlie,who also had nowhere to go,sometimes slept on the floor beside me." (125) Its austerity strips away pre-assigned cultural connotations and identity markers, freeing Karim from both ethnic cultural constraints and mainstream class norms. This de-symbolized everyday space dismantles the rigid binary opposition between Pakistani ethnic culture and British mainstream culture, enabling Karim to confront his authentic self without restrictive labels within mundane cohabitation. Gradually overcoming binary identity anxiety, he consciously embraces his multiply hybrid cultural subjectivity (Holmes 650), achieving a decisive cognitive shift from evasion to confrontation.

3.3 Identity Awakening: Establishment of Hybrid Identity Empowered by Dual Space

The Kensington West apartment's unique value as a core hybrid identity construction space lies in its label-free spatial neutrality, distinguishing it from the escapist subcultural sphere of Charlie's attic. Unlike Eva's exclusionary middle-class space and Karim's tradition-bound familial space, the apartment's plain, unadorned materiality strips away all cultural and class symbolism. This spatial desymbolization generates an unprecedentedly free, inclusive atmosphere, rendering it a purely functional living space unburdened by fixed cultural or hierarchical attributes. Free from pressure to assimilate into white mainstream culture or adhere rigidly to ethnic tradition, Karim abandons futile binary belonging struggles and confronts the inherent complexity of his identity as a naturally hybrid second-generation immigrant.

Complementing the apartment's domestic hybridity, Matthew Pike's theatre rehearsal room—"clean and bright" (167)—functions as a public Thirdspace bridging marginal immigrant experience and mainstream artistic discourse. Its inclusive artistic community enables Karim to participate in mainstream cultural production while retaining his immigrant identity, while also exposing him to subtle structural racial and class exclusion within elite artistic circles. Unlike his previous spatial escapism and passive cultural compromise, Karim's artistic practice fosters critical insight: immigrant identity recognition resides not in singular cultural affiliation but in harmonious coexistence of dual cultural heritage and stable hybrid subjectivity. This cognitive transformation advances his identity from passive acceptance to active construction, allowing him to sustain self-subjectivity within

mainstream spheres and clarify his hybrid identity boundaries.

The combined empowerment of domestic hybrid space (the Kensington West apartment) and public cultural Thirdspace (the theatre rehearsal room) facilitates Karim's ultimate identity leap. His epiphany that "the city blew the windows of my brain wide open. I couldn't yet see how the city worked,but I began to find out." (126) signifies his liberation from external power discipline and the successful reconstruction of autonomous subjectivity. Karim's journey demonstrates that immigrant identity construction is inherently spatially embedded, unfolding gradually through concrete everyday spatial practices and affirming the constitutive role of spatial experience in immigrant identity awakening.

Conclusion

By elaborating on diverse residential spaces in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi establishes a distinctive spatial poetics centered on ordinary daily dwelling. Departing from conventional grand narratives focusing on drastic racial and class conflicts, the novel traces Karim's constant spatial mobility, passive adaptation and active resistance within hierarchically divided living environments. It profoundly exposes the multidimensional survival dilemmas of British Pakistani immigrants and reveals the inherent correlation between spatial production and immigrant identity shaping.

The novel's dwelling-centered spatial narrative effectively renovates the traditional research paradigm of British Pakistani immigrant literature. It shifts spatial criticism from abstract macroscopic theoretical speculation to concrete microscopic daily spatial practice, greatly expanding the research perspective of postcolonial immigrant studies. This detail-based analytical framework provides a practical and referential research path for exploring the interactive relationship between spatial form and identity politics in contemporary diasporic literary works.

Kureishi's spatial narrative also embodies a significant ideological turn in postcolonial immigrant identity research. Karim's final identity awakening and subject reconstruction neither lie in blind return to ethnic tradition nor complete assimilation into mainstream white culture, but stem from the construction of inclusive hybrid Thirdspace. This flexible hybrid identity model provides innovative theoretical enlightenment for modern diasporic subject research under multicultural integration.

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Exile as CounterArchive: The Ethics of Withholding and Gendered Agency within Postcolonial Circuits in Palestinian Women's Literature

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Abstract Departing from melancholic, deficit ontologies of loss and return, this article reconceptualises exile as a productive analytic for literary form, feminist agency, and transnational intellectual labour in contemporary Palestinian women's prose circulating across and beyond the West. It advances an integrated framework—braiding Edward Said's exilic epistemology with Homi Bhabha's "third space," Chandra Mohanty's decolonial feminism, Avtar Brah's diasporic analytics, and theories of necropolitics, affect, and world literature—to explore innovative narrative strategies and reception circuits. A thematic analysis of a focused corpus in Arabic and English is paired with an examination of translation economies, prize infrastructures, and festival networks, alongside pedagogical reception in cultural institutions. Exile is conceptualised as counter-archival practice; hybridity as enunciative method—through interlingual code work, temporal braiding, and strategic withholding—and gendered agency as situated practice within carceralcolonial and diasporic regimes where necropolitics and debility shape exposure, mobility, and care. Memory and trauma are reinterpreted as ethical witnessing that refuses extractive consumption and insists on collective remembrance. Finally, the corpus's entanglement with global literary markets is assessed, recasting success beyond sales and laurels to encompass literature's capacity to reconfigure perception, foster solidarities, and sustain counterpublics amid ongoing dispossession.

Keywords Palestinian diaspora; women's writing; exile; third space; hybridity; transnational feminism; necropolitics; affect; world literature; memory

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Introduction: From Catastrophe to CounterArchive

Critical reception of Palestinian literature has long foregrounded catastrophe (alNakba) and the poetics of return, a framing consolidated by work on resistance aesthetics and national allegory (Barbara Harlow and Bashir AbuManneh). I enter that conversation to argue that exile—so often cast as a deficit ontology—should instead be read as a productive analytic of form, agency, and circulation in contemporary Palestinian women's prose. In Edward Said's now canonical formulation, exile is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience," a paradox that yields "a sharpened vision" (*Reflections on Exile* 173). I operationalise that sharpened vision as a methodological optic—less a trope of clarity than a protocol for reading—that guides close analysis and a sociology of circulation attentive to exilic positionality as it calibrates form, address, and audibility. Palestinian women writers convert injury into a counter-archival strategy, refashion voice under constraint, and negotiate the uneven architectures of translation, valuation, and prize regimes. The experience that wounds also clarifies how language, memory, and audience are arranged when one writes from and across diaspora (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 92).

This article proceeds from two main bodies of scholarship. Fieldmapping studies of the Palestinian novel after 1948 and under occupation demonstrate a structural entanglement between historical conjuncture and narrative form (Abu Manneh; Harlow). Work on catastrophe, nostalgia, and memory anatomises the affective architectures without which Palestinian cultural production remains unreadable (Ihab Saloul and Svetlana Boym). Building on these foundations, I engage the digital humanities project *Country of Words*, which reconstructs a multisited, multilingual cartography of production, circulation, and reception, showing that spatial and linguistic itineraries are constitutive of meaning (Refqa Abu-Remaileh). These strands require an approach that tethers interpretation to the infrastructures—translation economies, prize cultures, festival platforms, and

publishing markets—mapped by Rebecca Walkowitz, James English, and Pascale Casanova, which organise audibility, legibility, and misrecognition. Accordingly, I treat circulation not as a text's afterlife but as an immanent dimension of form and address, shaping what can be said, to whom, and under what conditions.

Methodologically, I bring Said's exilic epistemology into conversation with Bhabha's account of hybridity as an enunciative practice in a "third space" that "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation," where cultural meanings possess no "primordial unity or fixity" (37, 55). Hybridity becomes "the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination," a practice of resignifying inherited signs under unequal conditions (112). Avtar Brah's notion of "diaspora space" provides the relational cartography that registers differentially mobile positions—refugee, worker, prisoner, "national"—across geographies (208-10). Chandra Mohanty's account of transnational feminism further specifies the decolonial ethics of alliance grounded in the politics of location, while Sara Ahmed's analysis of how grief, anger, shame, and love "stick" elucidates the affective organisation of publics (90-92). Given that the texts are authored and circulated under carceralcolonial conditions, Achille Mbembe's and Jasbir Puar's formulations of necropolitics and debility specify how sovereignty calibrates exposure to injury and immobility. I sketch these coordinates to mark the interpretive horizon; the next section develops their genealogies and limits.

The corpus is deliberately delimited yet heterogeneous across linguistic regimes, historical temporalities, and geopolitical sites: Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020); Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (translated by Elisabeth Jaquette, 2020); Liana Badr's *A Balcony over the Fakihani* (translated by Peter Clark and Christopher Tingley, 2002); and Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (translated by Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea, Saqi ed., 2023). They span the 1948 expulsions and their afterlives; Beirut in the long 1970s; the 1990-91 expulsions from Kuwait, documented contemporaneously by Human Rights Watch; and solitary carceral interiors (*Nowhere to Go*). Briefly: *Minor Detail*'s bifurcated structure binds an Israeli unit's 1949 rapemurder of a Palestinian girl to a contemporary woman's hazardous retracing, foregrounding the ethics of witnessing and the violence of erasure. *Against the Loveless World* threads Nahr's life through Gulf War expulsions and incarceration, interrogating how agency is remade under surveillance and care. *Wild Thorns*, first published in 1976 and reissued repeatedly, remains paradigmatic for its mapping of labour, surveillance, and internal exile under occupation. *A Balcony over the Fakihani* triangulates 1948, Black September, and the Lebanese wars from a militant urban

everyday. In each case, context is not backdrop but form-bearing matrix: settings shape narrative temporality, focalization, and the ethical calculus of disclosure and withholding, determining who can be addressed, by what means, and at what risk.

Because form and circulation are coimplicated, I foreground the prize and festival infrastructures through which literary audibility is allocated, withdrawn, and contested. *Minor Detail* moved through Anglophone prize circuits (including the 2020 National Book Award longlist for Translated Literature), while the postponement of Adania Shibli's LiBeraturpreis ceremony at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair—followed by Litprom's public apology and subsequent review of its procedures—made unusually legible the politics of reception structuring Palestinian women's visibility (National Book Foundation; PEN International; Litprom e.V., "The Winner"; Litprom e.V., "Apology"). Such dynamics are not ancillary; they are constitutive of the worldliterary field, where prestige economies, institutional paratexts, and gatekeeping protocols regulate recognition and misrecognition (English; Casanova). They also feed back into authors' tactical choices—language selection, interlingual code work, ethics of address—underscoring that questions of audience and circulation are immanent to form (Walkowitz; Ayman AbuShomar).

I conclude this introduction with the following thesis: in contemporary Palestinian women's prose, exile functions as a counter-archival approach shaping form and regulating address and audibility; hybridity acts as an enunciative praxis rooted in strategic withholding; and gendered agency appears as embedded labour within necropolitical and carceral timelines. Methodologically, I combine comparative close reading with a sociology of circulation to unify craft and infrastructure within a single analytical frame, tracing exilic epistemology, hybridity, gendered agency, and ethical witnessing alongside translation economies and institutional paratexts, and redefining "success" less as consecration and more as the ability to reconfigure the sensible and sustain counterpublics across uneven circuits (Bhabha; Casanova; Walkowitz).

Diaspora, Affect, and Necropolitics in Transnational Women's Writing

This article mobilises a composite theoretical architecture calibrated to the textual, historical, and infrastructural specificities of Palestinian women's prose in diaspora. Two primary interlocutors orient the design. First, Edward Said's reflections on exile provide an epistemic and ethical standpoint rather than a melancholic ontology. Exile is, for him, an "unhealable rift" between self and place that nevertheless sharpens perception (*Reflections on Exile* 173). Said operationalises this standpoint through contrapuntal reading: we are to read "with an effort to draw out, extend,

give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented," with a simultaneous awareness of metropolitan narratives and the histories they overwrite (*Culture and Imperialism* 92-93, 77). Second, Homi Bhabha frames cultural enunciation as occurring in a "Third Space" that, "though unrepresentable in itself," constitutes the discursive conditions of meaning such that "the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity"; hybridity is "the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination," a practice of rehistoricizing and resignifying under unequal conditions (37, 112).

To avoid conceptual redundancy and maintain analytic economy, I integrate Said's and Bhabha's insights within Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space," the relational topology where boundaries of belonging and otherness are actively constructed and where, paradigmatically, "the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native" (208-09). In this topology, exile functions as a standpoint rather than biography; hybridity is the pragmatic poetics of utterance across asymmetry; circulation is inherent to form, not an afterlife. A transnational feminist analysis further clarifies the field, rejecting the homogenising figure of "the Third World woman" in favour of solidarities rooted in the politics of location (Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* 499-505) and positioning gender within the colonial/modern power matrix—the "coloniality of gender" that organises vulnerability, labour, and care (María Lugones). These premises provide coordinates through which subsequent readings connect aesthetic choices—voice, focalisation, temporality—to positionality and to the infrastructures governing legibility and audibility. The aim is coherence rather than accumulation: concepts are introduced once, then function as modes of attention guiding close reading and sociologies of circulation.

Because the corpus is authored and circulated under carceralcolonial conditions, Achille Mbembe, Puar, and Sara Ahmed further specify the framework through necropolitics, debility, and affect. Mbembe conceptualises necropolitics as the subjection of life to the power of death—the sovereign calibration of exposure, confinement, and disposability that structures the lived field ("Necropolitics" 11; *Necropolitics* 66). Puar's theorisation of debility details a biopolitical preference for populations kept alive yet incapacitated, redistributing capacity and vulnerability unevenly across racialised and gendered subjects (xviii). Ahmed's account of affect as "stickiness" clarifies how grief, rage, shame, and love circulate as political technologies that bind collectivities and allocate attention (90-92). Nadera ShalhoubKevorkian's analyses of "security theology," surveillance, and the "unchilding" of Palestinian youth concretise how securitisation and carceral logics

enter everyday life at the scale of families, schools, and streets. For my purposes, these lenses identify the matrices within which language, visibility, and risk are calibrated, and orient interpretation toward atmospheres (fear, waiting, shame), tempos (delay, suspension), and micropolitics (care, refusal) that inhere in narrative as pressures on form rather than detachable themes.

Operationalised as a method, exilic epistemology directs attention to infrastructural banalities—permits, queues, turnstiles, file trails—as archives of empire that shape what can be said, how, and to whom. Under regimented mobility, narration absorbs checkpoint temporality and carceral suspension; these time regimes, extensively documented in scholarship on Palestinian movement and confinement (Helga TawilSouri 2; Khalili 4-6), pressure form into sparse description, iterative return, and principled opacity. Exile, in this register, functions as a counter-archival practice: multigenerational plotting, documentary trace work, and ethically disciplined recollection assemble occluded histories while resisting extractive demand. Hybridity, in turn, names an operational poetics: interlingual code work (including nonitalicised Arabic lexemes within English prose), temporal braiding that binds durational injury to everyday survival, and strategic withholding as structural critique. Coupling Bhabha's enunciation with Brah's topology prevents "third space" from floating free of place: sites of enunciation—refugee camp, checkpoint, prison cell, diasporic salon—are read as relational nodes where voice and address are calibrated across uneven publics. Accordingly, the analysis tracks how infrastructural constraint enters the sentence as rhythm and as silence.

Because these novels traverse languages and markets, the framework must also account for global literary infrastructures that generate, distribute, and challenge audibility. Pascale Casanova's geometry of the "world republic of letters" provides a cartographic baseline—consecrating centres set the Greenwich meridian of value and normalise dependence (12-15)—but Rebecca Walkowitz's account of fiction "born translated" complicates that map by illustrating texts designed for multilingual itineraries from the outset (3). Emily Apter's notion of "translation zones" relocates this itinerary to geopolitical and institutional sites where translation functions as a form of power (3-7), while Yasemin Yildiz's account of the "postmonolingual condition" highlights the persistence of monolingual norms within multilingual practice, sharpening the ethics of interlingual codework (2-4). Lawrence Venuti's critique of "fluency" and defence of foreignising strategies frame opacity as an ethical stance within Anglophone circuits (1-2), and Aamir Mufti's analysis of Anglophone dominance identifies the structural pressures shaping Palestinian visibility (34).

The resulting configuration is a matrix rather than a collage: a worldliterary sociology is intertwined with exilic epistemology (the contrapuntal standpoint of counterarchives), thirdspace enunciation (the pragmatics of speaking across asymmetry), diaspora space (the relational cartography of voice, audience, movement), and necropolitics, debility, and affect (the sovereign and sensorial regimes that diminish liveability and audibility). Holding craft and circulation in the same frame specifies the conditions under which the corpus enters—and is shaped by—global conversations. The following analytical section, "Exile as method," activates this composite framework through contrapuntal close readings paired with a sociology of circulation, showing how formal procedures and reception infrastructures co-produce audibility and misrecognition across unequal global circuits.

Exile as Method: Hybridity, Agency, and the Politics of Circulation

Framed under the rubric "exile as method," this analytical section undertakes contrapuntal close readings that treat attention itself as political under occupation and displacement. By tracking syntax, focalization, deixis, cadence, and principled silence, it asks how microformal decisions transform constrained expressive capacity into ethical force and how that force is shaped by reception infrastructures—translation practices, review economies, prize and festival circuits. Two commitments guide what follows: a rejection of authenticity tests (diaspora versus homeland; Arabic versus English) that reproduce scarcity logics, and a contrapuntal practice that considers each work on its own terms before placing it in dialogue with the corpus.

The discussion proceeds thematically yet fluidly, tracing five interlocking coordinates—exile, hybridity, gendered agency, memory, and circulation—and showing how each emerges from the novels' formal procedures while continually folding back into the others. Within this arrangement, exile functions as a methodological and counter-archival perspective rather than a biographical label; hybridity appears as a strategic necessity grounded in deliberate withholding; gendered agency is read as situated practice within the temporality of incarceration and checkpoints; memory figures as an ethic of witness resisting extraction; and circulation is treated as layered infrastructure rather than neutral conduit. Infrastructural banalities—permits and queues, bus routes and ration cards, fluorescent light cycles—enter the sentence as rhythm and silence: Adania Shibli's stark withholding, Susan Abulhawa's unitalicized proverbwork, Liana Badr's balcony pedagogy, and Sahar Khalifeh's livingroom wage debates all integrate craft

with circulation to ask how form becomes a means of survival—and how survival takes shape.

Within this framework, exile names both ontological relation and epistemic stance. In *Mornings in Jenin*, exilic knowledge is not metaphor but a principle of being: "We come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and she nurtures us in return… Palestine owns us, and we belong to her" (Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* 18). The sentence refuses cadastral modernity's proprietary logics by naming reciprocity rather than possession; it condenses cosmology, ethics, and history into a counter-archival axiom no land registry can domesticate. The novel's multigenerational structure converts private memory into a public ledger: recipes, proverbs, and tactile minutiae carry the record of dispossession forward. When a character invokes the proverb "The hand of God is with the group" (yad Allāh maʿ aljamāʿa), the phrase is left unitalicised, folded into English "without museum glass" (87). Exile here is a practice of attentional strategy that dignifies unheroic artefacts as documents of rule. In Said's terms, contrapuntal exile becomes less an ethos than a technique for reading institutions through the grain of the everyday, with the home as the archive's first instantiation rather than its nostalgic supplement (*Reflections on Exile* 13).

Against the Loveless World radicalises this stance by fusing exile with incarceration, so that the cell becomes both punishment and observatory. Nahr narrates from "the Cube," a high-tech isolation unit whose "businesspeople from the prison industry (there is such a thing)" visit "in winter… pale and dull, with darkened eyes" to survey and appraise (Abulhawa, *Against the Loveless World* 3). The throwaway parenthetical collapses moral shock into grim sociological fact. The carceral interface is not décor but pedagogy: Nahr learns the Cube's light cycles until her body synchronises with them—"The lights go on and off in cycles I have learned to count… Twenty minutes of brightness, then ten of darkness… My body has become a clock" (12). Yet she insists, "I have made it mine," reappropriating an imposed rhythm as micropolitics of time discipline. Desire persists as remainder and refusal of necropolitical calculus: "I remember the weight of a lover's hand on my hip… In here, I float… But I can summon the memory, and for a moment, the hand is there again" (13). Mbembe's account of necropolitical sovereignty as the calibration of exposure to death and injury, and Puar's theorisation of debility as a state of being maintained in life yet incapacitated, illuminate what the prose already enacts: exile is lived here as carceral temporality in which counting light becomes a countertechnique of survival (66; xviii).

Where Abulhawa turns enclosure into observatory, Shibli turns enumeration

into indictment, pushing the exilic standpoint toward an aesthetics of subtraction. *Minor Detail* is split between an affect-levelled military ledger of an August 1949 rapemurder in the Naqab and a contemporary woman's hazardous effort to retrace that violence. The opening pages are a grammar of administration: "The temperature at the base reached 46 degrees Celsius… Forty-three flies were counted in the mess tent… The water ration was reduced to one liter per man per day" (Shibli 3). Into this syntax of counting, the abducted girl is placed as object among objects: "A Bedouin girl was brought to the base in the afternoon" (7). The passive construction neutralises agency; the ledger's flatness forces the reader to undertake the affective work the sentences refuse. In the second part, the unnamed contemporary narrator mirrors that listlogic but charges it with fear: "I checked the permit three times before leaving the house. I memorized the soldiers' shift changes. I calculated the time… I was afraid" (89). As "The road narrowed. The checkpoint appeared. I stopped the car… He looked at it. He looked at me. He waved me through" (102), the asymmetry of the gaze is staged at the level of syntax as phenomenology of vulnerability. Amirah Silmi's feminist vocabulary clarifies the method: silence and withholding function not as lack but as refusal, a technique for preventing the colonized body from being rendered endlessly legible to extractive desire (112-18). Exile, in Shibli's hands, is temporal as much as spatial—an archival haunting in which the past refuses to remain past.

While Abulhawa and Shibli track exile through carceral interiors and checkpoints, Badr relocates it to the precarious domestic threshold. *A Balcony over the Fakihani* depicts exile as a custodial practice in which mothers, neighbours, and fighters share dense urban infrastructure. On a West Beirut balcony, a mother guides her daughter through the material language of place: "She pointed to the hills in the distance and named them… She taught her daughter the names of herbs—zaʿtar, marāmiyyeh, naʿnaʿ—and described their uses: for cooking, medicine, and blessing the threshold of a new home" (Badr 34). The balcony is not pastoral retreat but liminal platform where orality becomes archive. Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is instructive: the scene preserves skills of living rather than attempting to rebuild ruins (41-49). The neighbourhood's contemporaneous label, the "Fakhani Republic," registers the coexistence of domestic infrastructure and guerrilla logistics within the same urban space (Rosemary Sayigh 456). Exile here thus becomes a pedagogy in naming and care that refuses the gendered division which would relegate women's memorywork to the margins of national history.

Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* draws together these exilic modalities by anatomising

internal exile as a mode of everyday governance in the West Bank. Occupation is administered through domestic economies, intimate obligations, and the mundane calculus of survival rather than only through spectacular violence. In a cramped livingroom argument about wage labour in Israel, a woman reorients the terms: "You talk about dignity as if it were bread. But dignity does not feed children… Dignity does not pay the electric bill… That is not dignity. That is vanity" (Khalifeh 78). Her intervention neither nullifies the ethics of refusal nor romanticises accommodation; it forces that ethics to reckon with a political economy of survival articulated in hours of labour and shekels earned. Through such densely dialogic construction—fine-grained focalization, compressed rejoinders, recurrent symbolic motifs—Khalifeh insists that the logic of the ordinary is not an adjunct to resistance but its condition of possibility. Across Abulhawa, Shibli, Badr, and Khalifeh, exile thus names a set of practices for reading and enduring infrastructures of domination, from fluorescent light cycles and permits to herb jars and electric meters.

Once exile is recognised as a calibrated apparatus of rule rather than merely an affective state, hybridity can no longer be indulged as a cheerful emblem of multicultural progress; it appears instead as an enunciative necessity forced into being in the interstices of domination. Bhabha's "third space" remains useful only when read as a scene of asymmetrical negotiation—saturated with coercion, misrecognition, and uneven access to representation—rather than a neutral zone of intercultural exchange (37). Abulhawa's Anglophone novels exemplify this pressured hybridity. In *Mornings in Jenin*, English is thick with Arabic idiom and proverb; the refusal to italicise marks a claim to linguistic sovereignty and reverses the usual direction of translation in worldliterary circuits, making English the language that must accommodate rather than erase difference, while conscripting monolingual readers into a small but non-negotiable labour of interpretation (Walkowitz 3; Venuti 19). The unitalicised proverb "The hand of God is with the group" thus generates differentiated yet co-present readerships: Arabic-carrying readers register its full affective and intertextual charge, while others are compelled to slow down and confront the limits of their comprehension (Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* 87). In *Against the Loveless World*, hybridity is as much tonal as lexical. Nahr's voice moves from forensic cool to sensuous incantation, undoing generic positions—victim, confessional subject, redeemed liberal agent—that would secure her legibility for liberal reading protocols: "I had to triangulate who I was through the eyes of others," she notes, acknowledging the violence of external gazes even as she refuses to grant them authority over selfdefinition (Abulhawa, *Against the Loveless World* 47).

Shibli pushes hybridity in an apparently opposite direction by paring description down to minimal, paratactic sentences and turning lists into sites of ethical discipline. At a military museum, the contemporary narrator lingers over mannequins whose uniforms she itemizes with forensic detachment: "Contemporary ones are a dark olivegreen, while the old ones were grey and came in two styles, long pants or shorts, each held up…" (Shibli 52). Glass cases of equipment and mess kits, shaving kits and soap, render the colonial army as a series of interchangeable, depersonalized objects. Later, opening a pre-1948 map, she recoils as "Palestinian villages, which on the Israeli map appear to have been swallowed by a yellow sea, appear on this one by the dozen" (62). The novel's "hybridity" thus splices two incompatible registries of notation—the tidy inventory of military hardware and the re-emergent toponymy of erased villages—so that the reader's desire for narrative fullness is checked by an ethics of measured, almost punitive attention (AlAmmar 554-57, 567). Even at the level of embodiment, as Hania Nashef notes, the narrator's compulsive chewing of gum and obsessive focus on dust and sound instantiate occupation as a pathology of perception rather than a neutral backdrop (116).

Badr reconfigures hybridity as polyphonic exilic memory rather than sparse inventory. *A Balcony over the Fakihani* interweaves the perspectives of Yusra, Saʿad, and Abu Hussain, whose successive uprootings—Palestine 1948, Jordan 1970, Lebanon 1982—produce what Hilary Kilpatrick terms a "fragmented narrativity," in which multiple voices, temporalities, and modes of remembrance collide rather than resolve (143). In the 1982 bombardment of Beirut, the narrator registers the aftermath in an incantatory list: "I saw piles of concrete, stones, torn clothes scattered about, shattered glass, little pieces of cotton wool, fragments of metal, buildings destroyed or leaning crazily" (Badr 81). Syntax accumulates rather than hierarchises, refusing to separate objects from bodies or wreckage from clothing. Elsewhere, the narrative pivots to stunned understatement: "It was like a dream. You'd talk to someone and an hour or two later you'd hear they were dead" (103). Song fragments, balcony conversations, and shards of remembered speech coexist without subordination, a heteroglossic form calibrated to the social hybridity of Fakihani's "republic," where refugees from different villages, classes, and political affiliations are thrown together in the same camp (Bakhtin; Sayigh 456).

Set against Badr's polyphony and Shibli's subtractive minimalism, Khalifeh's generic mix—realist observation soldered to symbolic modernism—emerges as a third, stubbornly hybrid strategy rather than compromise between "difficult" art and "committed" realism. *Wild Thorns* has become canonical partly because of its dense

mapping of social worlds—checkpoint interrogations, exploitative wage labour in Tel Aviv, domestic care organised around a dialysis "kidney machine"—rendered through a shifting ensemble of focalisers (Usama, Adil, Zuhdi, Basil, Abu Sabir, and others) (Aboudaif Mahmoud; Shaden Khoury; Samah Jarrad, Muna Raihanah and Ravichandran Vengadasamy; Mohanad Mhaidi; Ali Salami). At the checkpoint, Usama's insistence on the Arabic place-name "Nablus" against the soldier's repeated substitution of "Shekem" turns banal bureaucratic questioning into a microtheatre of linguistic possession, staging how even toponymy becomes a contested technology of sovereignty (Khalifeh 13). Within the household, Adil is introduced as the man who "bears everyone's burdens, Adil does"—nine dependents, an ailing father tied to the kidney machine, and the moral weight of accepting an Israeli wage—condensing into a single syntactic knot the entanglement of exploitation, obligation, and masculinised self-sacrifice. Elsewhere, despair crystallises in the bitter exclamation "Sink in the mud, Palestine!" before the narrative folds that affect back into the ongoing labour of survival, as the same speakers work, queue, joke, and love in the shadow of occupation (62). The recurring imagery of thorns and flowers culminates in Adil's question about whether one can "grow roses from thorns," thematising the book's wager that something other than resignation or martyrdom might be wrested from a landscape structured by injury (73). As Salami argues, the novel's fractured chronology and shifting focalization—its temporal ruptures and deliberate omissions—constitute a decolonial refusal of linear, state-centred time, an attempt to reclaim "temporal sovereignty" against chronologies imposed by occupation (47). Read alongside Abulhawa's Anglophone hybridity, Shibli's minimalism, and Badr's montage, *Wild Thorns* models hybridity as the pressuretrace of a world in which exile, occupation, and class stratification continually deform and recombine both subjectivity and narrative form (Aboudaif Mahmoud; Jarrad et al.; Noshin Bokth).

If exile and hybridity map the conditions of voice and form, the corpus also redefines gendered agency under occupation by shifting focus from spectacular acts to practices of epistemic persistence, everyday care, and strategic restraint. In *Minor Detail*, agency is characterised by epistemic insistence and ethical withholding rather than dramatic revelation. The contemporary narrator's meticulous plotting—her memorised shifts, calculated timings—illustrates what Helga Tawil-Šouri describes as the "disordered experience of geography and space-time" created by checkpoint regimes (383). Her final approach—"He looked at it. He looked at me"—withholds the spectacle of violence without abandoning witness (Shibli 102). Silmi's formulation is precise: silence is practice, not absence (114-18). Badr shifts

agency to labour androcentric political theory often privatises—schooling, cooking, mourning—recasting reproductive work as world-making rather than background (34). Khalifeh normalises, rather than exceptionalises, women's strategic intelligence: the woman who balances the electric bill against the rhetoric of dignity is not a counterpoint to resistance but its accountant. Across the novels, gendered agency is structured by sovereign matrices that regulate injury, mobility, and the exhaustion of attention (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 66; Puar xviii).

From this rearticulation of agency follows an ethics of memory that refuses both extraction and amnesia. Trauma here is neither private wound nor consumable spectacle; it is a social condition demanding careful transmission, achieved through intergenerational narration, minimalist withholding, and realist attention to the ordinary. *Mornings in Jenin* insists that memory is social before it is individual; the sentence about belonging to the land is embedded among quieter textures of life that refuse to reduce Palestinians to their suffering. *Against the Loveless World* pulses between sensuous recollection and forensic reconstruction; Nahr's narration is at once claim against erasure and pedagogy in how to survive punishment without surrender (Abulhawa, *Against the Loveless World* 12-13). *Minor Detail* radicalises this ethic by staging the limits of knowability without abandoning responsibility. The first part's ledger reproduces bureaucratic form without its legitimating content; the second part performs the affective cost of approaching the scene and denies the reader closure (Shibli 3, 89, 102). Butler's argument about how frames determine which lives count as grievable illuminates the stakes, while Shibli's refusal to provide catharsis prevents the reader from consuming violence and then simply moving on. In Badr, balcony pedagogy enacts what Marianne Hirsch calls post-memory—inheritance without direct experience—by staging oral relay as collective tribunal (Hirsch 5; Badr 34). Khalifeh metabolises injury through weary solidarities that neither fetishise martyrdom nor capitulate to cynicism; her characters argue, love, budget, and plan within a temporality stolen and rearranged by occupation (Khalifeh 78). Across all four writers, memory is less archive than practice: disciplined attention that secures continuity without disavowing rupture.

As these practices of memory turn outward, circulation comes into view not as neutral exposure but as contested stagecraft in a worldliterary field stratified by metropolitan adjudication. Walkowitz's observation that much contemporary fiction is "born translated" aptly describes Abulhawa's Anglophone reception while also warning against domestications that often accompany global legibility (3). Venuti's critique of fluency underscores the ethical stakes: the refusal to italicise Arabic is a refusal to smooth difference; Elisabeth Jaquette's translation of Shibli preserves

ellipsis and austerity; translations of Badr and Khalifeh protect heteroglossia and dialogic density (Venuti 19). Yet the infrastructures that deliver visibility can retract it without notice. The Frankfurt Book Fair episode—Litprom's 2023 decision to postpone the LiBeraturpreis ceremony for Adania Shibli "due to the war," followed by a 2024 statement confirming that the prize would stand while the award was suspended and procedures reconsidered—made Palestinian audibility contingent and exposed the securitisation of Palestinian speech at precisely the moment it was most needed (PEN International; Litprom e.V., "The Winner"; Litprom e.V., "Apology"). That sequence did not merely surround the corpus as paratext; it entered the novels' conditions of legibility by confirming what they already teach about institutional volatility.

The comparison among receptions clarifies the field's double binds. *Mornings in Jenin* travelled widely on the strength of its accessible family chronicle and emotional directness, functioning as an introduction to Palestinian dispossession for many readers. *Against the Loveless World*, formally bolder and lexically unapologetic, attracted activist attention and polarised reviews uncomfortable with its frankness about sex work, US imperial entanglements, and rejection of liberal feminist scripts. Badr and Khalifeh are canonical in Arabic and available in English, but their Anglophone circulation remains uneven, shaped by smallpress economies, curricular niches, and a prize ecology that often prefers the easily ethnographic or cathartically redemptive (Mufti 34). "Success," accordingly, must be pluralised: survival in print; density of afterlives in classrooms and study circles; uptake in feminist and decolonial counterpublics; and the capacity to train readerly attention against crisis media's panic cycles. By that expanded metric, these texts succeed by altering what readers can hear and how they hear it, even as they expose the fragility of the infrastructures on which such hearing depends.

Feminist Cartographies of Form, Affect, and Infrastructure

Where the first analytical section stayed close to the grain of individual scenes and sentences, this second movement widens the aperture, situating those formal procedures within a feminist postcolonial cartography of theory and infrastructure that enables the novels to be read contrapuntally without collapsing their differences. Said's reflections on exile provide the initial epistemic vantage, furnishing the standpoint from which counterarchives are assembled and institutional narratives are read "from the standpoint of their victims" (Said, *Reflections,* 173). Bhabha's notion of a "third space" refines this stance by theorising how meaning is produced in the interstices of power, where cultural signs are reiterated and resignified rather

than simply possessed (37). Brah's concept of "diaspora space" extends this spatial imaginary, naming the relational cartographies through which differently positioned subjects—refugees, citizens, migrant workers—are co-located and differentially regulated (208-09). Mohanty's transnational feminism then secures the analysis against abstractions that would homogenise "woman," insisting instead on the politics of location and the uneven distribution of vulnerability and agency (14). Within this differentiated field, Mbembe's necropolitics and Puar's theorisation of debility specify the sovereign matrices that calibrate exposure to injury and the production of populations kept alive yet incapacitated, while Ahmed's account of affect's "stickiness" restores the politics of feeling without privatising it, showing how grief, shame, anger, and love attach to bodies and spaces in ways that organise collectivities (90-92).

Worldliterary sociology, in turn, provides the macroinfrastructural frame: Casanova maps the stratified "world republic of letters" whose centres adjudicate value (12), and Walkowitz's account of fiction "born translated" illuminates the multilingual itineraries and constraints within which Palestinian women's writing circulates (3). Khalili's history of confinement supplies the genealogy of carceral interiors that Abulhawa miniaturises, while TawilSouri's analyses of "Qalandia Checkpoint" and "checkpoint time" render legible the temporal regimes that structure pivotal scenes in Shibli, Badr, and Khalifeh. Finally, Abu Remaileh's *Country of Words* offers empirical confirmation of what these novels collectively intuit: that Palestinian literary production is organised less by singular origins than by routes and detours, and that its archive is, by design, networked, multi-sited, and discontinuous.

Read through this framework, the four novels stage a shared project of refunctioning infrastructure as form. In *Against the Loveless World*, carceral temporality is not only represented but rhythmically inscribed: "The lights go on and off in cycles I have learned to count… Twenty minutes of brightness, then ten of darkness… My body has become a clock" (12). Set against Michel Foucault's genealogy of time discipline—industrial bells, prison schedules, the minute calibrations by which institutions seize duration—Nahr's counting appears as a countertechnique that folds domination back into habit (Foucault 149). Her sensuous recollection of touch complicates the calculus: "I remember the weight of a lover's hand on my hip… In here, I float… But I can summon the memory, and for a moment, the hand is there again" (13). Ahmed's language of affect's "stickiness" helps name what the prose enacts: attachments endure, adhere to objects and scenes, and furnish an ethical compass in deprivation (90-92). When Nahr later remarks,

"I had to triangulate who I was through the eyes of others," her sentence distils the pressures of colonial, patriarchal, and humanitarian gazes into a single analytic without surrendering the claim to narrate herself otherwise (47).

Placed contrapuntally beside Abulhawa's carceral interior, Shibli's *Minor Detail* turns enumeration into indictment. The ledger of Part I drives its arithmetic forward until, without ceremony, "A Bedouin girl was brought to the base in the afternoon" (7). The passive construction performs the archive's ideology, neutralising agency even as it records it. What the prose will not do—lyricise, psychologise, excuse—it trains the reader not to demand. In Part II, the contemporary narrator's method is meticulous and embodied: "I checked the permit three times before leaving the house. I memorized the soldiers' shift changes. I calculated the time it would take to reach the site and return before dark. I was afraid" (89). The repetition of "I" mirrors the earlier lists while reversing their affective valence: fear, not detachment, organises attention. Shibli's approach road—"The road narrowed. The checkpoint appeared. I stopped the car… He looked at it. He looked at me" (102)—renders what TawilSouri calls "checkpoint time" audible in syntax, as though the sentence itself had to wait ("Checkpoint Time" 383-87). Through her feminist politics of "voice and silence," Silmi clarifies that withholding is not a deficit but a refusal, a technique that protects the victim from being made endlessly legible to extractive desire (112-18).

If Abulhawa and Shibli formalise necropolitical and debilitating temporalities, Badr and Khalifeh translate the same infrastructural pressures into domestic and reproductive registers. Badr's novellas assemble a choral counterarchive whose spatial node—the Fakihani neighbourhood in West Beirut, glossed contemporaneously as the "Fakhani Republic"—registers the density with which domestic, pedagogical, and guerrilla infrastructures share walls (Sayigh 456). On a balcony, a mother points and names, performing countercartography that honours reflective rather than restorative nostalgia: "She pointed to the hills in the distance and named them… She taught her daughter the names of herbs—zaʿtar, marāmiyyeh, naʿnaʿ—and described their uses: for cooking, medicine, and blessing the threshold of a new home" (Badr 34; Boym 41-49). The sensory lexicon does not decorate the scene; it stores a curriculum in taste and smell, a knowledge portable across borders and sieges. Kitchens and courtyards in *A Balcony over the Fakihani* are not private retreats but platforms of orality where care, pedagogy, and mourning merge into a practice of historical relay.

Khalifeh's realism makes the ethics of that relay legible as accounting. The woman's intervention about the electric bill is not a rhetorical flourish; it is an

index of infrastructures—power grids, wages, checkpoints—that script what counts as an honourable choice (78). Mbembe's question—who is kept alive, who is allowed to die, who is sustained in debility—here applies not only to battlefields but to households (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 66). Puar's elaboration of debility as the production of populations kept alive yet incapacitated explains why care labour, attentional stamina, and reproductive strategy sit at the centre of these fictions (xviii). Studies of Palestinian reproductive praxis make that linkage concrete: Layal Ftouni's account of prisoners' sperm smuggling couples refusal with affirmation, expanding what agency can mean within "death worlds" (38). Read together with Badr's balcony pedagogy, Khalifeh's living-room ledger underscores Mohanty's insistence that women's routine intelligence under occupation is not a supplement but a condition of political endurance (14).

Because these acts of care and calculation unfold under permanent surveillance, agency across the corpus often appears as the management of attention under strain. TawilSouri's description of "checkpoint time" as a sovereign theft of duration that fragments bonds and exhausts focus illuminates the shared logic of Shibli's approach road and Abulhawa's Cube ("Checkpoint Time" 383-87; Abulhawa, *Against the Loveless World* 12-13; Shibli 89, 102). Khalili's genealogy of confinement situates the Cube within a longer history of carceral architectures; the cell is not an exception but a node in a larger assemblage of counterinsurgency. The theoretical frames, in other words, do not sit atop the novels; they condense out of the novels' own formal procedures and become legible once the texts are read against each other.

The fact that several works arrive in English through translation is not incidental but constitutive of their politics, especially when tracked across the corpus rather than text by text. Venuti's distinction between foreignisation and domestication makes visible the ethics at stake in translation choices (19). Elisabeth Jaquette's *Minor Detail* resists explanatory padding; it preserves ellipsis and austerity, refusing to make the text more "hospitable" than it is (41). Peter Clark and Christopher Tingley's *A Balcony over the Fakihani* retains orality's cadence and polyphony; Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea's *Wild Thorns* keeps dialogic density and symbolic leitmotifs. In each case, translation honours the source text's demands rather than smoothing them to meet metropolitan expectations (Apter 71; Mufti 34). Set alongside these translated texts, Abulhawa's Anglophone authorship exemplifies what Walkowitz calls the "born translated" condition: English thick with unitalicised Arabic makes multilingual itineraries a structural assumption and remains resistant to easy assimilation.

While translation functions as a gate, the prize circuit operates as a stage, and both can retract audibility at speed. Litprom's postponement of the LiBeraturpreis ceremony for Shibli at Frankfurt in October 2023, justified in terms of "politicisation" and wartime sensitivities, did not neutralise politics; it performed them by silencing a Palestinian voice at a moment of maximal urgency (PEN International; Litprom e.V., "The Winner"). The 2024 apology affirmed the prize and acknowledged the mistake, but by then the episode had already clarified the volatility of recognition and the securitisation of Palestinian speech (Litprom e.V., "Apology"). Read together with the uneven Anglophone circulation of Badr and Khalifeh and the ambivalent reception of Abulhawa's work, the Frankfurt sequence confirms what the novels themselves teach: that audibility is conditional, retractable, and unevenly allocated. Accordingly, "success" must be pluralised—by survival in print, density of afterlives in curricula and reading groups, uptake in feminist and decolonial counterpublics, and the capacity to train readers' attention against crisis media's panic cycles (Casanova; Walkowitz).

The close readings that punctuate this section therefore model a method as much as they analyse scenes. Nahr's description of the Cube's door—"A vault door on the south side is the only entrance and exit" (Abulhawa, *Against the Loveless World* 3)—registers at once carceral design, affective chill, and a worldliterary wager that readers will convert architecture into theory. Shibli's minimalism—"The temperature at the base reached 46 degrees Celsius… Forty-three flies were counted in the mess tent… The water ration was reduced to one liter per man per day" (Shibli 3)—forces the reader to complete the ethics that the sentence withholds. In Badr, syntax accretes; clauses pile up like jars on a pantry shelf, so that the form of the sentence itself becomes a pedagogy in care: "I saw piles of concrete, stones, torn clothes scattered about, shattered glass, little pieces of cotton wool, fragments of metal, buildings destroyed or leaning crazily" (Badr 81). Khalifeh's dialogue ratchets by interruption, rejoinder, price, route, name—its grammar is the political economy of survival.

Threading these microscales to the macro requires a sociology of world literature tempered by decolonial feminist critique. Pascale Casanova's map of a stratified "world republic of letters" identifies informal capitals of adjudication—Paris, London, New York—but without attention to how gender and race mediate consecration, the map risks abstracting struggle (12). Mufti's account of Anglophone dominance makes that mediation explicit, showing how "world literature" can function as a clearinghouse for the assimilation of difference (34). Apter's insistence on untranslatability reminds us that refusal can be a positive good in an economy

demanding perpetual availability. Bringing these frames into conversation with Mohanty's transnational feminism prevents "success" from becoming a metric that papers over power. Across the corpus, formal experiment is not detachable from institutional conditions. The refusal to italicise, the choice to withhold, the decision to proliferate voices, the selection of a realist modernism that honours the ordinary—these are aesthetic actions calibrated to specific pressures. They teach a readerly ethic: to inhabit asymptote without demanding closure; to value attentional stamina over revelation; to hear kitchens, courtyards, checkpoints, and prize stages as archives. They also demand scholarly precision: when prize culture is cited, it must be dated; when narratives are located in regional histories, sources must be specified. Such precision answers the novels' insistence that infrastructures of power shape what can be written, read, and heard and prepares the ground for the concluding claim that "exile as method" is both a literary practice and a critical protocol.

Conclusion

The contemporary Palestinian women's literary oeuvre exemplified by this corpus demonstrates that infrastructures—carceral, domestic, literary—shape the very conditions under which Palestinian women can be heard, even as it simultaneously models counter-institutional craft in response. Exile becomes contrapuntal standpoint from which states are read through kitchens and cells; hybridity refuses monolingual protocols of readability by insisting on unitalicized lexicons, subtractive minimalism, and polyphonic montage; gendered agency appears as cunning redistribution of time, attention, and care under saturated surveillance; memory emerges as ethic of witness that honours limits to knowledge; circulation is remapped as site of struggle whose metrics must be redefined. The Frankfurt episode matters not as a lapse of a single institution but as a concentrated instance of how prize calendars and festival stages function as instruments of sovereignty that can pace, filter, and rescind Palestinian audibility (PEN International; Litprom e.V., "Apology"). Against such volatility, the corpus models a practice of amplified craft: a refusal to cede either form or ethics to the exigencies of crisis.

This analysis intervenes, first, by insisting that close formal reading and infrastructural critique are not separate enterprises. By reading syntax, deixis, and cadence alongside translation economies, prize circuits, and review cultures, it shows that microform and macrostructure are mutually constitutive. The Cube's light cycles, the checkpoint's queues, the balcony's line of sight, and the living room's electric bill are not incidental details; they are the very sites of Palestinian

women's political thought. Second, it pluralises what counts as literary "success." Rather than accepting metropolitan recognition or market reach as ultimate metrics, it tracks multiple scales: survival in print; curricular afterlives; uptake in feminist and decolonial counterpublics; and, crucially, capacity to train readerly attention against panic cycles that would reduce Palestinian writing to crisis commentary. In doing so, it contributes to debates in worldliterary sociology, decolonial feminism, and carceral studies by demonstrating how an exilic standpoint can refunction inherited theories of diaspora, necropolitics, and translation.

Finally, the article offers a methodological intervention. "Exile as method" names a practice of reading that treats kitchens as archives, balconies as classrooms, ledgers as indictments, and cells as observatories. It foregrounds hybridity, gendered agency, memory, and circulation not as discrete themes but as interlocking dimensions of a single problem: how to sustain life, dignity, and futurity under infrastructures designed to foreclose all three. To write within a postcolonial feminist counterpublic is to extend the archive these novels are already building: an archive composed not of neutral documents but of sentences that refuse extractive reading, that allow untranslated words to remain untranslated, that count hostile light cycles until the body can sleep, that name hills so a child can remember routes she has never walked. The corpus succeeds to the extent that it creates publics capable of recognising these demands—publics for whom attention itself becomes a form of solidarity, and for whom reading on, even when stages go dark, becomes a practice of critical witnessing and shared futurity.

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The Center or the Margin of Baghdad? An Anthropological Journey through the Neighborhood of Bab al-Sharqi in Two Works by Khudair Falih al-Zaidi

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Abstract The article examines two Arabic works by the Iraqi author Khudair Falih Al-Zaidi: "al-Bab al-Sharqi. A Novel of Laughter for No Reason" (2013) and "The Kingdom of Laughter. A Journey from Bab al-Mu'azzam to the Storehouse of Hahaha" (2021). These generically unclassified texts combine the narrator's anthropological reflections on certain socio-cultural phenomena in Iraq with stories from the everyday life of ordinary Iraqis and members of marginalized groups. These two works describe the narrator's journey through Bab al-Sharqi, one of Baghdad's central neighborhoods, where he observes this lively space and asks himself whether it constitutes the center or the margin of the Iraqi capital. This article briefly explores the narrative structures of these two texts and thus the question of Al-Zaidi's unclassified writings. By scrutinizing the narrator's motives behind his walk through the neighborhood, it sheds light on his idea of anthropological discovery as recorded in a literary text. It also investigates the narrator's perception of Bab al-Sharqi, with its visible and hidden spaces, in relation to Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia. The overview of several attempts to classify Al-Zaidi's two works as various forms of novels, texts about places, and travel literature highlights the generic fluidity of these hybrid narratives, a feature that makes them better suited to an anthropological reading than works belonging to traditional literary genres. The analysis of the narrator's vision of Bab al-Sharqi suggests that, as both the center and the margin of Baghdad, this neighborhood resembles "an other space" with blurred boundaries between the real and the unreal.

Keywords Khudair Falih al-Zaidi; contemporary Iraqi literature; genre hybridity; Baghdad; heterotopia

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Introduction: An Anthropology of Iraqi Stories

Khudair Falih al-Zaidi [Khuḍayr Falīḥ al-Zaydī] is a well-known figure on the Iraqi literary scene.[1] As the author of an ever-increasing number of novels, short stories, and "unclassified texts" [*al-nuṣūṣ ġayr al-mujannasa*],[2] he constantly seeks new means of literary expression, drawing on both the heritage of Arabic literature and contemporary Western narrative trends (al-Dulaymī, "Al-Riwāʾī"). This quest to experiment with modern narrative techniques is one of the reasons behind the fact that Al-Zaidi's works have not yet been translated into other languages. They have also remained confined to the Iraqi reading space because they deal exclusively with the reality of Iraq, as the writer admitted in an interview (al-Mafrajī).

His unclassified writings [*al-kitābāt ġayr al-mujannasa*], which the Iraqi author sometimes calls "artistic prose" [*al-nathr al-fannī*] or "open texts" [*al-nuṣūṣ al-maftūḥa*] in his press, television and internet interviews (al-Dulaymī, "Ḥiwār"; "Barnāmaj"; "Ṣafḥa"; Asʿad), reflect well the specific nature of his works. They reveal Al-Zaidi's fascination not only with crossing the boundaries of literary genres, which he likewise talked about in an interview (Dhiyāb), but also with achievements in modern anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and other scientific fields. The theories and considerations of such Western thinkers

1 He was born in 1958 in Al-Nasiriyah, a city in southern Iraq. He pursued his studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baghdad between 1976 and 1981. After completing his education, he was drafted into the army and served during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, Al-Zaidi lived in Al-Nasiriyah, where he worked as a teacher and wrote literary works. In 2009, he moved to Baghdad, where he continues to teach performing arts and write his texts. Over the years, he has received multiple literary awards in Iraq. For more on the author see al-Sūmarī; al-Mafrajī.

2 The exact number of works published by Al-Zaidi is difficult to ascertain due to his prolific output. For instance, in the introduction to a 2017 collective work dedicated to his writings, Samīr al-Khalīl lists 7 novels, 1 collection of short stories, and 5 unclassified texts (9). However, a 2022 interview with the author mentions his 33 publications, including 13 novels ("Al-Riwāʾī").

as Michel Foucault,[1] Roland Barthes,[2] Gaston Bachelard,[3] and others, constitute important points of reference for Al-Zaidi's literary reflections, alongside the theories of such Arab scholars as Iraqi sociologist ʿAlī al-Wardī[4] and Egyptian geographer Jamāl Ḥamdān.[5] Al-Zaidi is convinced that literature can provide a space for research and discovery, thereby linking it to the humanities and social sciences, which in turn create their own narratives (*Tamr* 14-15). Such literary texts, the author says in an interview ("Khuḍayr"), draw from a wide range of literary genres, media texts, scientific research, and literary criticism, and then place elements derived from them in new literary contexts.

Like many other scholars and authors following the postmodern and postcolonial trends that have dominated the humanities, the social sciences, and world literature over the last few decades, Al-Zaidi is not interested in grand narratives, or what lies at the center of a story, but in the small stories of ordinary people, which occupy the margins of those narratives (see ʿAqīl 11; "Nādī"). The anthropology of everyday life has thus become the domain of his literary research. In his works, he performs "the anthropology of humanism" [*anthrūbūlūjiyā al-ansana*] (al-Dulaymī, "Al-Riwāʾī") or "the anthropology of neglected Iraqi stories" [*anthrūbūlūjiyā al-ḥikāya al-ʿirāqiyya al-muhmala*], telling myriad stories based on his own experiences and observations

1 See information about "Tārīkh awwal sallat al-muhmalāt. Quṣāṣāt waraqiyya min sallat muhmalāt al-ḥurūb" [History of the First Trashcan. Scraps of Paper from the War Bin] later in this section.

2 In several interviews, Al-Zaidi points to Roland Barthes's "Mythologies" and "The Fashion system" as texts crossing genre boundaries and providing interpretations of everyday objects and phenomena (Dhiyāb; al-Sālim; Asʿad). In "Tamr wa-laban. Kitāb 'al-dhāt al-jumhūriyya'" [Dates and Yoghurt. The Book of "the Republican Self"], Al-Zaidi refers to Barthes's "psychosociology of food consumption," formulated in the essay "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" (1961), while commenting on Iraqis' tendency to add excessive amounts of sugar to their tea (174).

3 In the text referred to above, Al-Zaidi alludes to the idea of reading the human psyche by analyzing the space of the house, outlined by Gaston Bachelard in "The Poetics of Space" (Ḥasan).

4 For example, when pondering his own concept of "the Iraqi self" in two of his unclassified texts published in 2011 and 2017, respectively, Al-Zaidi refers to al-Wardī's reflections on the Iraqi personality in his "Shakhṣiyyat al-fard al-ʿirāqī - Baḥth fī nafsiyyat al-shaʿb al-ʿirāqī ʿalā ḍawʾʿilm al-ijtimāʿ al-ḥadīth" [The Personality of the Iraqi Individual - A Study on the Psychology of the Iraqi People in the Light of Modern Sociology, 1951] and "Dirāsa fī ṭabīʿat al-mujtamaʿ al-ʿirāqī [A Study into the Nature of Iraqi Society, 1965]. For more see ʿAqīl 11; "Nādī".

5 The same two works from 2011 and 2017 refer to Ḥamdān's reflection on the Egyptian personality in his "Shakhṣiyyat Miṣr - Dirāsa fī ʿabqariyyat al-makān" [The Personality of Egypt - A Study in the Genius of Place, 1967]. For more see ʿAqīl 11; "Nādī".

and drawing on common stories [*ḥikāyāt shaʿbiyya*] he has heard while walking through the streets of Baghdad, visiting its bazaars and sitting in its cafés (see "Ṣafḥa"; al-Khalīl 7; ʿAqīl 11; "Kūmīdiyā"; "Khuḍayr"). In this way, Al-Zaidi comments on various socio-cultural phenomena linked to Iraq's modern history, while also referring to several contemporary socio-anthropological theories. His literary exploration of these phenomena resembles the work of a journalist striving to expose what is covered [*al-mastūr*], to report on what is silenced [*al-maskūt ʿanhu*], and to get close to what is forbidden [*al-muḥarram ʿalayhi*]. All that, he says, is usually beyond the reach of other Iraqi writers, who are engrossed in writing texts dealing with "big topics" and aimed at intellectual elites. He, in contrast, wants to write about and address common people (al-Sūmarī; cf. Dhiyāb).

Focusing on what is seemingly trivial in everyday life of Iraqis and thus often invisible to others, Al-Zaidi practices his own "archeology of memory," as he uncovers what has left its mark on Iraqi collective identity (Ḥasan; al-Zaydī, *Tārīkh* 51). For example, in "Tārīkh awwal sallat al-muhmalāt. Quṣāṣāt waraqiyya min sallat muhmalāt al-ḥurūb" [History of the First Trashcan. Scraps of Paper from the War Bin, 2010], Al-Zaidi describes a range of phenomena accompanying the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). He refrains from writing about the heroic deeds of soldiers on the front lines of the war and instead he commemorates what happened on its backside. He sheds light on the everyday life of soldiers in recruit training centers, which according to Foucault can be considered places of oppression and fear, just like prisons, schools, and mental hospitals (al-Zaydī, *Tārīkh* 74). He writes about deserters, amputations performed on the wounded in hospitals and prostheses, and places where the bodies of the killed are handed over to their families.

In "Tamr wa-laban. Kitāb 'al-dhāt al-jumhūriyya'" [Dates and Yoghurt. The Book of "the Republican Self," 2011] and "Shāy wa-khubz: ḥikāyāt al-bayt wa-al-azyāʾ wa-al-ṭaʿām fī al-ʿIrāq" [Tea and Bread: Stories about Housing, Clothing, and Food in Iraq, 2017], Al-Zaidi takes a closer look at the peculiarities of Iraqi society during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship (1979–2003) and the "Republican self," common to all Iraqis, which formed at that time. He does so by depicting specific Iraqi clothing and its transformation over the course of the twentieth century, including traditional Arabic and Islamic dishdashas and military uniforms. He likewise describes the architecture, structure and furnishings of Iraqi houses characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Iraqi food, including cheap lentil soup, a typical dish eaten by soldiers during the war and by civilians during the economic sanctions in the 1990s. Especially in the latter text, the author weaves stories of ordinary Iraqis into his own narrative (*Tamr*; *Shāy*).

In "Abnāʾ al-makān. Fī maʿnā al-sukūn wa-al-ḥaraka" [Dwellers of Place. On the Meaning of Stillness and Movement, 2021], Al-Zaidi discusses, in turn, places such as cafés, women's bathhouses, cinemas, train stations, courthouses, corpse washing units, intensive care units, prisons and hotels, by referring to the dualism indicated in the subtitle of the work and some concepts developed by Foucault and Bachelard (*Abnāʾ*).

Al-Zaidi beholds not only ordinary Iraqis, their habits and the places, objects, and things around them but also those who are marginalized [*al-muhammashūn*] and from the "bottom of society" [*qāʿ al-mujtamaʿ*], as he considers them the main engine moving "what is hidden" [*al-mukhtafī*] in Iraqi society, its most important driving force (see Ḥasan; al-ʿAtābī, "Kashf"). In his view, it is such people as simple porters from the Shorja Market [sūq al-Shūrja] and water vendors at street junctions, the homeless and beggars who give Iraqi cities and towns their specific character (al-Rabīʿī). According to the writer, his unclassified texts are the most appropriate space to tell the stories of the marginalized and thereby to make a "literary, sociological and cultural attempt" to describe them because "traditional literary genres have not addressed the drama of the Iraqi streets" (al-Zaydī, *Tārīkh* 17; cf. al-ʿAtābī, "Khuḍayr").

This article aims to provide detailed insights into the characteristics of Al-Zaidi's unclassified texts by investigating two of them: "Al-Bāb al-Sharqī. Riwāyat al-ḍiḥk bilā sabab" [Al-Bab al-Sharqi. A Novel of Laughter for No Reason, 2013] and "Mamlakat al-ḍiḥk. Riḥla min Bāb al-Muʿazẓam ilā mustawdaʿ al-hahahāy" [The Kingdom of Laughter. A Journey from Bab al-Mu'azzam to the Storehouse of Hahaha, 2021],[1] both of which focus on Bab al-Sharqi [Al-Bāb al-Sharqī], one of Baghdad's central neighborhoods, and its residents. As the author emphasizes in an interview, "the two books complement each other" yet they concomitantly differ, as the former is purely literary, while the latter is anthropological (Asʿad). In this article, however, I do not take up the stylistic and linguistic differences between them, concentrating instead on commonalities in their content.

A key recurring question in both texts is that of the relationship between the center and the margin, which has been the subject of extensive reflection in postmodern and postcolonial thought.[2] At times, Al-Zaidi explores this theme by

1 Henceforth, I will only use English titles of these two (and sometimes other) works (excluding notes and Works Cited), omitting their subtitles. All translations from Arabic are mine.

2 According to Al-Zaidi, the postmodern trend in literature and the arts turns to "the neglected margin" in an effort to "free it from marginality" and "bring it to the forefront" (*Al-Bāb* 47; *Mamlakat* 211).

referring to several tragic events in Iraq's recent history that also unfolded in Bab al-Sharqi. More often, however, he does so by contrasting the neighborhood's central geographical location with the marginalized status of its inhabitants. His multifaceted portrayal of Bab al-Sharqi suggests that this neighborhood functions simultaneously as both a center and a margin, a claim that will be further developed below.

The first of the following sections is devoted to a brief description of the narrative structures of Al-Zaidi's two texts and an overview of some attempts by Iraqi scholars and the author himself to classify them. It thus touches on the issue of unclassified writings [*al-kitābāt ġayr al-mujannasa*]. This section also addresses the motives behind the narrator's journey through Bab al-Sharqi. In this manner, it sheds light on his idea of anthropological discovery as recorded in a literary text. The second section draws attention to how Al-Zaidi perceives this neighborhood and its dwellers and therefore highlights his fascination with the marginalized.

Both sections incorporate quotations from and references to several international scholars whose work has contributed to spatial criticism, including Michel de Certeau, Caroline Herbert, Kevin Hetherington, Kevin McNamara, Nedra Reynolds and, within the field of Arabic literary studies, Samira Aghacy. The first section also refers to the French philosopher Frédéric Gros, whose ideas in "A Philosophy of Walking" (English trans. 2014) are invoked by Al-Zaidi in both of his works. None of these references serves as the primary interpretive framework; rather, they help situate Al-Zaidi's observations within the broader scholarly discussion of urban space and the act of walking.

The second section draws on Foucault's notion of "heterotopia," as articulated in his seminal essay "Of Other Spaces." The choice of this theoretical framework is informed by Al-Zaidi's brief reference to philosophical conceptions of space and "heterotopic existence" in "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" (80).[1] Although the Iraqi author does not explicitly identify Bab al-Sharqi as a heterotopia, his literary vision of the neighborhood evokes associations with Foucault's "other spaces"—"counter-sites" in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 24). It is therefore useful to examine Al-Zaidi's portrayal of Bab al-Sharqi and its residents through the lens of the six Foucauldian principles of heterotopia.

Furthermore, the second section employs James C. Scott's concept of "the

1 Al-Zaidi also mentions the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia in "Abnāʾ al-makān. Fī maʿnā al-sukūn wa-al-ḥaraka" [Dwellers of Place. On the Meaning of Stillness and Movement] when reflecting on the functioning of the city and the market (53, 121-122).

hidden transcript," which offers a valuable framework for discussing the subculture specific to Bab al-Sharqi. As Scott contends, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). "The hidden transcript is […]," Scott explains, "the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse" (25). Scott contrasts the hidden transcript with "the public transcript," that is, "the open interaction between the subordinates and those who dominate" (2).

"Al-Bab al-Sharqi" and "The Kingdom of Laughter" as "Loose Narratives"

"Al-Bab al-Sharqi" opens with Al-Zaidi's dedication to the inhabitants of this neighborhood, other ordinary and marginalized Iraqis, and his readers, which brings to mind Michel de Certeau's dedication in his "The Practice of Everyday Life." Al-Zaidi's dedication is followed by an introduction in which the first-person narrator, indistinguishable from the author, explains the purpose of undertaking his walk from the neighborhood of Bab al-Mu'azzam to Bab al-Sharqi,[1] which he perceives as the main production site for jokes about the realities of Iraqi life (*Al-Bāb* 5-22). In the first part of the book, entitled "Visions of a Journey on Foot and Laughter until the Morning" [*Ruʾā riḥlat mashī wa-ḍiḥk li-al-ṣubḥ*] and consisting of ten chapters, the narrator describes different residents of Bab al-Sharqi, including selected individuals and certain collectives. He likewise discusses the phenomenon of the jokes they create, particularly a new type about the taboos of politics, religion and sex, referred to as *al-taḥshīsha al-ʿirāqiyya*. This is followed by a short theoretical passage concerning popular culture and its relationship to oppressive power (25-47). The narrator cites an elderly man called Rashīd, a local tailor who tells him about other neighborhood dwellers, and sometimes shares stories he had heard earlier from others. These stories revolve primarily around the social conditions of post-2003 Iraq in general and the current situation of Bab al-Sharqi in particular. They are interwoven, however, with other stories connected to the neighborhood's history, including various events that took place decades or even centuries ago. Last but not least, some chapters in the first part contain the narrator's observations on the act of walking, inspired by Frédéric Gros's reflections on people's relationships with familiar places (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 49-102).

The second part of this book, the title of which can be loosely translated as "Portraits of Life in Bab al-Sharqi" [*Alwāḥ min adab al-Bāb*], comprises ten chapters and alludes to events that took place in Bab al-Sharqi during the American-

1 The names of the neighborhoods refer to the names of non-existent city gates (al-Mu'azzam Gate and Eastern Gate) built in the Ottoman era.

led occupation and the 2006–2008 civil war when the neighborhood witnessed several terrorist attacks during the fighting between Sunni and Shia militias. The narrator points out how daily life in Bab al-Sharqi has changed over this period. In this context, he asks: "Who is at the center, and who is at the margin? […] The People or the place? The suicide bomber or the victim?" (161; cf. *Mamlakat* 175). Through his description of the types of illegal goods sold in the neighborhood's markets, he illustrates the relationship between the local economic situation and the local and global political situation over the last few decades. Some chapters focus on specific social groups or selected individuals, while others address certain places. In addition to the narrator's recounting of local jokes and the tailor Rashīd's stories, this part features surreal depictions of suicide attacks in the main squares and streets of Bab al-Sharqi. Strikingly, some of its passages are written in verse form, while others take the form of local radio coverage (*Al-Bāb* 103-202).

Contrary to the term used by Al-Zaidi in the subtitle of this work, it can hardly be called a typical novel. "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" is perceived in various ways by Iraqi scholars and the author himself. In an interview, Al-Zaidi assigned this text to "the literature of place" [*adab al-makān*] because a detailed description of places and characters prevails here over a depiction of events (al-ʿAtābī, "Kashf"; cf. al-Zaʿr 50-51). In her two 2016 and 2020 articles with the same title on postmodern Iraqi texts representing *adab al-makān*, including "Al-Bab al-Sharqi," Nadā Nāṣir Sharhān argues that these texts revolve around one "entire place" [*makān kullī*], usually a city, and contain biographies of "partial places" [*amkina juzʾiyya*], such as a street, a river, a neighborhood, or a café (Sharhān and al-Thāmirī 46, 49; Sharhān 142, 155). Such texts [*nuṣūṣ al-makān*] juxtapose two images of a place: its present "real" image at the time of writing, usually that of a declining city, and its past "idealized" image, generally an image created from the narrators' memories of their childhood and youth. These texts about places are characterized, according to Sharhān, by their reference to different genres, a combination of realistic and imaginary elements, with the former being predominant; employment of a retrospective narrative; and a close identification of the narrator with the author (Sharhān and al-Thāmirī 51-52; Sharhān 144-145; see also Maśko 218-220).

The critic, Samīr al-Khalīl proposes to classify "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" as a "novel of place" [*riwāyat al-makān*], a term that can also be translated as a "story of place," where the narrative does not follow a sequence of events, but instead moves from theme to theme, with each chapter dedicated to a different, specific theme. The narrator comments on the place and its dwellers without having access to the thoughts of the characters he describes. In addition, his narrative seems to be

disordered and digressive, recalling the works of al-Jāḥiẓ (776–869),[1] one of the most prominent authors of Arabic edifying and entertaining literature [*adab*].[2] As al-Khalīl further notes, Al-Zaidi's text thereby resembles a mosaic, with some of the stories told by the tailor Rashīd being reminiscent of *maqāmāt* by Badhīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (969–1007)[3] due to their employment of a form similar to the rhymed prose and the ironic style so typical of this Arabic prosimetric literary genre that originated in the tenth century ("Al-Iḥtifāʾ" 57-61; cf. al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 53-56).

The links between Al-Zaidi's postmodern narrative and the *maqāmāt* are likewise recognized by another Iraqi scholar, Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm ʿAbd, who suggests referring to "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" as a "picaresque novel" [*al-riwāya al-maqāmiyya*]. The commonalities between Al-Zaidi's work and these short stories about vagabonds traversing the Abbasid caliphate include the multiplicity of characters representing different members of diverse communities, especially the lower social strata and the social margins, some of whom are storytellers; a critical view of the economic, political and social conditions depicted; and the aforementioned ironic style and form resembling rhymed prose. Al-Zaidi's text, which also takes into account Baghdad's linguistic diversity (the Modern Standard Arabic used by the narrator is accompanied by some phrases in Iraqi dialects specific to the residents of Bab al-Sharqi from different ethnic and religious groups), thus combines a kind of documentary writing with intertextual references to classical Arabic literature (ʿAbd 36, 39-40).

The second work under consideration, "The Kingdom of Laughter," is also preceded by Al-Zaidi's dedication to disadvantaged Iraqis, particularly the inhabitants of the Bab al-Sharqi neighborhood, which he refers to as "the kingdom of laughter" [*mamlakat al-ḍiḥk*] and "the storehouse of hahaha" [*mustawdaʿ al-hahahā*]. In the introduction, the narrator, who is identical to the author, explicitly identifies his text as a "travel book" [*kitāb al-riḥla*] "where there is no clearly defined time" (al-Zaydī, *Mamlakat* 17). He likewise calls it a "loose narrative" [*al-sard al-sāʾib*] "that is like a dreamy, late-night fantasy of a drunkard who laughs when he can't remember his home address and can't find it" (21). In the first of the following 30 chapters, the narrator elaborates on jokes as a narrative phenomenon in which "a marginal character becomes a narrative protagonist within the joke" (56), while in the second he draws a map of his journey through "the kingdom of

1 On al-Jāḥiẓ see Richards 408-409.

2 On *adab* see Kilpatrick 54-56.

3 On *maqāma (p. maqāmāt)* see Drory 507-508. On Badhīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī see Rowson 123-124.

laughter" (23-28). In this and subsequent chapters, which are interspersed with many stories, dialogues, jokes and further comments on this phenomenon, the narrator presents the neighborhood and its inhabitants, places and objects. At times, he adds new stories to those from "Al-Bab al-Sharqi." Notably, he delves into the daily life of Bab al-Sharqi during the economic sanctions of the 1990s (29-207). In the last chapter, tellingly titled "Flawed Theorizing" [*Tanẓīr mutahāfit*], the narrator summarizes his findings on the culture of ironic humor prevalent among the population of the neighborhood and its relationship to popular culture (209-212). Compared to "Al-Bab al-Sharqi," Al-Zaidi's second work appears to have more in common with a scientific text. Nevertheless, it is also written in a literary and often metaphorical language.

Both the subtitle of "The Kingdom of Laughter" and the aforementioned words of its narrator seem to place Al-Zaidi's second book within the genre of travel literature [*adab al-riḥlāt*].[1] In his foreword to this work, Shākir Shāhīn calls the narrator a modern traveler roaming the streets of Baghdad in neighborhoods affected by war, terrorism, corruption and unemployment, and reflecting through a "productive narrative" [*al-sard al-muntij*] on the lives of their dwellers and the critique of Iraq's socio-political conditions expressed in their jokes (11-12). In an interview, Al-Zaidi did not deny that his work can be assigned to travel literature. He pointed out, however, that this text is more about an imaginary journey in real places, a rediscovery of the city within familiar boundaries (al-Mafrajī). It is worth mentioning that "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" was also characterized in an interview as a "legendary-real journey" [*riḥla usṭūwāqiʿiyya*] and a "new spatial-narrative phenomenon" [*ẓāhira makāniyya sardiyya jadīda*], another genre that "gave the place its magical dimension" ("Kūmīdiyā").

What then are the narrator's reasons behind his real and yet unreal journey through central Baghdad? Every day for many years, as he mentions in both works, he takes the same route from Bab al-Muʿazzam to the backstreets of Bab al-Sharqi that leads through such well-known sites as the Haydar-Khana Mosque, Al-Mutannabi Street and Al-Rashid Street, among others (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 61; *Mamlakat* 31-32). By strolling along his "habitual pathway," the narrator, therefore, uses his mental map, "a form of imagined geography" connected with his "space memory" (see Reynolds 82-84). He walks to experience pleasure it provides to all his senses, to overcome laziness, and to feel alive. For him, walking through familiar streets and squares is "an elementary form of this experience of the city" (de Certeau 93); it enables him to feel that he belongs to a certain place. In perceiving

1 On the classical Arabic *adab al-riḥlāt* see Bosworth 778-780.

this place, he perceives both its existence and his own. His act of walking thus takes on an existential dimension. In his view, walking is also an intellectual activity, as by performing mechanical movements, he practices "thought tourism" [*siyāḥat al-fikr*] (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 58-59, 61, 70; *Mamlakat* 32-34; cf. Gros 83, 140-144).

In addition, the narrator defines his strolling as "a walk of mobile imagination that depicts existence and time utilizing tales that have almost disappeared," "a walk of memory coming out of its shell to practice recovery exercises in the open air" (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 62; *Mamlakat* 33). On the one hand, the narrator seeks inspiration for his literary creativity in the neighborhood he regards as a storehouse of images that he grasps with his eye, processes and analyses. On the other hand, he is driven by the idea of preserving the memory of Bab al-Sharqi, alongside his own personal memories of this place. The narrator thereby has much in common with the figure of the *flâneur* who "gathers impressions" (Reynolds 70), "lays himself open to scattered visual impacts" (Gros 181), and "absorbs and renders the city through writing" (Reynolds 69; cf. Gros 175).

The narrator's desire to rediscover familiar places leads him from the main streets to the back alleys of Bab al-Sharqi, from more visible to hidden spaces. He wants to take a closer look at "what lies buried amid the place's refuse and beneath its surface" (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 68). In his whimsical journey through the neighborhood, the narrator wants to explore—like Christopher Columbus discovering new archipelagos—this mysterious, somewhat isolated world and the oppressed beings, with their loud jokes, who inhabit it. In this way, his journey likewise acquires an anthropological dimension. He becomes a researcher who examines what is frequently overlooked through an analytical lens. He aims to foreground what is usually relegated to the margins of a story, seeking both "to explore all that is marginal, secluded, and spectral at the heart of the center" and "to adopt the perspective of the margin that exists within the very core of the central and dominant" (68). He feels the need to investigate the place and its residents, including their social behavior, lifestyle, and distinctive culture, and to record his observations and impressions, thereby practicing "an impressionistic anthropology" [*anthrūbūlūjiyā inṭibāʿiyya*], albeit not in a theoretical or methodological manner. By doing so, he demonstrates that "marginalized people are now at the center of the story" (34; cf. *Mamlakat* 108).

The narrator is convinced that it is in places like Bab al-Sharqi that one can learn the most about the current condition of Iraqi society and what influences it. This neighborhood appears to him as a theatre reflecting what is happening throughout the country, not just in the capital (*Al-Bāb* 12-13, 21-22, 30-35, 75;

Mamlakat 34-35, 198). In this light it can be said that "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" and "The Kingdom of Laughter" pursue "the rhetoric of walking" distinctive of postcolonial literature in order "to bring into view the sometimes hidden stories of postcolonial urban modernity" (Herbert 203).

The Visible and the Hidden Spaces of Bab al-Sharqi

In his article dealing with Foucault's spatio-temporal concept of "heterotopia" and its different interpretations by scholars representing a variety of sciences, Peter Johnson explains that this term refers to "cultural, institutional or discursive spaces that are 'somehow' different: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, and transforming;" but also to localizable sites "which somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle or invert other spaces" (790). According to the third principle of Foucauldian heterotopia, such spaces are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). These general characteristics of heterotopia can be seen in Al-Zaidi's literary perception of the neighborhood of Bab al-Sharqi. This place differs from other neighborhoods in Baghdad and even other neighborhoods in Iraqi cities and towns. And yet, it brings together some of their specific features in an intensified way. With its geographical location and the layout of its streets, squares, parks, and markets, it transforms in the narrator's eyes into a complex space filled with people moving around (cf. de Certeau 117-118).

In the two works under discussion, the narrator "hypostatizes a real space into the symbolic realm of imaginary space relations" (Hetherington 38). He sees Bab al-Sharqi as a space that cannot be erased from the map of Baghdad and a "map of existence" [*kharīṭat al-wujūd*] because the boundaries of this neighborhood are symbolic (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 32-33, 44). He also perceives it as "a symbolic existence between two levels" [*wujūd ramzī bayna mustawayayn*]. The first level is its official surface, namely, what is visible to the eyes and what is captured in photographs as its most recognizable sites, objects, and monuments, such as Liberation Square, the Freedom Monument, the Nation Garden, Tayaran Square, the Saadoun Tunnel, the Turkish Restaurant, and the Armenian Cemetery. The second level is its invisible bottom, represented by secret alleys and other places where the marginalized congregate and street stalls with illegal goods that can be quickly rolled up. This level embodies what is rebellious against the prevailing socio-economic system (*Al-Bāb* 98-99, 141-144, 146, 157; *Mamlakat* 145-146).

The surface space of Bab al-Sharqi is thus located in the very center of Baghdad and embraces iconic Iraqi sites, such as Liberation Square and the Nation

Garden. Both these sites and other sites in the neighborhood seem to change their functions, which may be viewed as reflecting Foucault's second principle of heterotopia, according to which "an other space" can serve different functions (25). During the day, it is Liberation Square and the Nation Garden that constitute both the actual and symbolic center of the city, attracting locals and the inhabitants of other districts, including drunks, thieves, the elderly, and invalids. However, it is Tayaran Square that becomes the center of the capital after dark as a bustling gathering place for entertainment-seekers, "the spirits of the night" [*al-arwāḥ al-layliyya*], visitors from other cities and towns, and day laborers waiting to set off from there at dawn. Moreover, in the imagination of the strolling narrator, several places in the neighborhood metamorphose into other, unreal spaces:

> From al-Jumhuriya Street (al-Khilani Square) and before entering the [Saadoun] tunnel, you can find the intestines of Bab al-Sharqi, stretching and elongating on the pavements and under the shade of high buildings. The pavement turns into a body, while the street becomes a margin for chaos and bustle. The pavement is the master that distributes livelihoods. "Green squares" are, on their part, homes for shanty dwellers and the spaces left for the dinosaurs of new streets become "community generators" (*Al-Bāb* 84; *Mamlakat* 133).

In this manner, the narrator "animates the city's mineral landscape through the alchemy of organic metaphors," to cite Kevin McNamara (12), or more precisely, to use Samira Aghacy's words, in his depiction, "objects in space and the human body intersect to produce a synergetic bond, an isomorphic relation between body and city" (20).

This visible space is open to people from other neighborhoods of the city and other parts of the country, who stream into it, especially at weekends, to shop at the local markets and stroll around. By participating in "a random popular festival" [*mihrajān shaʿbī ʿashwāʾī*] (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 76), they enter "a new space of consumption and pleasure" and hence "a space of transgression and freedom" (Hetherington 39-41). Visitors in brown suits and various local and regional clothes walk along the main streets, where most hotels are located, and enter their restaurants and cafés. They usually bypass the back alleys of this bustling space and therefore don't discover all of its secrets. They do not realize, however, that even while strolling through the visible, central streets of Bab al-Sharqi, they are already crossing the threshold of "the neighborhood's hell" [*jahīm al-Bāb*] and the underworld that begins somewhere in the side streets, as they are unknowingly

exposed to being scammed by vendors or having their wallets stolen (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 93). The following joke, one of many woven throughout Al-Zaidi's two narratives and varying in their degree of absurdity, points to the neighborhood's reputation as a place associated with scams and deception:

> An old joke: A client in Bab al-Sharqi bought a new watch, but it stopped working when he arrived home. When he opened it, he discovered that a louse that kept the watch running had fallen into the gears and died. The hands of the watch stopped moving… The joke was so old that it had exhausted all bursts of laughter (33-34; *Mamlakat* 199-200).

Some of the visitors, being aware of this underworld, wish to take advantage of the illicit pleasures of the hidden face of Bab al-Sharqi that attracts them like a magnet and appears to them as an earthly paradise. These customers from the main streets are brought to this dark zone by secret guides who find them in the crowd (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 76, 93-94; *Mamlakat* 138, 189-191). Their clandestine crossing of the blurred boundaries between the two spaces resonates with Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopia, according to which "the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place" and demands that the person who enters it "submit to rites and purifications" (Foucault 26).

The hidden space of Bab al-Sharqi, which, as a heterotopia, serves as "a space of illusion that exposes every real space" (Foucault 27), functions, as the narrator suggests, as a separate kingdom, state, or republic, in the sense that what is forbidden elsewhere in Iraq is allowed here. All Iraqis have heard of this marginal space, but, still, its details are unknown to outsiders (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 14, 20-21, 41-43). The kingdom of Bab al-Sharqi—which in light of Nadā Nāṣir Sharhān's theory can be perceived as an "entire place" [*makān kullī*]—consists of numerous smaller places and spaces, or "partial places" [*amkina juzʾiyya*]. These include alleyways off the main streets and squares where second-hand clothes, military clothing, electronics, and potency pills are sold. There are likewise labyrinths of covered shopping corridors where a variety of illegal items can be bought, including pornographic films, gadgets, and drugs. One can find cinemas screening adult films and rooms where CDs with music, movies, and even those showing terrorist attacks are illegally copied. Secret corridors allow insiders to escape from the neighborhood in the event of a police raid. Two cafés, on their part, are headquarters for thieves. With their pictures of religious personalities and press photos of athletes on the walls, these cafés become for the narrator an exemplification of those spaces where

the secret world and the overt world intersect (*Al-Bāb* 128-131; *Mamlakat* 14-17, 37-40, 47-49, 65-68, 149-156). Viewed through the lens of the first Foucauldian principle, the hidden kingdom of Bab al-Sharqi may thus be regarded as a "heterotopia of deviation," that is, a space "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 25).

Furthermore, the kingdom's landscape is formed by tenth-class hotels, houses abandoned by their Christian owners during the 2006–2008 civil war, and a mixture of scattered and closely packed buildings, which the narrator refers to as "the hidden abodes of silence" [*manāzil al-ṣamt al-khalfiyya*]. Interestingly, he describes them from the vantage point of their rooftops, where laundry hangs from clotheslines. He attempts to grasp the new meaning of these clotheslines, viewing them as "a place where one may perceive their enigmatic nature as spatial entities" (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 179). Seen in this light, the clotheslines reveal to him details about the buildings' inhabitants, including their gender, age, occupation, and physique (175-183), as illustrated in the following example: "dark-colored trousers and a white formal shirt appear to belong to an elderly employee […]; a dark blue shirt, apparently belonging to an overweight traffic police officer" (180). In addition, the clotheslines reveal which of these buildings is a brothel inhabited by women who have come from different areas of Iraq, each with her own tragic story (*Mamlakat* 69-74). The simple, empathetic imagery in the following passage sharply contrasts these women's socially stigmatized lives within the house with the anonymity they preserve behind Muslim veils in the neighborhood streets:

> The clothesline lays bare the secrets of the women living downstairs. While the house and its veil prevent one from knowing the details of the beds within, the clothesline exposes them with affection and spontaneity: a sheer white undergarment, colorful bras, a blue short-sleeved garment, a black hijab, and another black abaya (71-72).

Moreover, this hidden kingdom is a space "in which an alternative social ordering is performed" (Hetherington 51), an "'other site' with its own codes and relations of power" (Aghacy 19). On the one hand, the inhabitants of Bab al-Sharqi live together in peace, according to the narrator, despite their different ethnic, religious, and political affiliations, alongside the many dialects they speak. In this fashion, the neighborhood appears to be an ideal microcosm of Iraqi society, in principle strongly divided along these particular lines in recent decades. This strange peaceful coexistence in the local community seems to result from the fact that

all of its members are somewhat marginalized. The narrator uses the term "the passers-by" [*al-ʿābirūn*] to describe all those residents who experienced Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and have witnessed the post-2003 political transition.[1] Some of them were able to find their way in the new "democratic" reality and survive the tumultuous social and economic changes, but many of them have remained unemployed (al-Zaydī, *Al-Bāb* 134).

This diverse community of *al-ʿābirūn* comprises individuals and representatives of groups portrayed by the narrator in considerable detail because "you can't get to know this place without them" (77). Among these individuals are the tailor Rashīd, mentioned above, and a seller of old radio sets, ʿAbbās al-Rāwandī, who spends his life in silence in a back alley like a Sufi, being an archive of the oral history of Bab al-Sharqi. Then there is a seller of porn films in a covered alley and a blind beggar who has stood for hours every day for 20 years near the Nation Garden. A Sudanese watch vendor, in turn, is a representative of the many economic migrants from North Africa, "the sons of the Nile" [*abnāʾ al-Nīl*], from the 1980s, who have stayed in Iraq despite sweeping political transformations. Residing in the neighboring Bataween [al-Battāwīn] district, this patient Sudanese used to sell bags, pens, and watches near the Nation Garden. In the narrator's eyes, he has become an essential part of the social fabric in Bab al-Sharqi, appearing like a "moving tree" [*shajara mutaḥarrika*] in the neighborhood's cityscape (*Al-Bāb* 65-67, 165-173, 196-202; *Mamlakat* 109-118, 181-187).

Likewise, the kingdom of Bab al-Sharqi "is riotously quarrelling with the central authority, which is as far as the width of the [Tigris] river and the Republic Bridge from the days of the [Hashemite] monarchy" (*Mamlakat* 21).[2] It seems to be governed by a secret mafia that controls the influx of prohibited goods to its markets. The most recognizable members of this underworld are thieves who, under the leadership of a man called Abū Aqrab, form an organized community with their own rules, professional ethics, a division between the mentors and apprentices, and their permanent premises in the two cafés mentioned above. This community is constantly fed by unemployed individuals, and the profession of thief is often hereditary, as fathers apprentice their sons into it. These thieves fall into different categories, including the poor who steal wallets by day from the pockets of passers-

1 The narrator makes a direct allusion to the term *al-mukhaḍramūn* which refers to people who lived in the Arabian Peninsula at the turn of pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. In Arabic literature, this notion relates to the generation of poets between "pagan poets" and "Islamic poets". For more see Jacobi 548.

2 This is the so-called Green Zone [al-Minṭaqa al-Khaḍrāʾ].

by on busy streets, and those who only steal at night, seeing this as a sign of bravery and courage, while considering daytime pickpockets to be cowards who steal to survive. There are also various types of assistant thieves, some of whom distract those being robbed while others sell stolen wallets (*Al-Bāb* 125-127, 133-139; *Mamlakat* 157-163). This anthropological classification of the thieves' community, which ultimately takes the form of a witty and ironic glossary of thieves' jargon, complete with occupational designations and technical terms, is exemplified in the following passage:

> Al-Ḥaṣṣās ["the Share-Taker"]: an amateur thief who stages a performance in front of the customer, pretending to engage in a fistfight with another thief. When the unsuspecting customer intervenes to break up the fight, they "deflower" his wallet through a maneuver combining acrobatics and remarkable dexterity. Al-Ḥaṣṣās receives a quarter of the proceeds (*Al-Bāb* 137; cf. *Mamlakat* 162).

Many of Bab al-Sharqi's marginalized inhabitants make up "the group of laughers" [*firqat al-ḍāḥikīn*], who, in the narrator's view, form a kind of school of "experts in dark-comedy narrative techniques" (*Al-Bāb* 16). Their jokes, defined by him as "completely unreasonable discourse" [*khiṭāb ġayr ʿaqlānī tamāman*] (25), embody a distinct aesthetic that is vulgar, "immodest, stripped of gloves, hijab, and abaya" (25), and deeply rooted in shared historical experience. Their collective laughter, "a local ritual" [*ṭaqs maḥallī*] (12), stems from the fact that they have lived under chronic stress for many decades as a result of Iraq's turbulent history. The following joke, recounted by the narrator, explicitly alludes to the hellish living conditions in their country:

> It is said that an Iraqi and an Englishman entered hell together. When the Englishman called his family, the call cost him one thousand pounds, whereas the Iraqi paid only one cent. The reason was that for the Iraqi it was a local call, while for the Englishman it was an international call, hahaha (15).

Somewhat paradoxically, the narrator precedes some of the jokes he quotes with the expression "laughter for no reason" [*al-ḍiḥk bilā sabab*], although laughter has become "a ritualized daily necessity" [*ḍarūra yawmiyya ṭaqsiyya*] (10) that enables people to cope with the harsh reality that makes them want to cry and laugh at the same time. In other words, joking and laughter relieve "the group of laughers" of

the tragedies of daily life, while also functioning as a means of communicating the latest news from the country. But, above all, joking and laughter provide a basic form of revenge against any authority, for these oppressed individuals have enormous power as co-creators of ironic jokes about taboos (*Al-Bāb* 11-15, 26-30, 77; *Mamlakat* 51-60, 195-196, 209-211). The narrator depicts this form of power, manifested in witty, inventive, widely circulated, and ribald jokes, in the following hyperbolic, grotesque, and humorous terms:

> The tongue of a Bab al-Sharqi native is sharp. His head is a black box, his mouth a wide-throated megaphone. Together, they fire off jokes that are at times offensive to Baghdad's fading sense of propriety […] so indecent that they could never find their way into the vocabulary of people from respectable households and communities beyond Bab al-Sharqi (*Al-Bāb* 27; *Mamlakat* 105).

With reference to James C. Scott's concept of "the hidden transcript," it can be argued that the jokes created by "the group of laughers," as part of a subordinate discourse operating "beyond direct observation of powerholders" (4), function as vehicles of "disguised ideological insubordination" (xiii). Their subversive power lies in the oral and anonymous nature of their transmission, which makes it difficult for the authorities to identify a single author (19, 25, 137, 142, 160, 161). That is to say, the collective laughter of *firqat al-ḍāḥikīn*, understood as an act of socio-political resistance (cf. Hetherington 53), contributes to the heterotopic character of Bab al-Sharqi. This marginal space turns into a center since it serves as "a compass of the psychological condition of Baghdad's society" (al-Zaydī, *Mamlakat* 211). For their part, the inhabitants of the neighborhood are "the nerve of popular culture" [*ʿaṣab al-thaqāfa al-šaʿbiyya*] (*Al-Bāb* 27) that produces not only jokes but also counterfeit consumer goods and even its own music, distributed to other neighborhoods in the capital and other Iraqi cities. As a result, Bab al-Sharqi and its residents, particularly those from "the hidden kingdom," create a counterculture, an alternative to the official socio-political discourse, that influences contemporary Iraqi identity. The narrator's literary-anthropological analysis of this culture of laughter corresponds closely to Scott's concept, according to which "The hidden transcript of subordinated groups […] reacts back on the public transcript by engendering a subculture and by opposing its own variant form of social domination against that of the dominant elite" (27).

What makes Bab al-Sharqi "an other space" from the perspective of the

walking narrator, is also a distinct sense of time that prevails in this neighborhood. According to him, this unique space allows for the overlapping of different times. "The eye of the place is not the mirror of memory, it is a camera that captures history," he writes (72). This overlapping of times manifests itself through symbolic sites and monuments like the Nation Garden and the Freedom Monument, which witnessed important political events, such as the celebration of the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic in 1958, but also the presence of American tanks in 2003. In addition, this intermingling of times materializes through objects from different historical eras, documents and documentaries sold in markets and side alleys, and on the pavements of the main streets of Bab al-Sharqi, alongside images hanging on the walls of shops in the mazes of back streets. These objects include Ottoman-era artefacts from the early twentieth century, photos of King Faisal from the 1920s and 1930s, and photos of Abdul-Karim Qasim, the leader of the 1958 republic, among other Iraqi leaders from the previous century (*Al-Bāb* 17-18, 42-44, 71-72, 97, 99, 119-120; *Mamlakat* 203-207). As a space "accumulating time" and morphing into "a sort of general archive," Bab al-Sharqi can be viewed, in light of the fourth Foucauldian principle of heterotopia, as "an other space" "linked to [particular] slices in time," or what Foucault terms "heterochronies" (26).

Conclusion

"Al-Bab al-Sharqi" and "The Kingdom of Laughter" exemplify Khudair Falih al-Zaidi's consistently pursued long-term literary-cultural project, which resonates with prevailing postmodern and postcolonial trends. This project is an anthropological description of Iraqi social reality in which the author's reflections, inspired by various theories that emerged in the humanities and social sciences, are combined with real-life stories. Unlike the now-classic theories of ʿAlī al-Wardī and Jamāl Ḥamdān, which were primarily concerned with defining the social character of Iraqis and Egyptians, respectively, approaches developed by Western scholars such as Michel Foucault have enabled Al-Zaidi to analyze more recent social phenomena, including specific subcultures or what the author himself refers to as "the covert cultural discourse of oppressed communities" and "the uneasy relationship between popular culture, its flourishing, and repressive power" (*Al-Bāb* 45; *Mamlakat* 209-210).

In terms of their experimental and mosaic forms, the two works under consideration demonstrate Al-Zaidi's distinctive tendency to create *al-nuṣūṣ ġayr al-mujannasa*—hybrids that do not fully belong to any particular genre. Thus

far, several attempts have been made to describe these works as various forms of novels, texts about places, and travel literature, among which their classification within *adab al-makān* seems the most convincing. This is because the author's multidimensional depiction of Bab al-Sharqi as an "entire place" [*makān kullī*] and its multiple "partial places" [*amkina juzʾiyya*], together with the lives and stories of their inhabitants, occupies a central position in both narratives, while the plot remains largely secondary. Nonetheless, "Al-Bab al-Sharqi" and "The Kingdom of Laughter" differ from other Iraqi works classified as "texts about places" [*nuṣūṣ al-makān*] in that they do not contain autobiographical recollections of the author's childhood and youth, nor do they construct an idealized image of the city's past. Consequently, they do not intertwine personal past experiences and the city's contemporary history as closely as other *nuṣūṣ al-makān* do (cf. Maśko 222-235). Instead, they foreground the author's present-day observations of Baghdad's central neighborhood and his lived experience of urban space, while also recalling selected events from the capital's past.

For Al-Zaidi, it is especially significant that such hybrid texts are better suited to anthropological analysis than works belonging to traditional literary genres. Rather than portraying the life stories of individual characters and exploring their inner worlds and emotions, these texts present selected individuals as embodiments of particular communities inhabiting Bab al-Sharqi, highlighting their lifestyles, customs, social structures, and collective identities. This is most clearly reflected in the collective portrait of the thieves' community, as well as in those of the groups referred to as "the sons of the Nile" [*abnāʾ al-Nīl*], "the passers-by" [*al-ʿābirūn*], and "the group of laughers" [*firqat al-ḍāḥikīn*].

"Al-Bab al-Sharqi" and "The Kingdom of Laughter" show Al-Zaidi's fascination with what is ordinary and at the same time extraordinary, a fascination which manifests itself in his meticulous depiction of places and objects that seem to escape the attention of other Iraqi writers. In Al-Zaidi's works, even second-hand clothes and clotheslines can tell their own stories and the stories of those who use them. Moreover, these two works reveal Al-Zaidi's need to recount the stories of people from different social backgrounds, particularly members of marginalized groups, who often appear to be merely supporting characters in the works of other authors. Al-Zaidi walks through the streets of Baghdad and listens to their stories to write them down in the belief that these people form the core of Iraq's social fabric, although he also realizes that they are unlikely to be the ones reading his texts (*Mamlakat* 5). In his narratives devoted to their daily lives and surroundings, the author adopts an empathetic approach, employing humor and irony, the

colloquial language of jokes, metaphorical imagery, and a discourse resembling anthropological inquiry.

Through his narrative of Bab al-Sharqi and its inhabitants, Al-Zaidi engages in postmodern and postcolonial reflection on the notions center and margin and points out the relativity of this dualistic pairing. Located in the geographical center of Baghdad, the neighborhood contains sites and monuments of great historical, cultural and symbolic importance to Iraqis, yet its hidden backstreets are the dwelling place of the social margins. Nevertheless, through the production and distribution of jokes and other desirable material goods, these marginal places in Bab al-Sharqi and their residents play a crucial role in the formation of Iraqi popular culture and the contemporary identity of Iraqis, and even their counterculture, and in this sense become the center of both the capital and the country. They are "a different yet true face of the whole country" (al-Zaydī, *Mamlakat* 212).

These words bring to mind Foucault's consideration of the mirror in "Of Other Spaces." The French philosopher saw it as a "virtual space […] on the other side of the glass" that allows the beholder to "come back toward himself and to reconstitute himself there where he is" (Foucault 24). In this light, the neighborhood of Bab al-Sharqi can be conceived of as an Iraqi "other space," a heterotopia that "contains both the central and the 'marginal' in ways that unsettle social and spatial relations" (Hetherington 38). Moreover, this central and simultaneously marginal space is transformed in Al-Zaidi's literary vision into a unique space with blurred boundaries in which the real and the unreal, the visible and the hidden, intermingle.

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Time Spatialized: Place-Making in *Cairo Maquette*

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Abstract In *Cairo Maquette* (2022), Tareq Imam reconstructs Cairo through a series of nested maquettes that transform historical time into spatial form. This article examines how the novel spatializes time by combining Meg Mundell's Place-Oriented Experiential Techniques (POET) model with Lawrence Grossberg's concepts of "spacing time" and "spatial becoming." Using a qualitative single-case design that integrates close textual analysis with a corpus of public interviews with Imam, the study analyzes seven place-making categories: retrospection, immersion, collaboration, vicariousness, nebulousness, Distributed Temporality, and Space-Performativity. The first five categories are drawn from POET, while the latter two are proposed as provisional analytical extensions developed to address the novel's spatial organization of temporal relations and suggested for similar narratives in which temporal relations are organized spatially. The analysis shows that *Cairo Maquette* constructs Cairo as a layered urban environment where memory, artistic practice, political history, and speculative futures intersect through nested temporal spaces, cross-temporal objects, and acts of spatial reconstruction. Interview evidence contextualizes Imam's reflections on Cairo and the 2011 Revolution (the January 2011 uprising of the Egyptian youth), while close reading demonstrates how the novel converts chronology into spatial relations. The study argues that extending POET through Grossberg helps clarify the novel's spatial-temporal logic.

Keywords *Cairo Maquette*; place-making; spatialized time; POET model; Lawrence Grossberg.

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Introduction

Stories do not merely occur in places; they help make places imaginatively, affectively, and narratively. Literary place-making involves more than the description of setting or the reproduction of recognizable locations; it concerns the ways fiction constructs a "sense of place" through memory, bodily experience, emotion, cultural knowledge, and narrative form (Ball 242; Mundell 1). Yet narrative theory has often privileged temporal sequence over spatial organization, treating space as scene, container, or descriptive background rather than as an active element in the production of meaning. As Susan Stanford Friedman argues, narrative poetics has historically granted greater analytical importance to chronology, sequence, and temporal movement than to the spatial structures through which stories become intelligible (192-94, 203).

The spatial turn in cultural and literary studies has helped correct this imbalance by showing that space is not passive or merely representational. Spatial poetics, from Bachelard's account of the imaginative and affective power of inhabited spaces to more recent approaches to literary place, emphasizes that places are experienced, remembered, fragmented, and reassembled through narrative (Bachelard xxxviii, 4). "A literary approach to place," Vincent Gélinas-Lemaire affirms, "helps us conceive of a place's fragmented nature, these fragments appearing in a unique sequence and pace throughout the narrative, folding back the temporal into the spatial" (460). Such approaches are especially useful for fiction in which place is not simply a backdrop for events but a force that shapes character, identity, memory, and political experience. They are also important for works in which space and time are not separable narrative dimensions, but mutually constitutive forms.

Recently, scholars started to see how spatial and temporal dimensions in literature interplay to shape narratives, influence character development, and reflect broader socio-political contexts. Friedman analyzes Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) by highlighting how the novel prioritizes spatial elements over chronological sequencing in its narrative structure. Shabani and Hamiti explore the interplay between literary time and space in Ezra Pound's poetry. Kearns explores the significance of space in James Joyce's works, particularly in relation to Irish identity. Crang explores the relationship between spatial politics and textual representation in the works of Jane Austen and James Joyce, focusing on how their narratives create distinct senses of identity and place. More empirically, Faichney explains how she established a sense of place in her writing by using generative

techniques based on lived sensations, emotions, and memories. She conducted immersive site visits to significant locations, gathering sensory experiences that shaped her narrative. She also used retrospective techniques to incorporate memories from her research trips, enhancing the authenticity of the settings.

Meg Mundell's Place-Oriented Experiential Techniques model, or POET, offers a valuable framework for analyzing how writers generate literary sense of place. Drawing on interview data, creative works, and theories of place and creativity, Mundell identifies five interrelated techniques: retrospection, immersion, collaboration, vicariousness, and nebulousness (2, 9-11). These techniques explain how place may emerge from autobiographical memory, direct site experience, shared cultural knowledge, empathic perspective-taking, and elusive or intuitive processes of creativity. POET is therefore particularly useful for tracing the experiential resources through which literary places are made. She represents the model, its five components, and the dynamic relationship among them in Fig. 1:

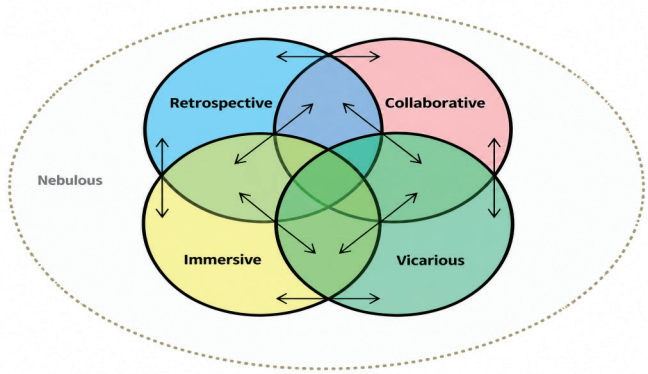


Fig. 1 The POET Model, (Source: Mundell 10)

Each mode interacts dynamically, suggesting that the creative process is not linear but a fluid exchange where insights from one mode can enhance and inform the others. This interplay fosters a richer literary sense of place as writers draw from diverse experiences and emotions, creating a cumulative effect that resonates deeply with readers. Mundell used the model to analyze a collection of short stories by the Australian writer Tony Birch (2-9).

However, in a novel like Tareq Imam's *Cairo Maquette* (2022) that reconstructs Cairo through a series of nested maquettes, an examination of how the novel spatializes time requires an additional theoretical step. The novel does not only create a sense of Cairo as place; it repeatedly turns time into spatial form. Its

narrative is organized around maquettes that materialize different temporal moments and allow them to overlap, contain one another, and act upon one another. In this structure, past, present, and future are not arranged primarily as a chronological sequence but as spatial relations. POET helps explain how Cairo is imaginatively and experientially produced, but it does not by itself fully account for a narrative in which time is spatialized through nested models, displaced objects, repeated scenes, and cross-temporal encounters. This is where Lawrence Grossberg's concepts of "spacing time" and "spatial becoming" become useful. Grossberg challenges linear models of temporality by arguing that historical events and identities emerge through spatial relations, social forces, and contextual configurations rather than through time alone ("Space" 177, 180). His account of the "becoming of space" further suggests that space is not a fixed container, but an active process continually produced through practices, relations, and events ("Theorising" 34). Read alongside POET, Grossberg's work makes it possible to ask not only how fiction makes place, but also how fiction reorganizes time as place. Therefore, this article proposes a limited and exploratory extension of POET through a single-case study of *Cairo Maquette* introducing two provisional analytical categories: Distributed Temporality and Space-Performativity.

Cairo Maquette is an especially appropriate case because it imagines Cairo through a sequence of interrelated maquettes representing different temporal moments, especially 2011, 2020, and 2045. The maquette is not simply an object within the plot; it is the formal principle through which the novel reorders narrative time. Characters do not merely remember Cairo's past; they encounter past and future as spatially modeled, scaled, repeated, and inhabited forms. In this way, the novel transforms the city into a layered structure of memory, artistic practice, political history, and speculative futurity. The article asks: how does *Cairo Maquette* produce a literary sense of place through the experiential techniques described by POET, and how does its maquette structure require an account of time as spatially distributed and performed? To answer this question, the study combines close textual analysis of *Cairo Maquette* with selected public media interviews in which Imam discusses the novel's composition, Cairo, artistic practice, and the relationship between the city and its inhabitants. The purpose is to demonstrate how this narrative exposes a productive limit in POET and suggests one way of extending place-making analysis for fiction that spatializes time.

From POET to Spatialized Time: Deriving the Two Additional Categories

Mundell's POET model provides the starting point for this study because it

treats literary place-making as a generative and experiential process rather than as the mere representation of setting. Its five modes: retrospection, immersion, collaboration, vicariousness, and nebulousness, explain how a writer may produce literary sense of place through memory, embodied encounter, shared cultural knowledge, empathic projection, and elusive or intuitive forms of creativity (Mundell 2, 9-11). POET is especially useful for analyzing how place is imaginatively made from experiential materials. It accounts for the resources through which a literary place acquires affective density, sensory force, and cultural resonance. The limitation addressed is that *Cairo Maquette* presents a particular kind of narrative problem. The novel does not only construct Cairo as an experienced, remembered, or imagined place; it also turns different moments of time into spatially arranged forms. Its maquettes materialize temporal moments, nest them inside one another, and allow objects, memories, and characters to move across apparently separate temporal levels. In such a narrative, time is not simply the background sequence through which place is remembered or represented. Rather, time itself becomes spatially distributed, modeled, entered, viewed, and performed. POET can explain many of the experiential sources of the novel's place-making, but an additional conceptual vocabulary is needed to describe how the novel spatializes temporality itself.

Grossberg's concepts of "spacing time" and "spatial becoming" provide that conceptual bridge. His account of "spacing time" challenges the assumption that history should be understood primarily as linear succession; instead, events and identities emerge through spatial relations, contextual forces, and situated arrangements ("Space" 180). His notion of "spatial becoming" likewise treats space not as a fixed container but as a process continually produced through social practices, relations, and events ("Space" 177; "Theorising" 34). Read alongside POET, Grossberg's work shifts the analysis from how place is evoked to how spatial relations reorganize time and how acts performed in space produce new temporal meanings. From this theoretical junction, the first additional category proposed here is Distributed Temporality. The term refers to the spatial distribution of different temporal moments so that past, present, and future are no longer organized only as sequence but also as co-present spatial relations. In analytical terms, Distributed Temporality can be identified when a narrative locates different historical moments in distinct but interacting spaces; when temporal levels are nested, scaled, or layered; when objects or signs move across temporal boundaries; or when characters perceive one another across spaces that belong to different times. In *Cairo Maquette*, this category is useful because the maquette form allows 2011,

2020, and 2045 to function not merely as successive dates but as spatially arranged and mutually affecting narrative zones. The second additional category is Space-Performativity. This term derives from Grossberg's emphasis on spatial becoming and names the process by which space is not only represented but actively produced through practices, gestures, artistic forms, and acts of interpretation. If Distributed Temporality explains how time is arranged spatially, Space-Performativity explains how space becomes meaningful through acts such as building, filming, drawing, scaling, entering, viewing, naming, remembering, and reconstructing. In analytical terms, this category can be identified when a narrative shows space being made or remade through performance, artistic production, embodied movement, or social interaction. In *Cairo Maquette*, the construction of maquettes, the filming of Cairo, the visual scaling of the city, and the characters' repeated acts of entering and interpreting spatial models all show that space is not a passive setting but an active process through which temporal experience is generated.

These two categories are offered as provisional analytical extensions developed for the specific demands of *Cairo Maquette*, a novel in which place-making depends upon the spatial organization of time. The purpose of adding them is to make visible a dimension of the novel that POET helps approach but does not fully name: the transformation of temporality into spatial form. Through the broader framework of distributed temporality, creative writers reconstruct historical moments recalled through retrospective, immersive, collaborative, vicarious, and nebulous modes. This process creates a place that reflects not the actual place but how it is experienced in memory. Incorporating a temporal layer for spacing time into the place-making model POET is illustrated in Fig. 2 as an adaptation by the author:

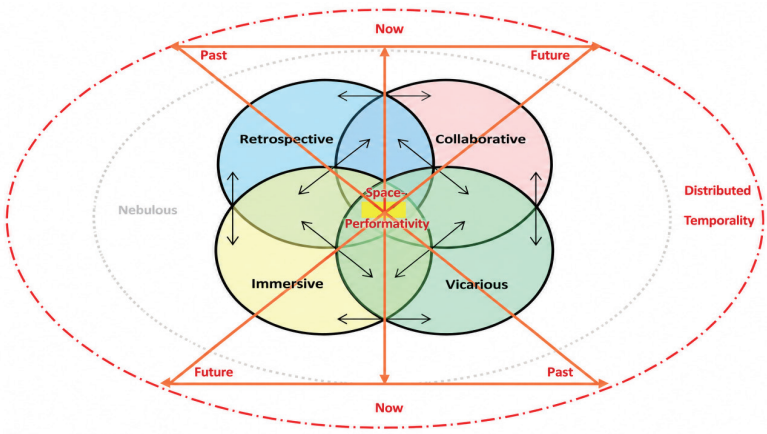


Fig. 2. A provisional spacing-time adaptation of POET, (Source: Author's adaptation)

The arrows and lines in fig. 2 emphasize its non-linear nature, illustrating how different experiences and memories interact and influence one another within the narrative.

Methodology: Interview Corpus and Textual Analysis

This article uses a qualitative single-case design that combines close textual analysis of Imam's *Cairo Maquette* with selected public media interviews in which Imam discusses the novel, Cairo, artistic practice, memory, and the relation between the city and its inhabitants. The study is "mixed" in the limited sense that it brings together two qualitative sources of evidence: the literary text itself and interview material concerning the author's creative process. It uses *Cairo Maquette* as a focused case through which to test a provisional extension of Mundell's POET model through Grossberg's concepts of spacing time and spatial becoming.

The primary corpus is Imam's *Cairo Maquette* in Arabic. The analysis focuses on the novel's maquette structure, its treatment of Cairo across different temporal moments, and its representation of memory, artistic production, bodily experience, and urban space. The secondary corpus consists of nine publicly available interviews and media appearances with Imam published between 2022 and 2023 when the novel was nominated for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF)[1]: the IPAF Longlist Interview ("Longlist Interview"), the IPAF Shortlist Interview ("Shortlisted Author"), the IPAF *YouTube* Video ("Cairo Maquette"), and interviews or conversations published by *Almanassa* ("Behind the Scenes"), *The National* ("Polymorphous Identity"), *Shorouk* ("Mystery of People"), *Alkalimah* ("Experimentation"), *France 24* ("Strange People"), and *Sardyat* ("Sardyat Interview). These sources were selected because they directly address *Cairo Maquette*, its composition, its urban imagination, its artistic characters, and Imam's reflections on Cairo, the 2011 Revolution (the January 2011 uprising of the Egyptian youth), and the relationship between reality and imagination. In these interviews, Imam elaborates on the intricate relationship between the city's physical spaces and the personal identities of its inhabitants. He describes how his daily interactions with Cairo's spaces influenced the creation of the maquettes in the novel, essentially making the city an active participant in the narrative. They reveal how Imam's personal experiences, historical knowledge, and emotional connections to Cairo informed the novel's structure and themes. Unless otherwise indicated, translations

1 The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) is one of the most prestigious literary awards in the Arab world. Established in 2007, it is commonly known as the "Arabic Booker." The prize seeks to honor excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing.

from Arabic are mine.

The categories presented in Table 1 function as the study's primary analytical framework and guide both the examination of the interview corpus and the close reading of the novel. The framework enables the identification of recurring place-making patterns across different forms of evidence. The first five categories: Retrospection, Immersion, Collaboration, Vicariousness, and Nebulousness, are adapted from Mundell's POET model and are used to trace the experiential, affective, and cultural processes through which literary place is constructed. These categories provide a structured means of examining how memories, sensory encounters, shared cultural knowledge, empathic identification, and imaginative or uncanny elements contribute to the representation of Cairo in the novel. The final two categories: Distributed Temporality and Space-Performativity, are treated as provisional analytical extensions derived from Grossberg's concepts of "spacing time" and "spatial becoming." They were developed specifically to address aspects of *Cairo Maquette* that are not fully captured by the original POET model, particularly the novel's transformation of temporal relations into spatial configurations. During analysis, the framework was applied deductively to both the interview corpus and the novel. Interview statements were coded according to the category most closely associated with the author's reflections on place-making, while textual passages were examined for narrative patterns corresponding to the same categories. This procedure allowed for a systematic comparison between authorial reflections and textual practice while maintaining the primacy of close reading in the interpretation of the novel.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the interview corpus was reviewed for statements concerning place, memory, urban experience, artistic practice, Cairo, the maquette device, fantasy, and the 2011 Revolution. These statements were then grouped according to the seven analytical categories used in this study. The coding was deductive and theory-led: the seven categories provided the initial analytical frame, while close reading determined which textual passages could support each category. Second, the novel was close-read for formal and thematic patterns corresponding to these categories. Retrospection was traced through scenes in which personal and historical memory shape the representation of Cairo. Immersion was examined through sensory and embodied encounters with the city. Collaboration was identified in references to shared cultural knowledge, artistic traditions, urban history, and intertextual or interpersonal sources. Vicariousness was analyzed through acts of perspective-taking and emotional identification. Nebulousness was traced through uncanny, intuitive, dreamlike, or ghostly elements

Table 1: A Provisional Analytical Heuristic for Spatialized Place-Making in Cairo Maquette

Technique	Explanation	Method of Analysis
Retrospection	Utilizing autobiographical memories of place.	Analyzing autobiographical elements in narratives to understand how personal memories shape the depiction of place.
Immersion	Engaging in direct encounters with place through site visits for sensory and emotional connection.	Tracing writers' site visits to evaluate how direct experiences influence narrative settings and emotional connections.
Collaboration	Leveraging shared cultural knowledge of place from intertextual and interpersonal sources.	Examining intertextual references and cultural dialogues within narratives to assess shared knowledge of place.
Vicariousness	Employing perspective-taking and emotional empathy to deepen character development and reader connection.	Investigating character perspectives and emotional depth through reader engagement and empathy in narrative development.
Nebulousness	Exploring esoteric concepts like dreams, intuition, and the spirit of place that influence creativity.	Exploring the use of dreams and intuition in narratives to understand their impact on creativity and place representation.
Distributed Temporality	The spatial distribution of different temporal moments so that past, present, and future become co-present, layered, or mutually affecting rather than merely sequential.	Identify nested or overlapping temporal spaces; trace objects, memories, signs, or characters that cross temporal levels; examine how the narrative converts chronology into spatial relation.
Space-Performativity	The production of place through acts of making, viewing, entering, filming, scaling, naming, remembering, or artistic reconstruction.	Analyze scenes in which space is actively produced or transformed by artistic practice, embodied movement, social interaction, or interpretive acts; examine how these performances reshape temporal meaning.

that contribute to the sense of place. Distributed Temporality was identified where temporal moments are spatially nested, layered, or made co-present through maquettes, objects, images, and cross-temporal encounters. Space-Performativity was identified where space is actively produced through acts of making, filming, drawing, viewing, entering, scaling, remembering, or reconstructing. Third, interview evidence and textual evidence were integrated through comparison rather than substitution. Interview statements are used to contextualize Imam's place-making practices and to illuminate how he describes his relation to Cairo, art, memory, and revolution. They are not treated as final proof of the novel's meaning or as a replacement for textual interpretation. Interpretive claims about *Cairo Maquette* are grounded primarily in close reading of the novel's structure, imagery, scenes, and narrative devices. The interviews function as supplementary evidence that helps connect authorial reflection with textual practice.

However, the methodology has some limitations as the study relies on public media interviews rather than original interviews conducted by the researcher; therefore, the interview material is shaped by journalistic format, editorial framing, and the occasions of publication or broadcast. The study also analyzes one novel by one author, so its conclusions should not be generalized to all experimental fiction, Arabic fiction, or literary place-making as a whole. The proposed categories of Distributed Temporality and Space-Performativity are consequently offered as exploratory and case-specific. Further comparative analysis would be needed to determine whether they are useful for other narratives that spatialize time.

Spacing Time and Place-Making in *Cairo Maquette*

Tareq Imam's *Cairo Maquette* (*CM*) (2022) originated and developed in a series of maquettes representing different time periods. The reader realizes later that each period is a maquette built at the time of the other maquettes, and each maquette/time encloses the previous and subsequent ones. The novel begins in an imagined time, 2045, when "Cairo Artwork Gallery" offered grants to build a maquette to represent Cairo in 2020, to revive the city's memory and restore its past. "The Cairo Maquette is an ambitious art project," explains the gallery's director, who is called only by her title The Missis, "it aims to build a miniature maquette of the city, with a specific ratio, 1:35. When completed, it will be a replica of Cairo at a particular moment" (14). A quarter of a century ago, this particular moment was the childhood of Origa, the artist who applied to build a part of the maquette to represent the downtown area of central Cairo, which encompasses the gallery and the house where he was born and raised. When Origa looks at a picture of the gallery's model and a picture of the gallery, it is not clear which one is a picture of the original. The Missis says: "They both look original," and Origa comments: "They both look fake" (19). Back in 2020, Nood, a documentary filmmaker and Origa's mother, applied to the same gallery for a Cairo 2011 maquette photography grant; the maquette represents the starting point of the novel's events, 2011, when Billiardo, a graffiti painter, Nood's husband and Origa's supposed father, lost an eye in the 2011 Revolution, and the other eye later on. The three carry nicknames, and their real names are not mentioned.

The novel moves between these three time-points, representing three places/times embodied in maquettes. Each maquette carries the microcosm of the era that precedes it; a "Matryoshka of identical cities," as the back cover of the novel declares. The characters live in every maquette, and their lives overlap with historical and fictional events that move between the novel's present in 2045, the maquette in 2020, and the maquette in 2011. The common element among the three

characters, apart from the familial links, is their inability to conform to the city in its multiple facets but the same personality represented in the unchanging character, the mysterious foreign woman, The Missis, who changes her facial features to reflect each situation with each of the characters without leaving its spatial territory, the office; and the mysterious Mansi Ajram's Book that changes its content to accommodate each time, place and character. "Places create their inhabitants," says the book, "if a new version of a house is created, a new version of its inhabitants will be created" (7). "All times," affirms the books at the end, "are the present" (381). The novel ends with a further future point in a postlude that takes place more than twenty years after the 2020 maquette of 2045. Manga, the comics artist, applies for a grant to draw a comics story of the 2045 maquette. Haunted by memories of a life she did not live, but remembers all its details, Manga meets the immortal character, The Missis. Drawing some overlapping circles and recapturing the essence of the narrative life, The Missis started to explain the story of Manga's comics:

> Origa participates in making Cairo 2020 maquette whose inhabitants include Nood. Nood films a smaller maquette within Origa's maquette, Cairo 2011 maquette, whose inhabitants include Billiardo. Over the three overlapping circles, the original temporal sequence of the story is replaced by a spatial overlap, making the three stories come true in parallel to create the story of one family in its relationship with the Cairo Artwork Gallery across three periods. (394)

The novel's structure disrupts chronological order, scattering and rearranging events to create a sense of temporal disjunction and layering. Readers, like the characters, must piece together the narrative, navigating a fragmented landscape of past and present. The novel unfolds in three parts: "Duplicated Copy," "Workspace," and "Cairo Demolished." Within each part, chapters are structured around the main characters: Origa, Nood, and Billiardo, appearing in a fixed sequence that repeats with increasing frequency: three times in part one, five in part two, and six in part three. A final chapter unites all three names, followed by a postlude dedicated to Manga. Events are not only out of sequence but also replayed with subtle variations, adding to the sense of temporal fluidity.

The centrality of the maquette as a spatial narrative tool gives the novel its imaginative and philosophical depth. It carries the novel's primary focus on identity, memory, and the relationship of the city's inhabitants to its history. This centrality is underscored by its ability to evoke what Bachelard calls the "dialectics

of large and small" (xxxviii), wherein miniatures foster a distinct psychological reality. Miniatures facilitate imaginative exploration that transcends simple fantasy, enabling a deeper engagement with the world. An engagement on such a small-scale, as represented by the maquette, allows for a unique form of world-consciousness, where the interplay between large and small dimensions reveals a dynamic relationship (184). Cairo, the city, and its recreation in three maquettes in the novel represent an extraordinary vision Imam was keen to present in his narrative so that the place of the events would carry its significance more deeply. The analysis that follows treats *CM* as a single case in which Mundell's five POET techniques illuminate the experiential sources of place-making, while Distributed Temporality and Space-Performativity clarify how the novel spatializes time.

Retrospection

Retrospection appears in *CM* through place-based memory, especially the memory of the 2011 Revolution. In Mundell's terms, retrospective techniques draw on autobiographical and emotional memories of place (Mundell 9). In this novel, memory is not merely recollected as personal past; it is anchored in central Cairo, Tahrir Square, and Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Imam's interview comments support this reading by identifying the 2011 moment as a generative context for the novel's concern with "the fluctuating relationship between the artist, the city, and the authorities" ("Longlist Interview"). The interview evidence contextualizes the creative impulse, while the novel itself shows how revolutionary memory is spatially embedded. Billiardo's movement through Cairo after the Revolution condenses this retrospective mode. He walks through streets covered with remnants of demonstrations and recognizes banners that he had written: "A revolution ended, resulting in these strange wastes. At this idle wintertime in a tumultuous year, Tahrir Square appeared like an abandoned ship" (31). The passage does not treat Tahrir as a neutral setting. It is a memory-site where political hope, exhaustion, and artistic inscription remain materially present. The banners are not background details; they are the spatial residue of a historical event. Nood's memory of the "old smell of the revolution" when The Missis recreates the atmosphere of 2011 with mock Molotov cocktails and tear gas similarly shows how the past returns through sensory and spatial cues (174). The revolutionary moment is recalled not as abstract chronology but as smell, street, object, and bodily atmosphere. Retrospection therefore prepares the novel's larger spatial logic: Cairo's past survives because it is materially and affectively lodged in places.

Immersion

Immersion concerns direct bodily encounter with place (Mundell 9-10). Imam's public interviews repeatedly connect the novel to his lived relationship with central Cairo. He describes daily life in Cairo as a repeated need to reacquaint oneself with the city ("Polymorphous Identity") and imagines standing on a scaffold before it ("Imagination and the City"). These comments should not be used as proof of authorial intention in a reductive way; rather, they help contextualize why the novel gives such weight to walking, looking, entering, touching, and sensing Cairo. The novel translates this immersive relation into embodied scenes. Origa treats central Cairo as a kind of homeland and feels estranged outside it (16), while Billiardo knows almost no life beyond its streets (67-68). The city is apprehended through the body before it becomes an idea. This is especially clear in Billiardo's discovery of a living eye in the street. The eye is "a human eye, a real eye, full and live, and still able to look and see" (29). The grotesque object gives urban experience a tactile and visual shock: Cairo is not merely seen by the character; it looks back through a displaced organ of sight. Imam's comment that, during the 2011 Revolution, he imagined he might step on a human body part while walking through Cairo ("Imagination and the City") provides contextual support for this scene. The close reading, however, rests on how the novel transforms urban walking into sensory confrontation. Billiardo's Cairo is a "concrete city" that has become "a city of miracles" (30-31). Immersion in *CM* thus does not produce stable local color. It produces estrangement, bodily vulnerability, and a heightened awareness of the city as both material environment and imaginative pressure.

Collaboration

Collaboration, in Mundell's model, refers to the use of shared cultural knowledge, intertextual sources, interpersonal memory, and collective understandings of place (Mundell 10). In *CM*, this technique appears through the novel's dense engagement with Cairo's artistic and urban cultures. Imam's interviews mention research into 1990s music, orphanage laws, graffiti, calligraphy, and other artistic forms ("Longlist Interview"; "Shortlisted Author"). These materials enter the novel not as documentary excess but as cultural textures through which place becomes legible. The Cairo Artwork Gallery is central to this collaborative place-making. It is described as a space for "marginal and protest" arts (58), and its 2011 grant is titled "Cairo Mad Graffiti" (222). Billiardo's graffiti, Nood's filmmaking, Origa's maquette-making, and Manga's comics all make Cairo through different artistic

media. The city is therefore not produced by one consciousness alone; it emerges through a network of visual, textual, architectural, and performative practices. The collaborative dimension is also visible in how individual experience becomes a version of collective urban knowledge. When The Missis explains Nood's documentary project, Nood hears the history of the whole city through the history of the gallery: "The Missis' words evoke in [Nood] the memory of the whole city though she was talking only about a single place" (26). Likewise, Origa sees the applicants in the waiting room as multiple "miniatures of Cairo" (47). These scenes show that the city is not reducible to one authoritative map. Cairo is made through overlapping personal, artistic, and cultural models.

Vicariousness

Vicariousness involves perspective-taking and emotional identification (Mundell 10). In *CM*, it operates through characters whose bodily injuries, artistic obsessions, and uneasy relation to Cairo invite the reader to inhabit the city through wounded perception. Imam's remarks about writing characters connected to his generation and to the consequences of the 2011 Revolution ("Shortlisted Author") contextualize this technique, but the emotional force comes from the novel's narrative embodiment of loss. Billiardo's lost eye is the strongest example. He has trained himself to look down while walking through Cairo, but on one occasion he looks upward and loses an eye to "the glint of the sniper's scope" (34). This scene makes bodily injury a mode of urban knowledge. The reader is asked to understand Cairo not only as a political space but as a field of risk that enters the body. The city is not observed from a distance; it is perceived through fear, habit, mutilation, and memory. The novel's vicarious force also depends on moral and emotional ambiguity. Imam's comment that humanity is most human when its morals are difficult to pinpoint ("Polymorphous Identity") is useful here because the novel resists simple heroic or victimological framing. He believes that the relationship between the individual and the city reflects a mix of reality and imagination ("Behind the Scenes"). Similar to Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" (22), Imam allows the readers to reinterpret memories and historical moments to contribute to the construction of a place, further enhancing the emotional depth and reader engagement in his narratives. Billiardo, Nood, and Origa are artists, witnesses, and participants in unstable worlds. Their relation to Cairo is intimate but never secure. Vicariousness therefore deepens place-making by making the reader experience Cairo through partial, injured, and morally complex perspectives.

Nebulousness

Nebulousness names the elusive, mysterious, dreamlike, or uncanny elements that shape literary place. In Mundell's terms it is the "esoteric or mysterious approaches" as a catch-all category to include the "elusive" and "slippery phenomena" of the creative process that influence place representation (Mundell 10). In *CM*, the nebulous is not decorative fantasy. It is one of the ways the novel makes Cairo unstable as a spatial and temporal reality. Imam's interview claim that dreams and fantasy arise from reality rather than escaping it ("Polymorphous Identity") provides a useful context for this mode. The novel repeatedly treats imagination as a force that exposes hidden dimensions of the real. Nood's mirror-man is the clearest example. She sees a male figure in the mirror: "Her mirror reflects two bodies" (19). He grows with her, but only "in glass" (19), and remains "on the fringe of another world" (21). The scene transforms an ordinary domestic object into a threshold between realities. It also destabilizes identity, gendered relation, and family origin, since the mirrored figure later becomes connected to Origa's parentage. The familiar act of looking into a mirror becomes an uncanny spatial event. The Cairo Artwork Gallery intensifies this nebulous place-making. It is housed in an old palace associated with haunting, unexplained collapse, and disappearing rubble (51). The Missis, who knows hidden details of the characters' lives and thoughts, functions almost as the genius loci of the gallery: not merely its director but the embodied intelligence of the place. Her office is spatially fixed, yet her knowledge crosses personal and temporal boundaries. Through her, the gallery becomes a haunted center where Cairo's memories, possible futures, and artistic reproductions are gathered.

Distributed Temporality

Distributed Temporality is the first provisional extension tested through this case. It is identified here through four analytical indicators: nested temporal spaces, cross-temporal objects, vertical temporality, and cross-maquette encounters. These indicators clarify how *CM* does not merely narrate events out of chronological order; it spatially distributes different times across maquettes, objects, and acts of perception.

The first indicator is nested temporal space. The novel's structure is built from three major temporal layers: 2045, 2020, and 2011. Each layer is not simply remembered by the next; it is modeled inside it. The 2045 project reconstructs Cairo in 2020, while Nood's 2020 project films the 2011 maquette. This nesting

converts historical sequence into spatial enclosure. The result is not flashback in the conventional sense but a set of co-present temporal zones. When the logic of a "Matryoshka of identical cities," mentioned on the back cover of the novel, is realized in the plot, chronology becomes architecture. The second indicator is the cross-temporal object. Billiardo's eye is again central. After losing an eye during the Revolution, he finds a living eye in the street: "It was a human eye of a person who is big enough not to be living in this world" (30). Later, he imagines that it may be his own eye from another scale or world: "When my eye fell down by the bullet, it must have fallen under the leg of another smaller Billiardo" (74). The freshness of the eye prevents it from being simply a relic of the past. It behaves as an object displaced between temporal-spatial levels.

The third indicator is vertical temporality. Billiardo explicitly reformulates time as a vertical rather than horizontal relation: "If life is a straight horizontal line, then that means that the future is a point ahead just as the past is a point behind, but what is happening now means that the future is a point above, and the past is a point below" (221). This passage gives the novel's temporal structure its most direct conceptual expression. Time is no longer an ordered line; it is a stack of spatial positions. Future and past are above and below, not simply before and after. The fourth indicator is cross-maquette encounter. Characters see, hear, or call to one another across spatially nested temporal zones. Billiardo sees Nood (156, 182-84), Nood sees Billiardo (314), and Origa sees Nood (313). These encounters do not merely dramatize supernatural contact. They show how the maquette form permits temporal difference to become spatial adjacency. Distributed Temporality therefore names the novel's core procedure: the past, present, and future are made mutually affecting because they occupy related spatial levels. Fig. 3 represents three events from the novel that converge and affect each other despite their temporal distances:

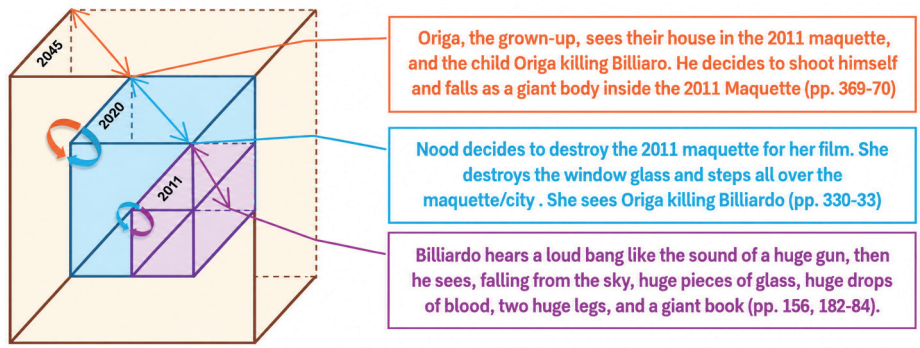


Fig. 3 Verticality of Three Spatial Events in Different Temporal Moments, (Source: Author's visualization)

Fig. 3 depicts a nested cube structure representing the interconnected timelines to illustrate how events in one timeline impact the others. It emphasizes the non-linear and cyclical nature of time as portrayed in the novel spatialized into the maquettes. The same can be illustrated for other events: the note Billiardo finds detailing the 2020 grant (221), which Nood has thrown into the 2011 maquette (334); and the note she finds from 2045 (212-13), which Origa has thrown into the 2020 maquette (211).

Space-Performativity

Space-Performativity is the second provisional extension developed for this case. If Distributed Temporality describes how time is spatially arranged, Space-Performativity describes how space is actively produced through artistic and embodied practices. In *CM*, Cairo is made through building, filming, drawing, entering, scaling, and interpreting. The city does not precede these practices as a stable object; it becomes intelligible through them. The strongest instance is the maquette itself. The Cairo Artwork Gallery's project does not simply represent Cairo in miniature. It stages an act of spatial production. The Missis asks Origa whether "an imaginative version of a city" can "eliminate and replace the real one" (18). The question makes artistic reconstruction performative: the model may alter the status of the city it copies because the maquette reorganizes scale, position, and temporal access. Later, she asks him to imagine Cairo's inhabitants walking around the maquette and seeing miniatures of their houses, streets, and cars, feeling for the first time that they are "bigger than the city" (45). Scale changes the relation between inhabitant and place. The maquette does not simply shrink Cairo; it reorganizes the subject's position toward it.

The threshold passage makes the performative logic explicit. Origa enters the open space on which the 2020 maquette will be built, or where "every unit will be implanted" (164), as The Missis expresses, suggesting this organic nature. He thinks about how "spatial precedence" can reverse the usual priority of "temporal precedence." He imagines The Missis telling him:

> The gallery's (technically cheap) iron door is inconsistent with the elegance of the architectural structure of the historic building. Why don't we say that the architectural structure distorts the image of the door? Is it based on the fact that the building precedes the threshold? Let this be true about ***temporal precedence***, but ***spatial precedence*** turns the equation upside down. You cannot enter the building without passing through the threshold. This will

> turn into a new temporal value that reformulates the meaning of precedence because you also, according to the logic of linear time of use and not ***historical hierarchy***, are forced to move from the threshold to the building, and not vice versa. [Emphasis added] (162)

Origa considers The Missis's distinction between temporal precedence and spatial precedence. Historically, the building precedes the threshold, but experientially one cannot enter the building without crossing the threshold. This is one of the novel's clearest statements of spatial becoming. The meaning of a place is not determined only by its historical origin; it is produced by the bodily act of passing, entering, and using.

Nood's film project extends the same logic through visual reconstruction. When she sees the 2011 maquette inside the gallery, she realizes that the gallery is a place in Cairo, but the maquette reverses the relation by placing Cairo inside the gallery. Her film will therefore contain "two galleries: one in Cairo and another in Cairo Maquette" (172-73). Filming becomes a spatial act that doubles and repositions the city. Cairo is made again through camera, model, and frame.

The postlude confirms that this performative production of space extends beyond the three central artists. Manga's comics project restages the maquette logic in another medium, while The Missis's overlapping circles explain the family story as spatial arrangement rather than temporal sequence:

> Origa participates in making Cairo 2020 maquette whose inhabitants include Nood. Nood films a smaller maquette within Origa's maquette, Cairo 2011 maquette, whose inhabitants include Billiardo. Over the three overlapping circles, the original temporal sequence of the story is replaced by a spatial overlap, making the three stories come true in parallel to create the story of one family in its relationship with the Cairo Artwork Gallery across three periods. (394)

The novel thus closes by translating narrative into diagram, memory into model, and time into spatial design. Space-Performativity, as used here, does not claim to define all literary place-making. It identifies a specific operation in *CM*: Cairo becomes place through acts of artistic reconstruction that make time visible, scalable, and inhabitable.

Conclusion

This article has examined Tareq Imam's *Cairo Maquette* as a qualitative single-case study of spatialized time and literary place-making. Through its nested maquette structure, the novel does not merely represent Cairo across different historical moments; it converts those moments into spatial relations. The city appears as a layered structure in which 2011, 2020, and 2045 overlap through models, objects, artistic practices, and encounters across temporal levels. In this sense, *Cairo Maquette* makes time visible and inhabitable by turning chronology into spatial form. The analysis has shown that Mundell's five POET techniques help clarify the experiential foundations of Imam's place-making. Retrospection explains how the memory of the 2011 Revolution is anchored in Cairo's streets, especially through Billiardo's relation to Tahrir Square and Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Immersion shows how bodily and sensory encounters with central Cairo shape the novel's urban imagination. Collaboration appears in the novel's use of shared artistic, cultural, and historical knowledge, including graffiti, filmmaking, calligraphy, music, and the Cairo Artwork Gallery. Vicariousness helps account for the reader's emotional entry into the city through injured and morally complex characters, while nebulousness explains the uncanny and dreamlike elements through which Cairo becomes unstable, haunted, and imaginatively charged.

The two provisional categories proposed in this article: Distributed Temporality and Space-Performativity, extend this analysis by addressing dimensions of the novel that POET helps approach but does not fully name. Distributed Temporality clarifies how *Cairo Maquette* arranges time through nested temporal spaces, cross-temporal objects, vertical temporality, and encounters between maquettes. Space-Performativity clarifies how Cairo is actively produced through artistic and embodied practices: building the maquette, filming the city, crossing thresholds, drawing, scaling, and reconstructing urban memory. Together, these categories show that place-making in the novel depends not only on evoking Cairo as remembered or experienced space, but also on producing time itself as a spatial and artistic structure.

The interview corpus supports this reading by contextualizing Imam's reflections on Cairo, the 2011 Revolution, artistic practice, and the relation between reality and imagination. However, the interviews have been used here as supplementary evidence rather than as a substitute for textual interpretation. The article's main claims rest on close reading of the novel's structure, imagery, scenes, and narrative devices. This distinction is important because the study does not attempt to prove authorial intention; rather, it compares authorial reflection with textual practice in order to clarify how the novel constructs its spatial-temporal

logic. This case study suggests that extending POET through Grossberg can clarify how *Cairo Maquette* spatializes time, but the proposed extension remains provisional. Its usefulness should be tested through further comparative work on other experimental urban narratives, especially those in which memory, architecture, political history, and artistic practice reshape the relation between place and temporality.

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Youth at the Threshold also Matters: Hostipitality in Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy*

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Abstract Children's refugee literature provides a challenging vision of the political and ethical overtones of (in)hospitality towards displaced people from the Global South. This article examines Benjamin Zephaniah's 2001 novel, *Refugee Boy*, as a pertinent case of engaging with hospitality and its counterpart through the conflicting lenses of the state and the community. It draws on selected substantial insights about hospitality engineered since Kant, later on elaborated by Levinas (1970s), and then revisited by Derrida (1980s). The discussion orchestrates the trauma of state inhospitality in England nowadays through a scrutiny of the refugee's border and post-migration narrative of belonging, exclusion and resistance. The community's propensity for hospitality proposes collective, rebellious avenues for repealing xenophobic laws and malpractices targeting refugees. In so doing, the article dismantles the predictable handling of the refugee's belonging question through a restrictive attention to children's illustrative/pictorial works and with strategic emphasis on the refugee's journey as a painful, pathetic process. In turn, the examination of the grassroots' empathetic welcoming of a hybrid and young asylum seeker sheds light on a cogent critique from below of the undesirable refugee stigma in the Eurocentric immigration agenda of the Global North.

Keywords ethical turn; border; asylum; masquerade; decolonization

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> Questions arising on the move, at the borders, in the encounter with the other, and when stranger meets stranger, all tend to intensify around the problem of the other foreigner,— someone doubly strange who doesn't speak or look like the rest of us, being paradoxically an exotic guest and abhorred enemy.
>
> —Minh-ha 1

> What ethics in philosophy and ethics in literature share is their awareness of the problematic nature of ethical issues, which philosophy addresses by theoretical reflection and literature by artistic representation.
>
> —Müller 83

Introduction

Warring nations and ideologies continually shape the literature of the day inasmuch as current world crises in the Middle East and the Global South inform contemporary narratives about refugeeism and asylum and politicize the discourse of hospitality. Concurrently, contemporary global conflicts, ranging from the mass genocide in Palestine to the civil war in the Sudan, together with the emerging anti-immigration self-protective policies in the Global North, contribute to spreading a Eurocentric image of the nation-state. On the other hand, they lead to the development of a prolific body of refugee texts that have witnessed a remarkable surge in a variety of genres.[1]

Drawing on Trinh T. Minh-ha, we can go to the extent of asserting a "political backlash against marked foreigners, foreign-born or foreign-looking members" (1). The exclusive backlash in question re-emerges with force in today's geopolitics but also hosts refugee texts ranging from graphic novels to docu-novels, poetry and short story collections. This is why Julia Hope rather refers to a turning point that she discerns in refugee narratives written for children. According to her, there

1 Among other examples, we can cite *The Bone Sparrow* (2016) by Zana Fraillon, *Boy, Everywhere* by A.M. Dassu (2020), *Welcome to Nowhere* (2017), *A House Without Walls* (2019) by Elizabeth Laird, *The Boy at the Back of the Class* (2018) by Onjali Q Rauf, *Boy 87* (2018) by Ele Fountain, *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) by Beverley Naidoo, *Exit West* (2018) by Mohsin Hamid, *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) by Dina Nayeri, *The Refugees* (2017) by Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee* (2019) by Gulwali Passarlay and *By the Sea* (2002) by Abdulrazak Gurnah.

is a paradigm shift from refugee texts that "looked back to World War II and its aftermath" to ones focussed on more recent struggles with the state of being/becoming a refugee (192).

In truth, one can speak of a double paradigm shift in recent refugee literature. At one level, it is a disruption of, or a deviation from, the dominant refugee narrative of the Holocaust associated with WWII. On the other hand, the contemporary refugee text shifts from what Gayatri Spivak terms "hospitality from below" (qtd. in Damai 15), referring to a colonized subject acting as host to a colonizing guest. In other words, refugee narratives have recently and visibly turned to engaging with the colonizer's hospitality towards the colonized.

The contemporary British poet and novelist Benjamin Zephaniah contributed to this multilayered shift in refugee literature with a children's book titled *Refugee Boy*, a docu-novel published in 2001. In 2008, Zephaniah was listed "among 50 greatest post-war writers" and elected "the third most favourite poet of all time in a poll in BBC in 2009 (after T. S. Eliot and John Donne)" (Indrák 17). His refugee narrative suggests a "non-Eurocentric perspective [that] gives voice to those who have been underrepresented, silenced and unacknowledged" (Bağlama 633). I contend that the complex position of Zephaniah, as a British author with roots in Jamaica and Barbados and an eyewitness to refugees' displacement and racial marginalization, brings a controversial engagement with hospitality and its reverse to the center of the text and provides a pertinent countertext to "hospitality from below", among other implications.

As a reminder, *Refugee Boy* is anchored in the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war (1998-2000), which erupted in the late nineties and was not resolved until 2020, following a peace treaty signed in Algeria (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 178).[1] Its war background manifests itself in the first two chapters, "Ethiopia" and "Eritrea." The pretexts tell the story of Alems Kelo's parents as victims of state aggression, who were eventually forced to choose between enforced exile and assassination (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 2 & 4). They are followed by the story of Alem Kelo, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, whose unplanned visit to London and subsequent struggle as an asylum applicant populate the major bulk of the narrative.

The ethical and political aspects of hospitality, however, are not sufficiently covered in the literature about Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy.* These dimensions remain under-researched, as shown through Šárka Bubíková's "Writing Personal Trauma in Young Adult Fiction: Abandonment in Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* and Siobhan Dowd's *Solace of the Road*". This article reflects an interest in psychologi-

1 Forthcoming in-text citations from *Refugee Boy* will briefly refer to *Refugee* in parentheses.

cal interpretations of the novel through discussing personal trauma in the context of identity formation. However, the research titled "*Refugee Boy*: The Social and Emotional Impact of the Shared Experience of a Contemporary Class Novel" by Sadia Habib, explores the novel from a didactic perspective; it reflects on the restrictions of state curriculum development versus young readers' appeal to contemporary literature as relevant to their time and place.

The theme of hospitality in Zephaniah's text is only briefly raised. As a third example, Sercan Hamza Bağlama's article, titled "A Postcolonial Approach to Contemporary Refugee Literature: Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy*," dissects Alem Kelo's character as an interpellated postcolonial subject reminiscent of postcolonial immigrant subjects in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (2009). Likewise, Břetislav Indrák's thesis "Racial and Ethnic Aspects in the Work by Benjamin Zephaniah" is no exception since it deals with Zephaniah's selected texts, including *Refugee Boy*, from the double perspectives of racism and ethnicity, with no explicit reference to hospitality. Overall, this theme warrants a more thorough examination, from a political and ethical lens.

Methodologically speaking, the current study integrates a conceptual analysis of hospitality into a scrutiny of public and private performances in the novel. Apart from the introductory and concluding notes, it takes three main sections to investigate the complex engagement with (in)hospitality in Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* and its utopian gesturing towards formalizing communal empathy towards displaced youth. First, "From Hospitality to Hostipitality" theorizes the ethical turn in the 1980s in the process of tracing the symmetrical concern with hospitality from Kant through Levinas to Derrida. The second section, entitled "Dismembering the Aporia of Hospitality"; examines hospitality in *Refugee Boy* as a political performance that borders on the liminal Derridean concept of hostipitality. In a third move under "Empathy and Decolonization," I contend that the Derridian neologism does not offer sufficient room to account for the discrepancy between the state's sceptical attitude towards foreigners, being marked by animosity and exclusion, and the ethical solidarity and responsibility towards asylum seekers, enacted from below and emanating by the novel's denouement. I also interrogate the mismatch between the text's contested construction of the undesirable refugee and the unconvincing characterization of the refugee protagonist, Alem Kelo.

From Hospitality to Hostipitality

As a welcoming/unwelcoming gesture towards the other, (in)hospitality superimposes an array of precarious identities. The latter could encompass

"a foreigner, an immigrant, a guest, an unexpected visitor" … etc. (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 77). In a diasporan migratory context, the other could have the status of a smuggled immigrant, an undocumented visitor, a refugee, or an asylum seeker. The multiplicity of identities associated with alterity/otherness evokes mainly Kantian, Levinasian, and Derridian readings into hospitality and, by implication, its reverse.

In the eighteenth century, long before the ethical turn in the 1970s and 1980s, Emmanuel Kant developed the first seeds of hospitality theory. The law of hospitality, according to Guerrero-Strachan et.al, who quote Kant, "concerns the 'right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory' (105) if he 'behaves in a peaceable manner in the place he happens to be in' (106)" (2-3). Explaining the Kantian understanding of hospitality, Derrida states: ''Kant does not mean that the right of hospitality is a-human or inhuman, but rather that, as a right, it does not arise […] from 'the love of man as a sentimental motive.' Universal hospitality arises [...] from an obligation, a right, and a duty all regulated by law'' ("Hostipitality," 4). According to this political framework, hospitality implies responsibility for the other as a visitor, but not as a permanent resident. Focussing on the guest's "right of resort", Kantian hospitality is contingent upon visitation and peace (qtd. in Derrida, "Hostipitality" 5). Suggestively, in the absence of the last two conditions or principles, hospitality is not a duty, nor is the temporary guest welcome. The latter merely becomes an enemy. The idea suggests that a stranger is denied hospitality if they breach the contract of temporality and safety, thus, the Kantian thesis of conditional hospitality.

The contemporary shift from enlightenment self-centered approaches to identity formation toward a responsibility for the other heralds an ethical conception of hospitality. It gestures towards "the respect of the other," using Derrida's words (Voloshin 75). In this way, ethical responsibility marks a clear break from similar individually-driven conceptions of being to those grounded in the Cartesian *cogito*. As Abi Doukhan put it: "The homeland of the self has now become a haven for the other. The world is no more the place where the self accumulates its possessions, but the place of welcoming of the other" (243). Subjectivity is relocated from autonomous self-consciousness to relational subjectivity that is anchored in the openness to the other.

In other words, Derrida's understanding of hospitality does not just reformulate Kant's philosophy but also subverts it, making a radical ethical turn. As part and parcel of this subversion, Derrida makes a distinction between the illimited law of Hospitality and the lawS of hospitality. Paradox, Derrida's *Of Hospitality*

suggests, lies at the core of hospitality. Situated between the singular and the plural, hospitality becomes liminal and creates a sort of aporia wherein the conditional cancels the unconditional, and the opposite is true.

On the one hand, Hospitality is contingent on universal or absolute acceptance. It is also hierarchical as long as it "is above the laws. It is thus illegal, transgressive, outside the law, like a lawless law, *nomos anomos,* law above the laws and law outside the law" (*Of Hospitality* 79). Absolute hospitality suspends the plural practices of hospitality defined by the nation-state. It speaks to a radical law that embraces absolute acceptance and tolerance, that is more than kindness and charity.

> Let us say yes *to who or what turns up,* before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification,* whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 75-76)

Unconditional, Hospitality pre-exists and annihilates every attempt of categorizing and identifying the new arrival, based on nationality, ideology, sex, kind or other, as is the case with the immigration practices at the borders of the Global North wherein one is categorized as a national, a migrant or a refugee. Such identifications not only impair but also degenerate hospitality into a state of transience.

Paradoxically, the lawS of hospitality, as seen by Derrida, are transgressive of "the law" above. They involve "rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional, as they are defined by the Greco-Roman tradition and even the Judeo-Christian one, by all of law and all philosophy of law up to Kant and Hegel in particular, across the family, civil society, and the State" (*Of Hospitality* 77). In other words, traditional hospitality enhances unequal encounter between the host and the guest and reinstates the sovereign discourse of colonial power. An example of hospitality laws are the visa documentation and entry protocols which are institutionalized by welcoming regimes. The latter are selective and restrictive in that they often lapse into further exclusion and injustice towards different applicants for immigration or asylum, so to speak begetting a dystopia of hospitality. In such a capitalist world order, conditional hospitality ensures institutional sovereignty over borders due to which the ineligible could pass for the deserving one and vice versa, especially that what is economically acceptable or welcome is not necessarily ethically sufficient.

In the same line, Derrida's article "Hostipitality" further highlights the

controversial morphology of the notion hospitality (4). It even reshapes hospitality into "hostipitality," a notion that entangles two contradictory words: hostility and hospitality. As he put it: ''Hospitalität, a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, "hostility," the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbours as the self-contradiction in its own body […]'' (3). Derrida reflects the binary essence of hospitality in his discussion of the host/guest relationship, which is etymologically and culturally embedded in ambivalence. "The welcomed guest [*hôte*] is a stranger treated as a friend or ally," argues Derrida, "as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy (friend/enemy, hospitality/hostility)" ("Hostipitality," 4). In this sense, hospitality deconstructs itself and is always mediated by inhospitality in the same way that "exclusion and inclusion are inseparable" (*Of Hospitality* 81). Hospitality becomes a site of conflict that hosts opposites: conditionality and unconditionality. This internal tension or contradiction makes genuine hospitality impossible in practice and unfree of inhospitality.

Above all, Derrida's analysis of hospitality within the aporia of inclusion and exclusion evokes his broader concern with the other which is at the core of the ethical turn in the 1980s. It brings in the responsibility of welcoming the other, "whether the other is invited or uninvited" (Kakoliris 239). Derrida's theory of hospitality goes beyond the enlightenment's conditional equation set up between hospitality and visitation.

Contrarily, the ethical emphasis on unconditional hospitality is radical in different ways. It imposes "an infinite demand on the host" (Kakoliris 239). This way, it is likely to beget a conflicting, violent encounter between a sovereign resident and an intrusive/ unpredictable newcomer. Its abstraction also represents a challenge to the controlling regulations of border entries whose abolition is practically impossible to institutionalize. "There is no possibility," Maximiliano E. Korstanje argues, "to offer hospitality beyond politics" (27). As long as this discourse of illimited hospitality is apolitical, it becomes utopian, particularly, with reference to nowadays' geopolitical context that is characterized by increasing anti-immigration policies targetting the disprivileged Global South.

Seen from this angle, the theory of unconditional hospitality illuminates the exclusive politics of conditional hospitality. At the same time, it does not effectively resolve the embedded injustices and rather creates further paradoxes and conflicts. After all, the very refusal of categorizing the guest is not to the latter's service since it endangers their safety and rights as asylum seekers, professionals, students, or

other. The distinction is crucial because *Refugee Boy* does not simply reproduce the aporia; it also stages a collective response that puts into question the state's sovereign hold on hospitality.

This subversive theory of hospitality enhances us to ponder upon the possibility of striking a balance between preserving the host's rights and those of the newcomer. We are equally inspired to consider the role of *Refugee Boy* not just in representing the slippery usage of hospitality from ethical and political perspectives but also in overcoming the hierarchy inherent in the traditional welcoming rules of visitation and in reconceiving hospitality beyond charity and generosity. In turn, we are going beyond Wolfgang G. Müller's prefatory argument about the mere representative, or reflexive task of literature in handling such ethical aspects as hospitality (83).

Dismembering the Aporia of Hospitality

Speaking to the Derridean concept of hostipitality and its paradoxical backbone, the refugee's traumatic journey in the host country and the stark rejection of his asylum applications are the novel's highlights. They herald its engagement with (in) hospitable contexts and encounters through private and public performances that intersect with the politics of asylum, language, and food. At one level, a scrutiny of the public host/guest encounters in *Refugee Boy* reframes the same "hospitable" performances and gestures as inhospitable, in the sense that particular expectations and realities condition them. Similarly, the novel maps out the community's "unconditional" welcome of Alem as an asylum seeker, featuring a remarkable sense of solidarity and empathy with his experience of dislocation and exile. Yet, even such private enactments of hospitality are encompassed within the logic of the sovereign's masquerade of conditional generosity and welcoming.

In my usage of the term masquerade, I have in mind Joan Rivière's article ''Womanliness as a masquerade'' and her reference to femininity as a defensive mask or façade that conceals a certain anxiety or fear of masculine power (4). Regardless of the concept's original gender context, I am particularly interested in the notion of the masquerade as a performance or enactment, either temporary or permanent, of an apparent role or a duty that disguises a totally different reality or attitude for reasons of propriety, persuasion or other benefits. In the specific context of Zephaniah's novel, the notion of the masquerade is politically appropriated to articulate a strategic sense of dutifulness and benevolence towards displaced people while also attempting to hide the rejection of their presence on the British soil. The system of power preserves its face and legitimacy as a sovereign state

that is compassionate with the undesirable refugees through this mingling of apparent acceptance and welfare to the detriment of the asylum seekers' dignity and autonomy. Political/ethical masquerade evolves into a state apparatus of stigmatization and surveillance; a prerequisite of hospitality. Thus, masquerade signals the tension between the apparent performance of hospitality and the concealed reality of exclusion and hostility.

According to Alem Kelo, the protagonist in *Refugee Boy*, hospitality is everything but apolitical. "We are here because of politics, the judge is there because of politics, and we are being sent home because of politics," he asserts (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 146). The short passage highlights the political bias and the extent of exclusion encompassed in the conditional performances of hospitality in the novel. The intriguing liminality of this concept is best articulated through Alem's displacement as a refugee and an asylum seeker. The latter is further intrigued by the fact that Alem is half Ethiopian and half Eritrean: "'Ethiopia and Eritrea are fighting each other. They are both fighting me, that's why I had to come here as a refugee'" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 104). The border question in the novel further highlights the political enactment of hospitality through which Alem is not only stigmatized as "a mongrel" at home but also denied asylum in England. The novel scrutinizes the post-migration journey of refugees as a conflicting contact zone where political and ethical meanings and interpretations of hospitality become challenged and blurring.

The immigration policy depicted in the first expository chapter of *Refugee Boy* best captures the slippery shift from the universal duty of absolute hospitality to a politically bound hospitality. In this context, the hostile entry formalities performed in the airport episode of the text articulate the nation-state's conditional border-crossing protocols.

Considering the verbal and nonverbal exchanges between the immigration officer and Alem's father, the reader notices an "announced" act of hospitality. The latter is performed through the officer's polite, automated "Welcome to England, Mr Kelo" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 5). However, the third-person narrator comments: "Alem could sense that the words the customs officer was speaking were *well rehearsed*; he could sense that he was *trying to be well-mannered and inoffensive*" (My emphasis, Zephaniah, *Refugee* 8). The performance of hospitality is reinforced by the automated phrase that gives place to a sceptical gaze through an intrusive interrogation of the (un)welcome outsiders. While scrutinizing the passports and luggage, the customs officer interviews Alem's father about why the luggage was so light, commenting, "It does seem odd" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 5).

At this juncture, the airport shifts from a site of hospitality to a hostile

apparatus, reinstating the conditionality of entry. The inhospitality of the immigration officer affirms the idea that "The border becomes the site par excellence to test [the] logic of hospitality. At the border, countries exert the right of admission and dispense welcoming or unwelcoming protocols against an outsider that, due to its difference, is often feared and unwelcome" (Gerrero-Strachan et al. 2). This metamorphosis substantiates Kelos' claim that a tourist visit is a necessary deceitful tool to guarantee a temporary sanctuary for his refugee boy. The hospitality of the taxi driver and the hotel manager later (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 12-13) counterbalances the state's hostile immigration policy and measures.

In the same political context, the novel reinforces state anxiety over immigration by delving into the restrictive apparatuses of British judicial institutions regarding refugees and refugeeism. The Home Office in Croydon is a case in point, especially its large, "threatening" and apathetic building, which suggests inhospitality and hostility. It is the site where "Alem was photographed, fingerprinted, interviewed, and given a number. On the way out, he was given a piece of paper, which he had to sign to confirm his number" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 49). The passage highlights how the court's screening routine is a stigmatizing, dehumanizing experience wherein Alem's humanity is reduced to a figure, an absurd status, a case file.

Reinforcing institutional inhospitality, Croydon court hearings revolve around questioning the asylum seekers' narratives on the grounds that Alem's application for asylum is turned down. In deliberating that Alem's case is inapplicable since there is no evidence of war persecution in his home countries, the Croydon court adds to the refugee boy's vulnerability, as he starts to wonder whether he is "a criminal" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 49). The court eventually deliberates: "As British subjects, we believe that it is our duty to offer them protection until it is safe for them to return to their homeland" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 247). This is a clear political testimony to the conditional hospitality within the linear asylum process, which disregards Alem's complex identity as an Eritrean Ethiopian. More significantly, it disrupts the illusion of the welcome guest, verging on Derrida's hostipitality.

In reinstating its hold on the destiny of illegal immigrants, the whole asylum process loses sight of the plight of further traumatizing the child refugee, since compelling him to retell his persecution narrative to justify his presence in England is a precondition of temporary hospitality at the Fitzgeralds', the foster family. Following these traumatic rehearsals, the court's different hearings eventually decline Alem's asylum case as irrelevant. The first hearing judges that "the appellant faces no personal threat if he were to be returned to his country [where he] would

live a relatively peaceful life" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 90). The second is no exception, for it supports the earlier position: ''Most of the people in Ethiopia and Eritrea have not seen any fighting whatsoever. In the opinion of the state, the risk to the lives of the appellants is minimal and we see no reason why they should not return to their country of origin and consider living in an area where they do not feel threatened'' (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 139). Nothing better mirrors state inhospitality during the asylum appeal than the careless accommodation of Alem between four places within a year, moving between a foster family in London, a few nights in a hotel in Datchet, one night in a children's home, and a short while in a hotel in Forest Gate (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 179). Ironically, despite the father's fear of politicizing the asylum case (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 145), the appeal is not apolitical. Rather, it is outstandingly enmeshed in the British politics of exclusion passed on as conditional hospitality.

Derrida's hostipitality thesis is also powerfully ingrained in the spectral belonging of the Kelos as marginalized asylum-seekers in the public realm. In fact, *Refugee Boy* uses the welfare queue to illustrate how the state masquerades or performs its conditional hospitality while perpetuating the refugees' abjection. The text "hosts" an inhospitable encounter between a bureaucratic system of dehumanization and the unwelcome "commodified" refugee, as the following lengthened passage suggests:

> Alem realised that he was waiting in the same place where he had seen Abbas [a Palestinian refugee] three weeks ago and that Abbas may have not responded to him because he was feeling humiliated. The queue was long and full of exactly the same kind of people Alem had seen outside the courtrooms, Asians, Africans, Romanians and Kosovans, all waiting with their heads hanging down, looking humiliated. Meanwhile many other cashiers were sitting filing their nails or combing their hair, waiting for customers. Other shoppers just seemed to be a lot happier and some looked over to the 'Vouchers only' queue as if the customers there were exhibition pieces. Alem could also see the humiliation on his father's face but as for himself he felt angry; he didn't want to show it but he felt really angry. His father was a qualified person who had been in a good job and always proud to have earned every penny he had, but now he had been reduced to what amounted to living off aid. As Alem looked up and down the queue, he wondered how many people there were in the same position. Which of the men and women were doctors, lawyers, nurses or mathematicians? Could he be standing next to one of Bosnia's most promising architects, or an

> Iranian airline pilot? His father saw him silently shake his head in disgust as they shuffled down the line. (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 168)

The hierarchical structure in the supermarket queue conjures up the artificiality of the court hearings. It performs the sovereignty of the state in the bureaucratic governance of refugeeism, wherein humiliation masquerades as charity and inhospitality as hospitality. The masquerade is therefore not only a performance of hospitality; it is the form through which inhospitality is staged as hospitality.

The voucher support scheme reinforces an artificial ethical posture particularly in view of the excluded ''vouchers line''. Its dehumanizing effect could be explicitly detected through the sympathetic, even proud gaze of those cueing in the opposite line for cash or credit card payments. The narrator captures the humiliating gazes that the non-voucher shoppers direct at the "others"/refugees in the "Voucher only" queue. Refugees are reduced to faceless specters of doctors, lawyers, mathematicians, architects, and pilots, angrily awaiting their turn for state charity. Emphasis is, in turn, placed on the state's panoptic power over refugees and its dehumanizing philosophy of hospitality. Reminding us of Irigaray's notion of epistemic violence as the construction of the other through stereotyping, the supported refugees become mere exoticized bodies in the spectacle for other clients. Their spectral presence/absence during the asylum appeal mirrors their effaced identities as outsiders, stripped of their dignity.

In parallel with the state-and institutional-level (in)hospitality, *Refugee Boy* foregrounds English proficiency as a prerequisite for admission into English society. This conditional correlation aligns with the airport scene, where English serves as the guest/tourist/refugee's prerequisite for communication and integration. Early in the novel, Alem's father compels his son to express himself in English (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 5). Mr. Kelo's imposition anticipates the importance of English proficiency for his son's survival and adaptation to his new environment. Yet, Alem's initial, deliberate articulations in his native language occasionally force him into silence or code-switching, impinging on a sense of linguistic displacement (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 42, 5 & 28).

Additionally, a significant part of the protagonist's linguistic confinement and exclusion has to do with his incomprehension of the fluctuating dialects of English, since he could not keep up with the different accents/dialects he could pick from TV programs and everyday speakers of English and the Standard English that he had learned in school (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 10). For a non-fluent English speaker, accent differences foster a sense of being an unwelcome asylum-seeker, as confirmed by court hearings. Ironically,

linguistic proficiency is conventionally associated with facilitating the granting of political asylum, recalling us of the performative heart of hospitality.

Regarding the political embeddedness of inclusion and exclusion, a similar ambivalence or contradiction permeates the novel's negotiation of food politics as an apparatus of conditional hospitality. *Refugee Boy* shows the tension between the ethical, unconditional duty to welcome the other and the legally bound, conditional hospitality through the motif of culinary politics. In this context, food presentation and sharing noticeably shape Alem's first visit to London, during which his father takes him to an Italian restaurant in Piccadilly Circus. At this level, food-sharing is evocative of homesickness regarding the father-son reunion following the mother's murder back home, for which the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict serves as backdrop. Meeting at an Ethiopian restaurant in London, father and son eat a traditional food, performing "*gursha*," i.e., "feeding each other with their hands" while the other customers "(all Europeans) watched them feeding each other […] trying not to be openly nosy" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 122). The host's intrusive gaze is part and parcel of a broader inhospitable milieu.

In the same way onlookers show their curiosity and express reserve toward such an alien ritual, the Kelos perform their identity through a nostalgic gesture that satisfies their hunger for belonging and embodies their displacement at once. The correlation between food and (in)hospitality also permeates Alem's first encounter with Italian food, arranged by the social workers at the refugee council. "If the man said he wants Italian, then the man gets Italian," Miriam (the worker at the refugee council) comments. At the same time, she and her friend "slowly grazed on some boiled vegetables and pasta," a typical English meal (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 25). Embedded in Miriam's "hospitable" and indulgent invitation is the intention to alleviate Alem's vulnerability as a child refugee, but also the implication that Alem is a welcome guest if he behaves like a wise boy. In other words, treating Alem to his favorite Italian dish is contingent on collaboration as a form of resilience.

In relation to the philosophy that we are or become what we eat, the English food presented to Alem reflects the host culture's unspoken call for conformity and adaptation. The text suggests that Alem rarely enjoys the English cuisine, "slowly getting used to the food, but he didn't find it inspiring. It was very much the meat-and-two-veg type, but the Fitzgeralds did experiment and gravy was always available to make the food wet" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 83). What can be termed the gastro-poetics of hostipitality is manifest through the Fitzgeralds' implicit determination to subjugate Alem to the culinary rituals that are alien to his native, default inclinations. Their food politics is inconceivable without the notion of

conditional hospitality, which dictates consumption without complaint. The threat of hostility, homelessness, and isolation flares up in the absence of submission to his foster parents' culinary norms, especially considering his desertion of the Children's House. In this sense, incorporating material nourishment in a narrative about belonging and non-belonging amounts to an ambivalent cultural symbol of (in) hospitality.

The liminal handling of hospitality in *Refugee Boy* further emerges from the young protagonist's contingent gratitude toward his host family. The conditional hospitality of Alem's foster parents is embedded in the guest's ambiguous statements of appreciation in the range of "a nice home," the absence of pressure, "talk to me," and "treat me very good" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 122). These perpetuate the dominant image of the grateful refugee and reinforce the host/guest binary. Considering the speaker's articulated afterthought "I can't say anything bad about them" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 122), they emerge as superficial, double-edged references to become endowed with ambiguity and dual meanings.

Alem's statement does not solely express gratitude but also the expectation of it, as an unstated condition of his temporary residence with the Fitzgeralds. In any case, the latter need Alem's positive testimony to ensure the continuity of funding against the services they provide to the House of Refugees. Also, the apparently unambiguous statement of appreciation is dictated by necessity and convenience, especially since Alem already experienced living in a visibly hostile milieu pervaded by bullying. His performance of satisfaction bespeaks the Derridian logic of conditional generosity reshaped as an exchange of interests and services that guarantee the survival of both sides.

This very obligation/expectation of appreciation becomes a ritual in the host's and guest's silent or undeclared compromise. The benevolence of the Fitzgeralds stands out as being contingent on Alem's cooperation as a precondition of their hospitality. In other words, they are likely to withdraw their kindness if the permission/passivity requirement is disrupted in any way (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 122). The visibly straightforward statement that they give him the freedom to play uncovers the power of the Fitzgeralds to provide or decline this privilege or liberty. In resonance with the notion of hostipitality, their hostility is deferred, since Alem can become an outsider the moment he fails to cope with his hosts' absolute sovereignty in their private realm.

Empathy and Decolonization

In a sense, the analysis of the complex reception of Alem Kelo and his father based

on the Derridian framework of hostipitality allows us to single out that inhospitable attitudes towards asylum seekers are not enacted by those in power or by the state at large. They are occasionally internalized by individuals and the immediate community.

At another level, Derrida's concept of hostipitality does not thoroughly account for the discrepancy between the state's sceptical/hostile attitude towards foreigners, including asylum seekers, and the empathetic attitude of civil society and non-profit organizations. Let us be reminded that even after the relocation of father and son to a local hostel, the Fitzgeralds expressed their constant commitment to support Alem as his "extended family" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 148). The gesture goes beyond a mere performance of conditional hospitality, re-emerging as an unconditional expression of love and empathy, an attempt to make up for the damage and precarity of the UK's asylum process.

The social worker expresses a similar sense of moral obligation toward Alem when she affirms, "it's our job to make sure that you're looked after. We are not the police, we are not from the government and we don't have any special powers, but we are on your side" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 20). Apart from shelter provision, the social worker assigns a lawyer who genuinely defends the Kelos' political asylum application, based on their liminal status as Eritreans and Ethiopians, a status that makes them prone to being accused of treason back home (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 140). Thus, Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* creates a refugee counter-narrative that reinstates hospitality from the political sphere into the ethical social realm that recalls us of Derrida's Law of unconditional hospitality.

Moreover, a scrutiny of the school community's collective resistance to the planned deportations of Alem and his father reinforces genuine hospitality, acknowledging the guest's humanity, dignity, worth, and complexity. Based on Alem's worthiness and the reliability of his persecution narrative, the community addresses a protest letter to the government recalling its "duty to offer them protection until it is completely safe for them to return to their homeland" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 155). During its consciousness-raising mission, the community is comparable to "a young army of resistance working for a cause they all believed in;" as a reinforcement of more than generosity (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 150).

Similar empathetic gestures explicitly teach us about the dynamic role youth can play in raising awareness of the reality of refugees and changing minds about xenophobic laws. As the young spokesman of the march asserts:

'[…] there are many people who are not happy with the way refugees are

> treated. We are the young people who are growing up in this country, and we demand better treatment for refugees, you know, more compassion. I have looked at your family history, and I see that your family came here as refugees. This country of ours was once empty and barren so in some ways we are all refugees.' (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 165)

As noted, the British government fails to uphold its responsibility for the vulnerable foreigner. It lost sight of the fact that, besides food shelter, father and son need empathy and kindness to survive an unfamiliar/alien environment and its exclusive rules. Even the original narrative of British nation-building, we are reminded, recounts the waves of immigrants from Rome, the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, the Normans, and others who have shaped British identity.

Eventually, the communal performances of solidarity with the young asylum seeker constitute a powerful act of hospitality that challenges the asylum rejections. Inspired by his schoolmates' team spirit, Alem capitalizes on his speaking potential and raises public awareness of his endurance and adaptability to the brutal realities of displacement. It is no coincidence, then, that his creator Zephaniah is referred to as a member of the group of British writers called "trickster figures" for their critical reflections on British culture and politics (Indrák 15).[1]

In the closing chapter titled "Let Me Speak", the young protagonist seizes on a decisive moment of self-definition where he regains his complex voice and challenges his trauma:

> 'To be really honest, I would prefer to live in Africa with my mother and my father, but they have both been killed and there is war in my country. […] Look at me, look at all the things that I am capable of, and think of all the things you could call me - a student, a lover of literature, a budding architect, a friend, a symbol of hope even, but what am I called? A refugee. Some people believe that I gave up my homeland and lost my parents in order to become a refugee; some people actually believe that I gave up thirteen months of sunshine to live in the cold and to be called a scrounger. I didn't. Circumstances beyond my control brought me here, and all that I can do now is pick myself up and try my best to make something out of what is left of my life. If good can come from bad, I'll make it. Fortunately, I have some good friends and a family that cares

1 In addition to Zephaniah, other "trickster writers" include Su Andi, Roger Robinson, Lemn Sissay, Anthony Joseph, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Patience Agbabi, and Lorraine Griffiths (Indrák 15).

> about me so I am not alone. I'm going to get some qualifications, a bike, and a girlfriend maybe, and if I'm able to, some time in the future I shall repay all that this country has given me. I am not a beggar, I am not bogus. My name is Alem Kelo.' (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 179)

The extended passage emphasizes the protagonist's sense of dignity and individuality, challenging the *de jure* reductive labels that overlook the persecuted refugee's involuntary immigration for survival and safety. It allows us to see him far beyond the stigma of the rootless refugee that is absurdly imposed on him partly by the current geopolitical division of the world into the Global North versus the Global South.

The refugee label is too narrow to encapsulate Alem's forward-looking vision of a borderless world. Serving as the author's mouthpiece, Alem assumes that "'If there is to be any fighting, we should be having a nonviolent fight to get rid of borders'" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 165). Since the status of refugeehood depends on the existence of borders of all kinds, which categorizes people into citizens and foreigners or insiders and outsiders, only a borderless world that recuperates Derrida's absolute hospitality, at least in emergencies, can guarantee safety for vulnerable groups and communities through a temporary suspension of what Derrida terms hospitality lawS.

As a refugee text, the examined novel sends out a hopeful message about hospitality, as utopian as Derrida's unconditional visitation. It exemplifies that refugee literature "is not (only) a literature of despair that dwells on the moral hypocrisy of the West," borrowing from Claire Gallien (725). "[N]or is it only a form of testimonial literature depicting traumatic events and an urgent intervention to respond to a fictional 'crisis'" (Gallien 725). Hence, in an onward-looking vision of a "mature" child, Alem estimates that global unity on justice is likely to restore the universality of hospitality. In such a way, he corroborates decolonizing the right to security from political sovereignty and the rigidity of geopolitical borders.

By granting the refugee protagonist space to defend unconditional hospitality for vulnerable people, the novel's analysis through the lens of hospitality versus inhospitality disrupts prevalent myths about refugees. Hope is right in stating that *Refugee Boy* breaks the tradition of refugee narratives "dominated by a focus on the refugees' long journeys with a warm reception at the end," while losing sight of "the hostility, homelessness, loss of family, identity and safety, and exposure to exploitation that is common" (194). In fact, Alem disrupts the stereotype of the homeless refugee, as he is the child of an educated family and is an avid reader of

literature and history. He is admirable for determining to "read every book in his room. But in his over-eagerness to learn, he hadn't finished a single one. Instead, at the side of his bed, he had four piles of books, each one with a bookmark inside it, each one unfinished" (Zephaniah, *Refugee* 55). While the unfinished readings demonstrate his will to keep up with the pace and complexity of the asylum process, they also mirror the intricacy of processing a new language, a new family, a new school, and particularly a new legal system from the fragmented standpoint of a traumatized child.

Likewise, though Zephaniah's text manages to disintegrate the dominant image of the undesirable refugee, its documentary style articulates a skeleton or a robot refugee to whom the reader is denied access. The external, superficial treatment of Alem as a victim of border conflicts, which are in turn the residue of colonial heritage, offers an explanation. Alem becomes a desirable refugee but not a desirable character. Indeed, Zephaniah's documentary representation of the refugee reflects the peril of the outsider-informant in refugee literature.

According to Julia Hope, a revealing perspective in refugee literature oscillates between direct testimony and collaborative literary productions. Some refugee texts have come to light through "refugee children themselves," while others are the fruition of "paired writing between a refugee and a Western author" (Hope 192). As a refugee text, *Refugee Boy* is inspired by refugee camps in Gaza and Montenegro, and from real-life refugee stories told by young teenagers who have been denied asylum in Britain ("Benjamin Zephaniah on Writing *Refugee Boy*" n.p.).[1] The author's indirect knowledge of refugeehood is reflected in the omniscient third-person narration. In other words, despite the research Zephaniah seems to have conducted on refugees and the ethical-political complexity of the refugee question, his handling of the refugee figure remains simplistic and distant. It challenges the suggestion that the "docu-novel" remains the favoured mode for telling the refugee experience (Hope 192).

Conclusion

In engaging with Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* mainly from the perspective of the Derridian ethical turn, the article reveals how hospitality and inhospitality perpetually flirt with each other. These two notions help challenge the core values of the host country and culture in contemporary England and test its welcoming and protective performances in ways that veer towards Derrida's notion of "Hostipitality". As such, *Refugee Boy* essentially deconstructs the monolithic

1 Forthcoming parenthetical references to this afterword will figure as "Benjamin".

representation of the refugee space as either hostile or hospitable, embracing a more nuanced, conditional rather than unconditional hospitality. In so doing, the current discussion of Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* aligns with emergent efforts to fill the gap in academic scholarship that is more concerned with the escalating pictorial refugee books than with narrative texts (Hope 193). The notion of masquerade further clarifies how the state's welcoming performance suggests a strong sense of sovereign legitimacy even while perpetuating inhospitality.

In support of "the ethical power of narrativity" (Liang 5), *Refugee Boy* stages children's literature as a locus to defend the voice of the voiceless, the voice of the refugee and the asylum seeker. Through its intricate conversation with the notions of hospitality and inhospitality, Zephaniah's refugee narrative thematizes the intersection of literature, ethics, and politics. Its decolonial vision of hospitality, broadly speaking, also banks on the valorized potential of empathy and solidarity for the individual and the community in facilitating the post-migration experience of asylum seekers.

Finally, *Refugee Boy* typifies the conflict between ethics and politics in interpretations of hospitality. It orchestrates Zephaniah as "a figurehead for critique and rebellion" (Indrák 15) by shedding light on the revisionary ways in which the prevalent images of the guest/refugee, such as Alem Kelo, were rewritten. This leads to enriching the refugee's post-migration experience and agency, elevating them from stigmatization to complexity. Hence, the novel engages with the child's perspective on the self/other encounter and with the challenging, growing need to show greater tolerance and welcoming towards vulnerable individuals in the current, conflictual world. By investing in collective action as a turning point in Alem's journey, the novel does not abandon its ethical vision of hospitality. It enhances the possibility of social change through amplifying the youth's rebellious voice.

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Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and De-Darkening of Cruel Carnival in *She's the Man*

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Abstract This paper examines how Shakespeare's carnival tradition is ethically transformed in the 2006 teen comedy *She's the Man*, a film adaptation of *Twelfth Night*. While scholarship has long recognized the cruel, carnival-like undercurrent in *Twelfth Night*, most clearly seen in how Malvolio is humiliated and victimized, modern film studies often note that contemporary adaptations deliberately soften Malvolio's bitterness to suit mainstream comic tastes. Building on these observations, this paper focuses on Malvolio's story and its transformation into the teenage character Malcolm, arguing that the film systematically removes the play's carnivalesque cruelty through neutralizing the scapegoat figure, undoing the sacrificial mechanism and adopting cinematic-specific aesthetic strategies. Driven by teen-film conventions and early 21st century anti-bullying values, the adaptation negotiates between the strange, distant ethics of Shakespeare's original and contemporary moral norms. This adaptation brings mixed gains and losses: It makes Shakespeare accessible to young audiences and promotes inclusive values, yet gives up the original play's unresolved moral ambiguity and its sharp critique of communal violence.

Keywords *Twelfth Night*; Malvolio; *She's the Man*; cruel carnival; literary adaptation ethics

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Introduction

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* has long been praised for its lyrical language, gender ambiguity, and seemingly redemptive vision of communal reconciliation. In his

foundational study of Shakespearean festive comedy, C. L. Barber argues that the play represents the peak of this dramatic mode, using folk carnival traditions to temporarily invert social hierarchies and create communal harmony (4). Later scholars have revisited Barber's optimistic reading and uncovered a dark undercurrent within the play's festive framework, most clearly seen in the punitive mistreatment of Malvolio. Stephen Dickey analyzes the harsh and unresolved nature of the prank against Malvolio, and he believes that the staged madness, public shaming, and unjust confinement produce a form of communal cruelty and disrupt the play's harmonious comic ending (271-72). Extending this line of inquiry, Elizabeth Klett examines teen film adaptations of *Twelfth Night* and argues that *She's the Man* (2006) rewrites the play's gender plot[1] and softens the harsh social tensions in Malvolio's subplot (70). Scholarship on *Twelfth Night*'s screen adaptations has extensively explored cross-dressing, gender performance, and cross-cultural transplantation. This tendency is clearly visible in criticism on *She's the Man*, where much existing scholarship concentrates on gender identity and adolescent romance, and celebrates its accessible retelling of Viola's cross-dressing plot. However, the vast majority of the cinematic readings frequently overlook the reshaping of Malvolio's storyline, the site where the comedy's festive values are most severely tested. Popular cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare frequently streamline the original plays' sharp satirical and social undertones to cater to mainstream romantic and youthful aesthetic preferences (Rothwell, 1999). Lisa-Jane Roberts observes that modern screen adaptations repeatedly reshape Malvolio for contemporary viewers, softening his vengeful resentment to suit mainstream comic sensibilities (315). Yet little scholarship closely examines how *She's the Man* neutralizes *Twelfth Night*'s cruel carnival and lessens the harm inflicted on this steward cast as a scapegoat. These studies provide a foundation and points of departure for the current analysis.

This paper takes up that gap and reads popular cinema through the lens of ethical criticism, asking what a film changes when it rewrites plot and character together with the moral logic underneath Shakespeare's festive world. Among screen adaptations of *Twelfth Night*, *She's the Man* is a striking case. Viola Hastings disguises herself as her twin brother Sebastian to play on the boys' soccer team at Illyria Prep, and there the reimagined Malvolio surfaces as Malcolm Festes, the unpopular dorm director. Malcolm's characterization, this paper argues, keeps the cruel carnival and scapegoat motifs of the original alive in the twenty-first century.

1 See *She's the Man*, directed by Andy Fickman, Dream Works Picture, 2006, for this modern adaptation of *Twelfth Night*.

Tracing how the film reshapes him shows what happens to those motifs when they move from the early modern stage to the modern screen.

This study compares the play and the film by combining two strands of theory. Barber's festive comedy framework and Bakhtin's carnival theory describe how carnival works; Girard's scapegoat mechanism supplies the criterion that separates benign festivity from cruel carnival. Girard's model matters here because it names the collective violence that festive readings tend to pass over. Traditional accounts treat carnival as a temporary loosening of social restraints that ends in renewal, but cruel carnival purges communal disorder by marginalizing and sacrificing a designated victim. This distinction explains why Malvolio is dismissed and sidelined within the Renaissance festive world. To compare the original with the film, the study also draws on Nie Zhenzhao's notion of the ethical environment, which shows how changing social and moral contexts reshape narrative strategies and soften the marginalizing power of cruel carnival in cinematic rewriting. Rothwell's observation supports this move: mainstream Shakespearean screen adaptations routinely blunt the sharp social and satirical edges of the originals to favor crowd-pleasing romantic narratives. Together, these perspectives form the analytical framework through which the paper traces the ethical transformation of the cruel carnival and the scapegoat narrative from *Twelfth Nigh*t to *She's the Man*.

Malvolio as Carnival Scapegoat: Cruel Comedy and Ethical Fracture in *Twelfth Night*

Barber's saturnalian pattern is where this study begins reading the play's carnival tradition. In his account, festive release moves toward communal clarification and ends by reaffirming the social order. In his foundational study of Shakespearean festive comedy, Barber argues that this genre embodies the Renaissance cultural dialectic between official order and folk carnival freedom. Folk carnival traditions temporarily suspend social hierarchies to foster communal joy. Within this comic mode, social boundaries are lifted and established norms are playfully subverted (4). This interpretive tradition has long shaped mainstream interpretations of *Twelfth Night*: Olivia's household becomes a space where rigid social rules loosen, romantic confusion multiplies, and the comic energy of the feast dissolves class rigidity. This traditional reading thus downplays the bullying Malvolio endures, and frames the mistreatment and humiliation against him merely as a comic corrective of social pretension, with no trace of violence for his arrogant ambition to transcend his inherent social station. Barber further elaborates that the temporary rank inversion inherent in festive carnival serves a communal purpose: through the playful release

of repressed social tensions, the community achieves collective clarification, reconsolidating normative social order after temporary festive disruption (8). Within this saturnalian festive framework, individual excess is always subordinated to collective well-being. Malvolio's inappropriate ambition to transcend his fixed social status disrupts the balanced operation of communal festivity. Consequently, his subsequent humiliation and exclusion are framed as a legitimate disciplinary price paid to restore and sustain holistic festive harmony, with his individual desire and suffering deliberately marginalized for the sake of communal stability.

Against Barber's saturnalian paradigm of redemptive, order-restoring festivity, Bakhtin's theory of the "carnivalesque" offers a critical lens to examine Malvolio's victimization. While Barber's model emphasizes communal harmony and social reconciliation, Bakhtin stresses the "subversiveness" and "unfinalizability" of carnival rituals, revealing the latent cruelty of *Twelfth Night*'s communal mockery that traditional festive readings overlook. To fully account for the cruelty underpinning the play's festive unity, it is essential to move beyond Barber's redemptive festive paradigm and adopt Bakhtin's notion of the cruel carnivalesque. Bakhtin argues that medieval and Renaissance carnival holds an inherent "dualistic" nature, rooted in ritual decrowning, public ridicule, and symbolic exclusion rather than pure benevolence. Carnival operates as subtle symbolic violence, with its celebrated inversion of hierarchy accompanied by inevitable marginalization of outsiders. Central to this logic is "carnival laughter", defined as fundamentally "ambivalent", simultaneously affirming and negating, elevating and debasing, celebrating and condemning (11-14). In *Twelfth Night*, such laughter unites the community by condemning Malvolio's puritanical temperament and ambitious desires as incompatible with carnival community's ethos. The very communal energy that dissolves rigid social hierarchies simultaneously singles out marginalized victims to consolidate temporary group cohesion. In this sense, Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory exposes the core limitation of Barber's harmonious saturnalian model. Carnival unity is not universally inclusive; instead, it relies on collective ritual ridicule to unite participants, inherently distinguishing between insiders eligible to join subversive festive gameplay and excluded outsiders who become the ritual's sacrificial targets.

While Bakhtin's dualistic framework uncovers the punitive and exclusionary logic inherent in cruel carnival, it fails to fully elaborate how collective carnival hostility targets and sacrifices a specific individual. This explanatory gap can be effectively filled by Girard's scapegoat mechanism, which further clarifies how carnival's ambivalent laughter and symbolic exclusion culminate in the deliberate

marginalization and victimization of Malvolio as a communal scapegoat in *Twelfth Night*. For Girard, communities in crisis manage internal tension by directing collective aggression toward a single outsider, whose expulsion or humiliation restores a sense of unity. Girard further identifies three stages in this process: First, a lack of differentiation in which social boundaries become unstable (14); second, the selection of a surrogate victim who is blamed for the crisis (18); and third, the collective act of expulsion or sacrifice that restores order (40). The laughter that dissolves hierarchy simultaneously builds a new one, with the scapegoat at the bottom. Malvolio fits the model closely. The household of Olivia is already in a state of festive disorder when the play begins: Sir Toby drinks, Sir Andrew chases Olivia, and Maria plots. Social boundaries are blurred, and the household's internal hierarchies are unstable. Into this crisis steps Malvolio, whose sober puritanism and social ambition make him a perfect target. He is the figure who refuses to participate in the household's drunken, festive indulgence, who repeatedly scolds Sir Toby and his companions for their disorderly conduct.

Girard's second stage, the selection of a surrogate victim, is not an abstract process; it is enacted through language, and Malvolio's own words provide the community with the evidence it needs to cast him as an outsider. When he interrupts the midnight revels with the demand, "Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time, in you?" (Shakespeare 2.3), he speaks in the administrative vocabulary of order, decorum and temporal discipline. This is the language of the steward, not the reveller. Maria immediately labels him "a kind of puritan" (Shakespeare 2.3), and the label sticks because it captures a behavioral truth: Malvolio's refusal to laugh with the community marks him as an outsider within his own household. In the logic of carnival, the demand for order is itself an offence, because it denies the temporary suspension of hierarchy on which festive community depends. Malvolio's words thus do not merely express personal stiffness; they supply the community with the very justification it needs to designate him as the scapegoat. His language completes the process Girard describes: He is not chosen arbitrarily but self-marked as the antithesis of carnival. Malvolio's rejection of carnival pleasures marks him as alien to the group's communal bond. At the same time, he is intimately bound to the household as Olivia's steward, which means his exclusion can be staged as a domestic correction. By punishing Malvolio, the household can temporarily consolidate its own fractured solidarity.

Girard's third stage, the collective act of expulsion, is crucial for understanding the ethical stakes of the Malvolio subplot. The scapegoat mechanism works only if the community believes, even momentarily, that the victim deserves his fate.

Maria's forged letter is engineered violence in the form of a prank: It is built so that Malvolio convicts himself. By manipulating Malvolio's class ambition, the conspirators ensure that he will publicly humiliate himself, thereby providing the community with a justification for its cruelty. The letter is the instrument through which this justification is manufactured, and its most insidious feature is that it forces Malvolio to betray himself. The poem it contains, "I may command where I adore; But silence, like a Lucrece knife, With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore; M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" (Shakespeare 2.5), is deliberately ambiguous. "I may command where I adore" can be read as the voice of a noblewoman who loves a servant, but Malvolio interprets it as Olivia's confession of love for him. The mysterious letters "M.O.A.I." compel him to decode them as his own name: "M. Malvolio. 'M'—why, that begins my name" (Shakespeare 2.5). This decoding scene is darkly comic because Malvolio's vanity is not simply mocked; it is structurally exploited. The letter needs no false information. It hands Malvolio a puzzle whose only solution is the one his ambition already desires. Maria's trap thus operates through a cruel form of self-fulfilling prophecy; the letter never has to lie. It offers Malvolio exactly the reading his ambition is already waiting to find, and he supplies the rest himself. In Girard's terms, the scapegoat is made to participate in his own sacrifice, which is precisely what makes the community's violence appear justified. Malvolio's offence lies less in personal vice than in his desire to rise across class boundaries, a desire that disturbs the household's unspoken social hierarchy. The tricksters are fully aware that Malvolio's ambition is rooted in class longing, not mere vanity. Maria's scheme is carefully calibrated to bait that ambition, knowing full well the shame that will follow when Malvolio acts on the forged message. When Malvolio appears before Olivia smiling and oddly dressed, Olivia believes he has lost his reason (Shakespeare 3.4). He is then locked in a dark chamber, accused of madness, and denied opportunities to defend himself. This is not light comic correction; it is institutionalized psychological persecution.

The persecution reaches its peak in the dark-room scene, where Feste disguises himself as Sir Topas and torments Malvolio under the pretense of religious authority. Here the play makes visible what Girard's theory predicts. The community does more than exclude its scapegoat; It redefines him as morally or mentally deviant, and in that redefinition finds its justification. This redefinition is not merely conceptual. It unfolds through verbal exchange, and the dark-room dialogue makes the process visible. Malvolio insists on an empirical fact: "I am not mad, Sir Topas, I say to you, this house is dark" (Shakespeare 4.2). Sir Topas responds by redefining darkness as a spiritual condition: "Madman, thou errest, I say, there is no darkness

but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog" (Shakespeare 4.2). Under the cover of comedy, the exchange strips Malvolio of rational standing. His appeal to sensory evidence is dismissed as proof of madness, and the theological language of exorcism is used to deny him any credible voice. The audience knows he is sane, and the tricksters know it too, yet the community maintains the fiction of his insanity because that fiction justifies his confinement. Malvolio's repeated attempts to reason his way out of the dark room, "I am no more mad than you are: Make the trial of it in any constant question" (Shakespeare 4.2), are precisely what the persecutors refuse to hear. The scene thus dramatizes Girard's insight that the scapegoat's voice is structurally excluded from the community's judgment. The more Malvolio speaks rationally, the more his speech is taken as evidence of unreason. What the audience watches is the production of a persecutory truth, in which the victim's own words are turned into evidence against him. The gap between the characters' justification and the audience's knowledge produces a distinctly uncomfortable form of comedy. We are invited to laugh, but we are also made aware that the laughter is built on a lie. This double structure echoes Bakhtin's claim that carnival laughter is ambivalent: It can be liberating and cruel at the same time. In *Twelfth Night*, the liberating energy of the festive household and the cruelty inflicted on Malvolio are not separate plotlines; they are two aspects of the same carnival mechanism.

Dickey captures this duality when he notes that *Twelfth Night*'s comedy operates as a "mastiff comedy", one whose laughter carries sharp, biting force, and whose joke inflicts real harm on its target (255). The play's closing scene lays bare this unresolved ethical wound. When Malvolio finally emerges from confinement and learns that the letter was a fraud, he delivers his famous parting threat, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (Shakespeare 5.1). Unlike most comic antagonists in Renaissance comedy, he is not reconciled, forgiven, or redeemed. He storms off the stage with unappeased anger, leaving the audience with an uncomfortable residue. The festive celebration of marriage and reconciliation at the play's end cannot fully erase the cruelty enacted against Malvolio. The carnival feast, in the end, is bought at the expense of a scapegoat's psychological suffering. What makes this ending so unsettling is its failure to provide the closure that comedy conventionally promises. The marriages at the play's close—Viola to Orsino, Olivia to Sebastian—cannot erase what Malvolio endures: Public humiliation, wrongful imprisonment, and a complete denial of justice. The play ends on a threat: Malvolio's parting vow is never answered.

The cruelty of the play cuts three ways, and each works against the comic

tone. Among the servants, Malvolio is sabotaged and betrayed by the people he lives with; the intimacy makes the betrayal sharper, and shared amusement turns into targeted harm. Through the household hierarchy, the punishment falls on his attempt to rise beyond his station. No real moral fault of his justifies it; the carnival community leaves no room for social transgression. Through the laughter itself, both characters and audiences are pulled into festive unity, a unity bought at the price of one scapegoat's suffering. These three layers leave the play ethically unresolved. They break the promised comic resolution and turn the carnival punitive, undercutting Barber's saturnalian reading of festivity as redemptive.

This tension between festive gaiety and scapegoating cruelty sits at the center of *Twelfth Night*, and it becomes a problem for any modern adaptation. The comedy's charm rests on the suffering and marginalization of one character, so a film that wants accessible, family-friendly storytelling cannot keep that arrangement without revising its ethical terms. A filmmaker could retain the punitive carnival logic, soften its cruelty, or reframe the sacrificial narrative altogether. *She's the Man* takes the third path. It restructures the Malvolio storyline to remove the sharpest ethical conflicts and brings the narrative in line with the moral and aesthetic tastes of young audiences today.

From Malvolio to Malcolm: Layered De-Darkening and Character Remediation in *She's the Man*

Against this cruel comedy and ethical fracture at the heart of *Twelfth Night*'s carnival scapegoating plot, *She's the Man* rewrites Shakespeare's brutal festive logic. The film relocates *Twelfth Night* to an American high school. Viola, denied a place on her school's girls' soccer team, disguises herself as her twin brother Sebastian and enrolls to play on the boys' team, where Olivia, the school's most admired student, is drawn to the cross-dressed "Sebastian." Malcolm Festes, the dorm director, functions as the film's counterpart to Malvolio. The film ends as a conventional romantic comedy: The disguise is exposed, the couples are united, and no character is expelled. As previous analysis has illustrated, the "cruel carnivalesque" in *Twelfth Night* manifests itself through three layered forms of communal cruelty that destabilize the play's comic framework: it fosters communal unity through interpersonal betrayal and sabotage against the scapegoat Malvolio, imposes disproportionate punishment to suppress his class transgression and social ambition rather than moral error, and ensnares both internal characters and external audiences in ethical complicity through ambivalent carnival laughter that legitimizes the scapegoat's unjust suffering. It is precisely this threefold cruelty embedded

in Shakespeare's carnival logic that modern film adaptations seek to dilute and sanitize.

In the play, Malvolio's yellow stockings and cross-gartered legs read as comic precisely because they mark him as socially out of place. They stand as a tangible symbolic metaphor for his misplaced class ambition: a subordinate who improperly drapes himself in the performative trappings of a higher rank. As a household steward, Malvolio's entire sense of self is confined to his subordinate institutional rank. His vain fantasy of becoming "Count Malvolio" reveals a deeper, transgressive urge: to breach the invisible yet unyielding class boundary that underpins the household's social order. The mistreatment he endures is far more than casual festive bullying—it is a deliberate, politically charged enforcement of hierarchical discipline. What the household punishes relentlessly is not merely his arrogance, but his presumptuous ambition to rise above his assigned station. Even in the liberating, carnivallic atmosphere that suspends ordinary social formalities, the ruling class refuses to tolerate any challenge to the fixed stratification. The cruelty directed at Malvolio is therefore systemic and political: it serves to police class boundaries, suppress subordinate upward mobility, and uphold the rigid hierarchical structure that governs the household. *She's the Man* plants Malcolm firmly in Malvolio's place before it softens him. Malvolio stands at the bottom of a household class hierarchy; Malcolm occupies the lowest rung on a different hierarchy, the teenage social ladder. Both characters begin as marginalised figures marked out for mockery, yet *She's the Man* keeps the marginal position but changes its code. Malcolm is the school nerd, a dorm director who polices shower-shoe rules, infatuated with Olivia and laughed at behind his back. Unpopular and awkward, he is the adolescent equivalent of the steward who does not belong. Like Malvolio, he is marked as an outsider within his social world, singled out for ridicule when he dares to reach beyond his assigned place. Their correspondences are deliberate. Both men hold a small institutional office: The steward runs Olivia's household, and the dorm director polices the dorm. Both use their little authority to spoil other people's pleasure. Critics have long read Malvolio as a puritan figure, sour toward the feasting and music of the household; the film translates that sourness into school rules, the shower-shoes regulation Malcolm enforces with officious relish. Both men also nurse a hopeless crush on Olivia, a woman above them in rank.

However, none of the above makes Malcolm a second Malvolio. Both figures are marginal, but only one becomes a scapegoat. To realize de-darkening, the film's first intervention is to dismantle the original scapegoating structure and erase its political dimensions through textual restructuring. Deploying character

reconstruction, symbolic naming, trait splitting and revised narrative closure, it undermines core stages of Girard's scapegoating sequence: selection of a marginalized target, collective humiliation, isolation, and communal renewal via the victim's expulsion. In *She's the Man,* sharp class grievance gives way to campus adolescent peer conflict, and the "jock versus nerd" code of teen comedy makes the hierarchy legible to a 21st-century audience. Malcolm's conflict with Viola (disguised as her brother Sebastian) comes not from athletic rivalry but from romantic jealousy: Olivia's sudden interest in the transfer student wounds the boy who has pined for her for three years. The humiliation Malcolm suffers stays interpersonal and temporary, confined to teenage heartbreak, rather than the structural, class-based punishment that destroys Malvolio, whose downfall is structural. He is singled out by a coordinated plot, locked in a dark room, deprived of his own senses, and finally expelled from the household that was his world. Every stage of Girard's mechanism is in place: selection, humiliation, isolation, and a community that heals by sacrificing him. Malcolm's story keeps none of these stages. He is laughed at, but nobody plans his downfall. He is mocked for his crush on Olivia, yet he stays in class, in the dorm, on the edge of the group. He is never isolated or confined, and he is never cast out. Where the play expels Malvolio, the film only embarrasses Malcolm. At the Illyria-Cornwall match, Malcolm denounces "Sebastian" as a girl, and the principal halts the game to interrogate Sebastian in front of the stands. When the real Sebastian proves himself a boy, the accusation collapses in front of the whole school (01:18:44-20:54). The film even protects Malcolm from the failure of his own revenge. The joke lands on Malcolm, and it is immediately repaired: after Viola tells the truth, he grabs the megaphone and announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, I hate to say I told you so, but…" (01:27:19-28:42). The boy who tried to expose the heroine is folded back into the joke. Where Malvolio exits the stage burning with vows of vengeance, Malcolm is handed the microphone. He remains on the social margins, yet the sacrificial apparatus that once turns marginalization into communal scapegoating has been dismantled.

The adaptation's divergences also emerge in a host of finer details. The name "Malcolm Festes" merges the two figures positioned on opposite sides of the play's gulling plot: Malvolio, the trick's victim, and Feste, the fool who helps orchestrate it. Feste in *Twelfth Night* is no mere bystander. In the dark-room scene (4.2), he plays a pivotal part in the persecution. Disguised as the curate Sir Topas, Feste visits the imprisoned Malvolio, badgering him with religious sophistry and turning the steward's anguish into a cruel game. Far from merely following others' orders, Feste lends the prank its most psychologically cutting edge. The film merges the two

roles into one teenager, the persecuted and the persecutor. Without separate figures for the victim and the tormentor, the collective cruelty loses a clear focal target. This narrative reconfiguration dissolves the play's sharp class politics, stripping the collective torment of its structural force. The displacement goes one step further when Malvolio's name is handed to Malcolm's pet tarantula in *She's the Man*. In *Twelfth Night*, the steward's hopes explode when a forged letter appears to validate them, stages by the household's collective prank; Malcolm's longings spill out in a private monologue to his pet tarantula, Malvolio, with no manipulative ruse to stoke his fantasies (00:37:58-38:31). The scapegoat who is expelled so the group can heal becomes a pet in a terrarium, a creature to confide in rather than a victim to sacrifice. This shift neutralizes the original's sacrificial force, turning a charged social conflict into an idiosyncratic teen joke. Paradoxically, the film fragments Malvolio's traits between two separate characters, Malcolm and Monique Valentine, Sebastian's former girlfriend. Monique is an original creation for the teen adaptation with no direct analogue in *Twelfth Night*. She carries portions of Malvolio's vanity and social ambition, traits redistributed away from Malcolm. Roberts reads this naming as part of a wider splitting: the film divides Malvolio's traits between Malcolm and Monique, and even the surviving fragment is tamed (307). Roberts's reading of character-splitting unpacks one major de-darkening strategy in *She's the Man*. Where Shakespeare constructs Malvolio as a unified social scapegoat, the teen adaptation fragments his qualities across multiple figures to defuse the play's harsher social violence.

On the cinematic level, bright visual tones, brisk comic pacing, and public, luminous spaces further neutralize trauma. All potentially humiliating moments involving Malcolm are reframed as reversible teenage comedy rather than destructive social punishment. The three scenes, namely the "dorm tarantula monologue" (00:37:58-38:31), the "soccer pitch accusation" (01:18:44-20:54), and the "post-revelation megaphone moment" (01:27:19-28:42), trace a narrative arc from private grievance to public accusation and then to comic reconciliation, showing how the film gradually defuses the potential for scapegoating violence. Across all three scenes, shared cinematic strategies operate to neutralize trauma. Their spaces, whether intimate dorm room or sun-drenched stadium, are non-oppressive and free from the dark, claustrophobic confinement of Shakespeare's dark room. The camera avoids lingering on Malcolm's suffering; snappy editing and restrained reaction shots keep his embarrassment temporary. The pacing and tone consistently frame conflict as light, reversible teenage comedy, rather than escalating the moment into lasting, socially destructive humiliation.

The film also employs upbeat background music, snappy comic cuts, and restrained character reaction shots to confine all personal embarrassment to a temporary, superficial social friction. Strategically avoiding prolonged visual emphasis on vulnerability, the film never dwells on moments of discomfort, shame, or social alienation, thereby eliminating the lingering psychological unease embedded in Shakespeare's original carnival structure. Where Shakespeare's text lets Malvolio's suffering unfold across an entire act, the film confines each embarrassing incident to one discrete scene, resolves it at once, and relies only on scattered crowd reaction shots rather than sustained, punitive gazing at Malcolm's humiliation. The visual reworking fundamentally alters the audience's affective response: instead of witnessing institutional psychological persecution, viewers observe harmless teenage awkwardness. The film keeps the embarrassment but removes the machinery that turns it into trauma. The film's ending makes this contrast explicit. In the play, the festive community celebrates multiple marriages while Malvolio storms offstage. In the film, the concluding soccer match and romantic resolutions integrate Malcolm back into the social world. At the climactic debutante ball in the final sequence, two of the on-stage pairings directly echo the romantic resolution of *Twelfth Night*: Viola and Duke, and Olivia and Sebastian. The third couple, Toby and Eunice, is an original addition invented for the teen comedy, with no direct counterpart in Shakespeare's play. Most attendees remain unpaired, and Malcolm is among them, who stays within the student assembly and participates in the celebration as part of the community.

Malcolm retains his marginal status, but the film refuses to cast him out of the final comic reconciliation. The community never has to drive him away, for it never shuts him out entirely. Following this logic, the demand for sacrificial suffering falls away. The group no longer needs a victim's lingering resentment to hold itself together. Where Shakespeare's play secures communal harmony by banishing Malvolio into lasting bitterness, *She's the Man* dismantles that scapegoating logic entirely. It keeps the marginal figure within the communal fold, rewriting the destructive social punishment of humiliation into fleeting, reversible adolescent comedy.

Media and Ethics: Motivations behind the adaptation's reworking of the carnivalesque structure

As discussed above, the noticeable elimination and softening of class-based scapegoating and communal humiliation in *She's the Man* derive in large part from two intertwined contextual transformations, cross-media remediation from early

modern theatrical performance to 21st century commercial teen film, and cross-temporal ethical evolution from Renaissance festive culture to contemporary adolescent moral norms. Media-specific industrial constraints determine the representational possibility of cruel carnival narratives, while temporal ethical shifts define their moral legitimacy. The synergy of these two dimensions ultimately shapes the film's de-darkening strategies, rewriting early modern festive cruelty into morally appropriate and commercially viable youth media content.

Early modern theatre was a live, one-off communal ritual, and its sensory and performative qualities suited carnival festivity well. On Shakespeare's open stage, Malvolio's humiliation is carried mostly by verbal ridicule and stylised acting. That performative choice keeps a clear distance between theatrical spectacle and real harm. Because there were no close-ups and the festive frame was strictly time-bound, early modern audiences could tell ritual role reversal from genuine cruelty. Film breaks down that protective barrier. With tight close-ups, hyper-realistic imagery and an immersive viewing experience, cinema removes the detached distance the stage kept. This shift in medium changes how carnival cruelty can be presented, imposing distinct visual and industrial constraints on how scapegoating narratives reach the screen. As Siegfried Kracauer argues, filmic imagery captures fragments of tangible everyday reality, preserves moments that a live performance would let vanish, and enables their endless digital reproduction and circulation (300).

Kracauer further observes that "any huge close-up reveals new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures, for instance", which "blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before" (48). This helps explain why moments acceptable on the early modern stage demand careful reworking when translated to film, especially for digital distribution. On the Elizabethan stage, even Malvolio's confinement and public humiliation operate under the licence of festive carnival rather than depicting prolonged psychological trauma. Bound within the time and physical limits of a single live show, these staged humiliations register for audiences as contained, temporary theatrical spectacles. Twenty-first-century teen films operate by a different set of rules. They exist as endlessly reproducible, market-oriented media artefacts within a widespread digital convergence culture. Freed from the spatial and temporal constraints of live theatre, their scenes circulate broadly and permanently online. Any sensitive or disturbing depiction of humiliation thus carries amplified affective weight and long-term repercussions absent from one-off stage performances.

A direct replication of Malvolio's systematic public humiliation and confinement in *She's the Man* would inevitably translate ritual carnival play into

tangible visual trauma, violating the stable and positive affective contract that defines mainstream teen comedy. Furthermore, the industrial logic of Hollywood youth cinema prioritizes universal audience accessibility and sustainable commercial benefits, and unresolved hostility and merciless collective scapegoating would severely damage the film's cross-platform marketability. For these material and industrial reasons, the film erases the original confinement plot, weakens group collusion in mockery, and transforms sustained ritual humiliation into isolated, harmless comic embarrassment, completing the preliminary media-driven sanitization of Shakespeare's cruel carnival.

Beyond the material and industrial constraints of cross-media remediation, the film's de-darkening also reflects a shift in ethical norms across time. Adaptation is not the direct transportation of the canonical text; it is a reorganization of that ethical material. Such rewriting involves value renewal across history. The transformation of textual meaning "involves multiple ethical contexts: the ethical context of the original author, the ethical context constructed within the text, and the ethical context inhabited by later readers and adapters" (Pan and Zhang 868). Ethical standards shift historically rather than remaining fixed across time. Many carnival behaviors permissible in early modern culture, including the public shaming and punitive confinement inflicted on Malvolio in *Twelfth Night,* no longer align with contemporary understandings of personal dignity and psychological vulnerability. Within Renaissance social and moral frameworks, Malvolio's class-coded humiliation carried legitimate communal justification. As a presumptuous social climber who deliberately rejects collective festive harmony, he occupies the culturally sanctioned role of the carnival scapegoat: his public degradation serves restorative social functions and satisfies the period's communal ethical priorities. Today, however, the same punitive spectacle reads as unethical, targeting individual dignity and inflicting lasting psychological harm that modern audiences can no longer dismiss as mere festive play.

The early 2000s, precisely when *She's the Man* was produced and released, saw an ethical shift in American youth culture against school bullying, driven by a series of high-profile campus violence incidents. The 1999 Columbine massacre reshaped public understanding of adolescent harassment. The U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative that followed found that a number of school attackers had suffered long-term peer bullying and social exclusion before their violent acts[1]. The awakening

1 See United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004).

led to nationwide reforms. American schools adopted zero-tolerance policies for peer harassment, and public media and education discourse worked to dismantle the old idea that "teen teasing is harmless fun". By the mid-2000s, researchers and educators had firmly classified targeted group mockery, prolonged peer humiliation, and collective exclusion as harmful bullying. Such behaviour harms young people's mental well-being and undermines safety within schools[1]. Youth culture scholar Henry Jenkins makes this clear: contemporary teen media ethics centre empathy, inclusive social exchange, and psychological safeguards for vulnerable groups[2]. It rejects the Renaissance tolerance of ritualised group victimisation. Under this strict modern ethical framework, the play's class-bound collective carnival punishment loses moral legitimacy when transplanted to an egalitarian high-school setting.

The film therefore removes the class root of Malvolio's punishment, turns collective conspiracy into casual awkwardness, and strips out every trace of cruel, punitive humiliation. These revisions reconcile early modern festive conventions with the zero-tolerance bullying ethics and humane adolescent values of 21st century American campus culture. Once adapters internalize the canonical text as ethical memory and rebuild it within a new ethical framework, revising its outdated narrative treatments becomes an obligation rather than a choice. *She's the Man*'s treatment of Malvolio is thus a historically bounded decision: it brings the play into line with modern ethical standards.

Medium and morality together set the boundaries of this adaptation. Cinematic techniques and industrial constraints limit how much cruelty can be shown on screen, and the evolving ethics of adolescent culture filter out carnival practices that clash with modern values. The softening of scapegoating violence in *She's the Man* is therefore not an arbitrary creative choice; it answers to the combined demands of a new medium and a new moral context. At the same time, this revision does not break with Shakespeare. Renaissance theatre could treat ritual humiliation as comedy, yet *Twelfth Night* itself registers unease over Malvolio's treatment. The film's de-darkening thus amplifies an ethical ambivalence already latent in the source play, updating its festive logic for twenty-first-century cinematic norms and

1 See Melissa Beattie-Moss, "Probing Question: Can School Bullying Have Deadly Consequences?," Pennsylvania State University, 22 Oct. 2006. This news report summarizes empirical findings from Carney and Hazler's bullying-related research.

2 See Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Jenkins discusses the "ethics challenge within participatory culture, which emphasizes empathy and care for vulnerable youth participants"; the contrast with Renaissance attitudes toward ritualized group victimization is my own argument.

youth sensibilities. In the end, cross-media remediation and cross-temporal ethical change jointly reshape the film's comic resolution, keeping the harmonious closure of romantic comedy while removing the sacrificial victimhood that anchors early modern carnival culture.

Conclusion

She's the Man's systematic reworking of Shakespeare's carnival logic exemplifies how early modern festive ethics evolve across media and eras. By fully dismantling the play's traditional scapegoating mechanism, abolishing the targeted marginalization, communal expulsion, and sacrificial suffering that anchor *Twelfth Night*'s dark carnival, the adaptation gains clear contemporary merits, yet it also surrenders vital layers of the source's artistic complexity.

The clearest gain of this reworking is accessibility, both ethical and cultural. Once the normalized cruelty and ritual victimization are removed from Shakespeare's text, the dated violent undertones of Renaissance carnival fall away. The revision brings the classic narrative in line with modern anti-bullying advocacy and inclusive gender values, and young audiences find the comedy easy to approach and relevant to their lives. Aesthetic remediation thus amounts to a form of ethical renewal. It connects early modern dramatic tradition with progressive modern social discourse, and in doing so keeps the canonical text alive in popular youth culture and education.

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Defying the Darkness: Victimhood, Agency, and Patriarchy in *The Story of Zahra*

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Abstract This article examines Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* through a multi-theoretical feminist framework to challenge binary readings of victimhood and agency. The novel's structural division between peace and war mirrors Zahra's fragmented identity, shaped by systemic patriarchal violence in both domestic and national contexts. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Nawal El Saadawi, and Fatema Mernissi, the study argues that Zahra's experiences cannot be reduced to either passive suffering or explicit rebellion. Instead, her silence, psychological breakdown, self-harm, and unconventional sexual choices function as complex forms of negotiation within oppressive structures. While Zahra is undeniably subjected to gendered violence—from family members, husbands, and the wartime sniper—she simultaneously performs subtle and embodied acts of resistance. The Lebanese Civil War intensifies rather than initiates patriarchal brutality, revealing its deeply entrenched nature. Ultimately, the article contends that Zahra's agency is fragmented, paradoxical, and constrained, reflecting the difficulty of achieving autonomy within rigid patriarchal systems that predate and outlast war.

Keywords Patriarchy, feminist theory, victimhood and agency, silent Resistance

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Introduction

Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* is a portrayal of how its female protagonist, a young Lebanese girl named Zahra, navigates the rigid constraints of a profoundly patriarchal society, and the challenges involved in seeking her agency and autonomy. *The Story of Zahra* is divided into two parts which may appropriately represent the two sides of Zahra, the female protagonist for whom the title of the work is named after. As will be captured in this article, Zahra's life can be explained through the façade of acceptance and tolerance on the outside where she does not rebel directly. At the same time, Zahra's narrative where her thoughts and perspectives come to light, she is clearly fighting a raging war within.

Therefore, the division of the novel into a peaceful and a wartime narrative seem to represent and reflect Zahra's inner struggles and outer strength coupled with indirect rebellion adds depth to her character, making the audience wonder if Zahra is a victim or a rebel. At the same time, peace and war exemplifies the reality of Zahra's station in life. While she appears to be at peace with her stake in life, a war brews inside. Yet, there are no simple identifications and readily available conclusions in Zahra's story, as this narrative subtly challenges conceptions of women as either resistors or victims of marginalization and oppression. As such, Zahra's silent victimization and suffering due to patriarchal structures in the first volume of *The Story of Zahra* contrasts with her empowerment in the second part.

In "The Scars of Peace," the first part of the novel, Zahra attempts to navigate the patriarchal society before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. While peaceful for the time being, Zahra's own personal experiences can hardly be described as such. To begin with Zahra's mother uses her to cover for marital infidelity, and her Zahra's father physically abuses her. As if turmoil in the home

is not enough, friend of Zahra's brother rapes her, leading to two abortions and a nervous breakdown. Escaping from Lebanon to Africa exposes Zahra to her uncle's improper conduct and forces her to rush into marriage with another man, but it does not last long. In "The Torrents of War,", the second part of the story, a divorced Zahra returns to war-torn Beirut, where she is raped by a sniper called Sami, starts a relationship with her rapist to distract him from killing, gets pregnant, and is eventually shot by Sami.

The process of combining different feminist theories helps develop a deeper understanding of how Zahra's fragmented identity challenges patriarchal constraints. This paper examines how Zahra's narrative challenges the binary of victimhood and agency, and how she asserts her identity within a patriarchal society. Focusing on how Zahra negotiates constantly with the societal structure seeking to confine her, analysis through the prism of different feminist theories exposes the paradox of female agency in Al-Shaykh's compelling gendered narrative, where submission often conceals underlying defiance. Zahra's story is so complex and dynamic, adopting a single feminist discourse may not fully account for decoding empowerment in war-torn, Middle-Eastern, and non-Western contexts. Zahra's experiences reignite a debate about how to detach bodily autonomy from patriarchal violence and how crucial small acts of defiance are for self-identification. Her non-binary sense of agency is often weaponized and mobilized against her, reinforcing the paradoxical attempts to seek autonomy in a system that denies it. In this regard, non-binary is a term used to reference Zahra's uneasy fit in a patriarchal society's idealization of women. Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* suggests that female resistance can operate in the margins and manifest in the form of breakdowns and rejects conventional modes of explicit defiance. *The Story of Zahra* is engulfed in the complexities of war, Middle-Eastern, non-Western female struggle to find her voice and her agency in a world that denies her autonomy in every possible way.

The Story of Zahra is one of many "canonical examples" of Arab women's war narratives (Al-Samman 460). In discussing the many examples, Al-Samman stated that Al-Shaykh's novel and a others written about the same war experience, reveal the nature of irrational violence against women during the Lebanese Civil War. Al-Samman effectively highlights their collective focus on likening the brutalization and abuse of women to a nation scarred by war (460). The *Story of Zahra,* however, is unique because it goes outside the war and presents the female struggle in both war and peace. Al-Samman's vivid allusion to war as a "scalpel" destroying the country and dissecting feminine bodies mirrors the violence meted out by an equally heinous patriarchal society in the peace time. Zahra's fate shows that patriarchal

violence is not an outcome of war but an intrinsically entrenched system that predates and outlives it. The war frames the patriarchal brutality and makes it stand out even more.

Zahra is a dynamic, complicated character. The analysis of her development in the story can hardly be limited to a single critical context or one feminist theory. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir's existential analysis of women's entrapment helps to explain Zahra's early years, when young Zahra grows with a sense of herself as the inferior "Other" and a heavy burden of male dominance in every sphere of her life. Zahra's maturation takes place in a setting where women are explicit victims of patriarchy, and they are well aware of it. For example, Zahra knew that "he [Zahra's father] would kill [Zahra] should he ever find out" (Al Shaykh 30-31) that his daughter fails to conform to the Muslim values prescribed to women. Herewith, Zahra's path out of this suffocating environment intersects with de Beauvoir's views on female liberation and "women insurgents" who "indicted this unjust society," when Zahra fights her battle to stop violence and bloodshed (841) in the second part of the novel. At the same time, *The Story of Zahra* actively attempts to destabilize de Beauvoir's victim-resister binary by refusing to label Zahra as only one or the other.

Judith Butler's theory of performative resistance which recognizes abnormal acts in public spaces as a resistance to dominant norms, is also relevant for understanding Zahra's journey, especially her unconventional experiences and actions, since resistance does not have to be direct or confrontational (202). Butler's assertions help explain Zahra's journey more accurately without going to extremes where a woman can be either a servile victim or a fiery rebel. Al-Shaykh's heroine actively undermines the structures that seek to define her. However, Zahra's defiance is not always visible or easily understandable.

Navigating Zahra's painful journey, Haitham Zinhom aptly details how Al Shaykh actively rejects linear character development in favor of the female protagonist's engagement in "silent resistance" against "forcibly imposed social [and patriarchal] paradigms" (10). Zinhom effectively makes a case for the protagonist's empowerment in the second volume, where "Zahra becomes a completely different character, one who is ready to do anything to stop the war," (48) even sacrificing her body to distract the sniper from killing other people. Her society and immediate family respect patriarchal norms, whereas Zahra does not and as such, it leads to tragic fate. Nonetheless, Zinhom's assertion that Zahra transforms into an empowered figure in the second volume also oversimplifies the complexity of her silent resistance. Her relationship with the sniper overtly signifies agency but

innately reinforces the inescapability of patriarchal violence. Zahra's fate is not the tragic outcome of her choices but a reflection of how the system punishes women, irrespective of how they engage with it. Her death underscores the futility of seeking autonomy within a system that seeks to control and erase it. In this context, Zahra's silent rebellion remains a double-edged sword central to her negotiation of agency.

When madness is considered as rebellion against patriarchal abuse, it can be analyzed as a form of defiance (El Saadawi 92). A contemporary Arab feminist scholar, Fatima Mernissi, also argues that patriarchal forces destabilize and dictate every aspect of a woman's life (112), including her mental health. El Saadawi's conceptualization of madness as a symptom of patriarchal violence and a subversive form of resistance complicates the conventional views of feminist defiance. Framing psychological breakdown as a rebellion, El Saadawi exposes how suffering is a direct response to systemic female oppression that a mental illness can aggravate. Mernissi's assertion that patriarchy permeates different aspects of female existence affirms that madness is the consequence of oppressive patriarchy rather than an anomaly. Both perspectives challenge the binary of resistance and submission, holding that perceived passivity embodies Zahra's defiance. In a sense, Zahra's madness is a critique of patriarchal control and a means of survival within it.

Analysis

Zahra's narrative alternates between her attempts to resist and subvert male oppression and her lack of autonomy and safety due to violent and abusive patriarchal structures inherent in both the Lebanese society and a regular Lebanese family. Zahra is a victim of systematic patriarchal oppression. She is subjected to male domination and gendered violence from a young age, contrary to her brother, Ahmad, whose gender automatically endows him with autonomy and preferences. When Zahra's father abuses her mother, Fatme, and vents his anger on his daughter, he not only beats Zahra, but also creates and nurtures a cause-effect-relationship between men in Zahra's life and violence, whether physical or psychological, Zahra clearly recognized a pattern of physical abuse against women which may have been manifested in her own relationship choices. Zahra notes that "All I [Zahra] knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her [Fatme] as I was of those, he dealt me" (Al-Shaykh 15). There was a measure of passive acceptance juxtaposed against a deep-rooted resistance. Witnessing the brutality in husband-wife and father-daughter relationships prepares Zahra for violence as an integral part of her relationship with men. On the other hand, it also built a wall of stony silence and resistance deep within Zahra.

Zahra's early exposure to male violence establishes a cycle of fear and submission that defines her struggles. She cannot leave her house without her father's permission and has nowhere to hide within this realm of male dominance. While spatial restrictions limit women's power to shatter patriarchal expectations (Mernissi 54), Zahra managed to create space by passively rejecting patriarchal norms. Patriarchy affects Zahra from every angle, with family members and strangers reinforcing male dominance alike (Mernissi 25). Zahra is commodified from a young age in ways that are consistent with the subhuman treatment of women in patriarchal societies are treated like movable property or an irrefutable burden (Rahman 3). Zahra's father enforces patriarchal control not only through physical violence, but also through spatial confinement. Zahra is subjected to abuse and limitations just like her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and practically any woman in this society, supporting Al-Shaykh's assertion that male violence is emblematic of a broader system, where women's suffering is normalized and dismissed. This system favors men, as evidenced by Ahmad, whose more than modest writing and reading skills still qualify him for an expensive education in the United States, just because he is male.

Zahra's mother also validates and legitimizes the patriarchal violence she is continuously subjected to in her nearest social circle and beyond. There is a correlation between de Beauvoir's claim that men are the main source of control over women's bodies and minds "to keep a woman in a state of dependence" (193), and Fatme who is an instrument of patriarchy, establishing her daughter as the "Other," inferior and subordinate to men. Fatme physically silences her daughter by putting "her hand tightly cupping my [Zahra's] mouth" (Al-Shaykh 3) The silencing occurred on another occasion when Zahra and her mother were hiding from Zahra's father after he discovers Fatme's infidelity. These acts of silencing Zahra are symbolic of the denial of not only Zahra's voice, but also food as the substance of life. Zahra shares her denial of food by stating that: "My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. She always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father (Al-Shaykh 11).

Mental and physical control in the family extends to Zahra's appearance, which becomes another instrument of her objectivization. She suffers from acne that can hinder her marriage, making Zahra an object of mockery from both her father and her mother, "That will be the day, when Zahra marries. What a day of joy for her and her pock-marked face!" (Al-Shaykh 25). Zahra is not only the inferior "Other." She is growing with a sense of unworthiness, substantially coming from her mother as an instrument perpetuating patriarchal forms of control and oppression. It

significantly interferes with Zahra's autonomy and agency.

An escape from home, where Zahra is subjected to continuous abuse, restrictions, and mockery, provides her with an efficient means to restore her autonomy and get a voice she has been denied for so long. Physical and psychological separation from the familiar social circle, which is largely comprised of oppressors, is intended to liberate Zahra. So are her intentions when leaving her home country: "Now I am in Africa because I want to be far from Beirut" (Al-Shaykh 29), where 'far from' the repressive place is symbolic of 'close to' Zahra's agency, at least in her expectations. However, her escape to Africa results in another subjugation, which she actively resists despite being victimized. Zahra's exiled uncle, Hashem, does not perceive her as an individual. She views his conduct as yet another attempt to sexualize her, "he [Hashem] embraced me with all his strength, both arms around me. I felt uncomfortable" (Al-Shaykh 19). Hashem comes to Zahra's room and touches her face without permission. He hugs her in the cinema. While the scenery around Zahra and the people surrounding her have changed, her position as an object of desire without the right to say 'no' stays the same. Hashem's sexual intentions towards his niece reduce him to a controlling, villainous figure (Al-Shayk 27) and quickly turn him into a familiar male oppressor Zahra has been dealing with for all her life. He may deny having such desires, but he cannot deny the fact of never recognizing Zahra as a personality. She is at most a link to the native land and the family he has lost, "for the first time I have a feeling of being back home" (Al-Shaykh 19). Hashem justifies his conduct by his feeling of homesickness and uses their familial ties as a motive for seeking intimacy with Zahra. For him, it feels natural, while for her, it is yet another abusive conduct. Zahra fails to form enduring or positive bonds with male partners, from Malek and Majed to the sniper, the roots of which lie in a dysfunctional relationship with her physically violent father (Atiyat 146). Hashem's inability to exhibit a different behavioral pattern returns Zahra to the position of a victim she tried to leave behind when moving to Africa.

While gender-based oppression that Zahra faces in a patriarchal society conforms to de Beauvoir's theory situating women as the unwanted "Other" in many ways, Zahra lives in a different spatiotemporal setting. Zahra is different in that she passively rejects her place in a patriarchal society. Al-Shaykh uses "multiple shifting narratives" to document Majed's dawning horror at discovering Zahra was not a virgin (Hartman 94). As an inferior "Other," Zahra is not entitled to embarrass the man in her life with anything, especially with the lack of virginity. Patriarchal ideologies construct female purity as central to male honor. In other words, women

live for the pleasure of the men in their lives. In a narrative shift, the audience can share the perspective of Majed, who observed that Zahra is an explicit sexual object he can use to satisfy his needs whenever he wants and however, he wishes:

> I was so happy on my wedding night that I couldn't describe my joy. Here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman's body that I could make love to whenever I wished. From now on, surely my feelings of deprivation must dwindle. (Al-Shaykh 83)

Majed believes he owns Zahra's body and can use her for physical satisfaction and psychological relief. The body that can be passed from one man's hands (the father) to another man's hands (the husband) is supposed to conform to certain requirements. Virginity is crucial here. Moreover, Majed expects his wife to suffer during their first wedding night, which brings him so much joy, "I heard no cry of pain… no sense of a barrier to my penetration... the sheets remained white. Not even one drop of blood" (Al-Shaykh 83-84). Indirectly, silently, by turning her eyes away from her legitimate husband as if building an invisible barrier between them, Zahra manages to question patriarchal values that "normalize women's obedience to their partners or husbands" (Atiyat 146). Zahra's protest is often disguised, subtly non-verbal, yet powerful, nonetheless.

Zahra's existence is shaped by patriarchal rejection and objectification, but Majed cannot do anything, even with all his male power. He feels humiliated. Zahra's virginity is out of Majed's control. It cannot be restored, and he cannot forget that his wife was not a virgin on their wedding night. In a patriarchal world shaped by men and constructed for male dominance, it is a serious insult that Majed cannot forgive. At the same time, it endows Zahra with agency, as she has something her husband cannot influence. Although Zahra's marriage to Majed advances de Beauvoir's argument that marriage substitutes one form of control for another (488), Zahra manages to rebel within her new prison. When "walking round the outside of the house, carrying the radio, playing it turned up so loud that God himself could have heard it" (Al-Shaykh 99), Zahra attempts to establish her autonomy. Her acts of defiance may be small, yet they are precious in terms of gaining agency in such an oppressive environment.

The patriarchal society in which Zahra lived presented marriage as a woman's ultimate security. Yet, it becomes another site of oppression for Zahra. As Mernissi states, "Marriage is not a sanctuary, but an institution designed to reinforce male control" (67). Zahra's marriage to Majed is not based on love or companionship,

but on patriarchal expectations. From the onset, Majed views Zahra as an object to possess rather than a partner. The same happens in Zahra's relationship with the sniper. When she becomes pregnant, he rejects and eliminates her as an item that loses its value or a possession he no longer needs: "The moment the sniper knows she is pregnant in her fourth month, he does not hesitate to get rid of her and her unborn baby" (Al-Shaykh 214). This moment symbolizes how patriarchal societies marginalize and objectify. Mernissi's assertion that patriarchal societies view women's reproductive roles as both necessary and threatening is fully realized in Zahra's fate. Her pregnancy, rather than symbolizing a bond of shared responsibility, becomes her death warrant, reinforcing Mernissi's argument that women's reproductive roles are paradoxically feared as well as valued. Zahra's fate also underlines how patriarchal structures commodify women's bodies for pleasure or use but discard them once female autonomy is asserted. Gendered power dynamics in Al-Shaykh's novel are an indictment of systemic misogyny, where intimate relationships are not a safe refuge anymore.

Zahra's ability to rebel is limited to rare moments of isolation, when she can be open at least with herself, for example, when wishing she could be brave enough to tell her uncle she does not enjoy his affection. When Zahra vocalizes her true wishes, "Please don't ruin my visit. You're [Hashem] upsetting me" (Al-Shaykh 23) when she is alone, it can hardly be called a manifestation of weakness. Zahra's mental instability and trauma due to psychological, physical, and emotional scars and sexual abuse are strong enough to lie to herself and comfort her wounds, but she does not. She tries to be honest with herself, verbalize her true wishes, and articulate what could be done to change the situation. However, weakened by social and domestic realities, Zahra escapes her deep-seated fears following the abortion by attempting to "erase" its memories from her mind (Al-Shaykh 30) or locking herself in the bathroom after a confrontation with her uncle, such mental disturbances are strategic to attain liberation from male oppression. If she blindly accepts male domination or silently follows all instructions, Zahra's autonomy will be buried for good. Instead, she clings to what is available to her as a woman, no matter how insignificant, futile, or even insane it may seem to others. As such, Zahra's compulsive self-harm is a coping mechanism as she picks at acne, drawing blood, and leaving her face irrevocably infested with scars (Al-Shaykh 24). Self-inflicted pain and injuries are ultimately seen as a rejection and response to patriarchal oppression (El Saadawi 87), corrupting patriarchal expectations of a beautiful, subordinate doll:

My fingers would search one out, touch it, peel off the dry skin, and then

> squeeze it out of existence. I would not stop until I found a drop of blood on my finger. (Al-Shaykh 24)

Her self-harm is a manifestation of Zahra's internalized suffering and an act of defiance against a society that seeks to control her. She does oppose, harming her most precious asset — her body — and exposing it to the male-dominated society, raw and damaged, to defy objectivization.

Zahra's marginalized position forces her to unexpected forms of rebellion. Men in Zahra's life are likely to call her silence and passivity signs of weakness. Yet, these men are the source of Zahra's pain. They control everything. They are free to dispose of their bodies and express their thoughts. Men are the reason for the gendered nature of psychological struggles, illustrating how women's suffering is often ignored or pathologized (Douglas 458). When Zahra tells the sniper that she is pregnant, a tragedy is more probable than a happy ending. Therefore, her death can be interpreted as a suicide, if not an intentional but a subconscious one. As such, it can represent Zahra's final act of defiance against a world that refuses to grant her autonomy (El Saadawi 97), similarly with her silence in certain moments, acting as a quiet form of protest, when passivity is a form of resistance (El Saadawi 99) rather than an indication of surrounding to the male-dominated world. Zahra's scarred and dying body is symbolic of a trampled female agency.

There is a clear division of male and female roles in a war context in the second part of the novel, with men acting as oppressors and women being peacemakers. Explicit violence intensified by war exposes Zahra to even more pressure. War and psychological trauma are deeply intertwined, as Zahra's descent into "madness" coincides with the outbreak of war (Hartman 87). By challenging women to endure suffering without consequence, Zahra's unraveling can be read as a destructive liberation from patriarchal constraints (Douglas 460). If her "madness" is a form of rebellion, Zahra's story becomes one of resistance rather than victimhood. Elizabeth Holt challenges the perception of Zahra as a victim due to her fatal love for the sniper, holding that feminist interpretations in the 1990s shifted from conceiving the female character as mesmerized or crazy to "one of political and erotic agency" (255). Similarly, Zahra's pursuit of a sexual relationship with the sniper marks a willful attempt "at subverting an imposed social order" (Aghacy 508). Through each of her actions, whether it involves silent resistance or willful rebellion, Zahra actively attempts to subvert the patriarchal order and disobey societal stigma. Nonetheless, Holt's argument risks overstating the extent of Zahra's autonomy. While feminist interpretations reclaim Zahra as a figure of resilience and

resistance, sexual autonomy alone does not lead to liberation when social structures remain unyielding. Zahra's intentions are more than noble: "What could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead?" (Al-Shaykh 157) because the answer to these reflections is entering into a sexual relationship with the sniper. Yet, by sacrificing her body, Zahra supports existing social structures where a woman's body is her only asset.

Overt complicity and passivity reveal the complexity of the lived experiences of women existing in oppressive environments, where moments of resistance coexist with subjugation. While Zahra may be perceived as a passive victim in many situations in her life, resistance is not necessarily missing, since women may not navigate oppressive structures in simple ways (Butler 202). There is nothing simple in Zahra's life. Thus, the sniper is a threat and a protector at the same time. She is intimidated yet "for the first time in my life, I felt free" (Al-Shaykh 183). Despite being shaped by oppression, a woman's choices remain her own (de Beauvoir 687). Negotiating the affair with the sniper is not purely an act of victimhood but an effort to negotiate power on Zahra's terms. Her relationship with the sniper challenges Zahra's belief systems and the surrounding patriarchal expectations, yet still largely reflects the paradigm of patriarchal dominance. There are no simple choices and easy identifications in this relationship. Rather than affirming her affair as an assertion of pure power or a manifestation of victimhood, Zahra's attempts represent a more fragmented exploration of how women navigate oppressive landscapes within boundaries and systems they cannot escape completely.

Zahra's efforts at negotiating and navigating the complexities of war-ridden patriarchal societies are not a linear process. She is not directly confrontational to escape unwanted situations. Here, the Lebanese Civil War which began in 1975 and originated from the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel, is an extension of patriarchal control, and Zahra submits herself to violent sex, thereby trying to forget the outside violence she cannot cope with (Cooke 133). Her final thoughts represent that her agency is neither absolute nor absent: "He's killed me... Again, I feel the drops of rain. I'm still in my place... I close my eyes again, or perhaps I haven't opened them before?" (Al-Shayk 183-184). Despite the efforts to rise to the challenge, Zahra eventually becomes a casualty of war in a male-dominated world, where patriarchal control extends beyond national and cultural borders, making true escape nearly impossible (Mernissi 112). Zahra's attempt to gain agency through her relationship with the sniper leads to her downfall, showing how deeply entrenched and inescapable patriarchal oppression is. Despite moments of rebellion, Zahra remains trapped within patriarchal structures.

Zahra's existential alienation illustrates de Beauvoir's claim that patriarchal structures prevent women from achieving self-actualization. External escape does not necessarily grant freedom, as the fundamental structures of patriarchy persist across geographic and cultural boundaries (de Beauvoir 488) and can be more overt in some regions compared to others Zahra experiences it firsthand. When she pictures her free life away from Lebanon, based on her correspondence with Hashem, Zahra endows physical distancing from her usual social circle with too much power to change her life drastically. In reality, moving to Africa brings her the same discomfort because she appears in a society with similar patriarchal rules. Zahra's disenchantment with Hashem, "I feel very disappointed now that I have seen my uncle. He sounded so different in his letters" (Al-Shaykh 21), is symbolic of her dismay with the male-dominated world, whether it is Lebanon or Africa.

Zahra's experiences reflect the existentialist feminist framework as she struggles to define herself amid societal oppression. Her fragmented sense of self is a consequence of this oppression, where any attempt at resistance is ultimately constrained by the overarching system that refuses to recognize her as an independent being (de Beauvoir 267). Zahra's instability and psychological distress arise from the tension between her desires and the restrictive gender roles imposed upon her. Her inability to escape these constraints highlights the pervasive power of patriarchal discourse, which enforces compliance even when individuals attempt to resist (Butler 34). Zahra is subjected to societal expectations that dictate her values and behavior based on male-defined notions of honor and morality. Her suffering is a product of patriarchal distortions of religious teachings that do not require men to oppress women, necessitating the need to challenge these oppressive structures and advocate for a reinterpretation of gender roles that empower women rather than confine them (Mernissi 125). As noted by El Saadawi, patriarchal societies reinforce female subjugation through sexual repression, family control, and institutionalized violence (82). Herewith, Zahra's descent into instability is not a personal failing but a reflection of the broader systemic oppression faced by women in patriarchal societies, where rebellion often leads to isolation rather than liberation (El Saadawi 82). Zahra's emotional turmoil and self-destructive tendencies stem from a lifetime of suppression, where she is denied agency over her sexuality and existence. She attempts to break free from patriarchal limitations without any external support, and her 'little' victories cannot be either undermined or disregarded.

Scholars debate Zahra's role as either a victim or an agent of her fate. For example, Aghacy argues that Zahra's urban identity complicates her agency,

as the city offers freedom and oppression (507) simultaneously. While this perspective acknowledges Zahra's struggles, it risks overstating her control over her circumstances. Similarly, Hartman challenges male absence in women's war narratives, arguing that Zahra's experiences should not be read in isolation from the broader gendered violence of war (85). While this reading deepens the analysis of Zahra's suffering, it does not fully address how her choices shape her trajectory. Holt comments on those feminist interpretations that reduce Zahra to a passive figure, advocating for a reading that recognizes her as an active participant in her fate (258), no matter how miserable the end is. However, this perspective may overemphasize individual agency in a context where structural forces limit her choices to such an extent that Zahra is often no master even of her own body. De Beauvoir's views can be used to claim that Zahra's struggle is existential — she seeks self-definition but is constrained by patriarchal structures (267). Again, while this perception highlights the internalized nature of oppression, it does not fully consider the material realities of Zahra's suffering.

As the narrative unfolds and the reader becomes more familiar with Zahra, El Saadawi shifts the focus to institutionalized violence and portraying women as a product of deeply embedded patriarchal control (82). This systemic view is valuable but risks depicting Zahra as entirely powerless. Mernissi, by contrast, emphasizes the role of cultural and religious misinterpretations in shaping male oppression (125). For instance, male patriarchy in practice tend to practice gender role assignments with women occupying domestic duties. This perspective offers a more balanced and structured view, showing how Zahra is caught in intersecting power structures rather than simply being a victim of fate. The relationship between war and patriarchy further complicates Zahra's agency. Rahman argues that Zahra's suffering reflects feminist concerns in the developing world, where women face layered oppression from gender norms and political conflict (3). Furthermore, Rahman effectively situates Zahra's struggles within global feminist discourse, though such attempts at framing such oppression risk universalizing her experience. Zinhom highlights how Zahra negotiates war and patriarchy, showing that she is neither wholly powerless nor entirely autonomous (43). This perspective is the most balanced of all used to analyze Zahra's complicated personality, acknowledging that Zahra's survival depends on navigating structural oppression while still making individualistic choices.

Conclusion

The Story of Zahra cannot be read as a narrative about a girl choosing the less

painful scenario of survival in a male-dominated world and having no control over her life. It is neither a story of active resistance, defending one's perspective, nor of rebelling against patriarchy on barricades. Oversimplifying Zahra's life and endowing it with too much resistance are equally harmful for such a dynamic, complex, and ambiguous character as Zahra. *The Story of Zahra* resists binary readings of victimhood and agency. Zahra's suffering is undeniable, yet she asserts herself in small but significant ways. Despite patriarchal oppression, Zahra's choices — whether in love, war, or personal defiance — portray a woman who refuses to be entirely consumed by the patriarchal forces oppressing her.

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Afropessimist Critique and Formal Innovation in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract This article argues that *The Nickel Boys* does not simply represent anti-Black violence as content but formalizes it as a regime of legibility, in which harm persists as infrastructural ongoingness rather than a finished historical event. Reading Afropessimism through the novel's form, I track four linked mechanisms. First, a braided and dispersive temporality collapses the distance between then and now. Second, archival incompletion converts identity into administrative remainder. Third, narrative deferral and ellipsis stage testimony as structurally inadmissible until institutionally authenticated. Fourth, affective restraint withholds catharsis as a formal analogue to the foreclosure of liberal repair. The late turn to name substitution extends this logic. "Elwood Curtis" becomes a portable credential rather than a recuperated self, exposing how personhood can be rerouted under racial fungibility. The payoff for Afropessimist debate is methodological. Instead of applying social-death ontology to the novel's violence as illustrative content, this reading shows how narrative form itself produces the experience of impasse. Memory, witness, and recognition are organized as procedures that cannot culminate in redemption, yet still demand ethical attention. In this sense, Whitehead's formal innovations stage an ethics beyond redemption, where obligation survives precisely because closure is structurally unavailable.

Keywords Afropessimism; Social death; Racial violence; Black studies; Trauma narrative

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I. Introduction

The Nickel Boys (2019) will not indulge the comforting notion that to recover the past is to restore it; from the first page it makes clear that what we call "history" has been absorbed into the present as a land-use problem, subject to zoning, development, and demolition. The prologue fixes the reader's gaze on a carceral geography whose status as evidence is immediately subordinated to the calculations of planners and investors: "The secret graveyard lay on the north side of the Nickel campus," where developers "had earmarked the field for a lunch plaza, with four water features and a concrete bandstand for the occasional event" (Whitehead 1). Exhumation is not granted the dignity of moral revelation but is cast instead as an irritant in the smooth operation of governance, "an expensive complication," delaying the prospect that "the whole damned place could be razed, cleared, and neatly erased from history" (1).

The archive enters not as a curative repository but as an apparatus that has participated in, and continues to reproduce, disappearance: "No white crosses, no names. Just bones waiting for someone to find them" (Whitehead 3). Personhood is not merely neglected but rationed: incomplete and haphazard school records identify only some of the dead, while seven of the forty-three bodies remain unnamed (2). The forensic labor of the prologue is thus legible as bureaucratic triage, an exercise in partial legibility in which an unidentified act of destruction splinters the field of the knowable and memory markers can be reduced "into chunks and dust" (2), so that the archive may remain unstable, revisable, and therefore governable.

Read through Saidiya Hartman's account of slavery's "afterlife" as a continuing arrangement of "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," Nickel Academy does not appear as a grotesque exception belatedly brought to light but as a technology perfected to routinize Black ungrievability (6). It parcels out those chances, those deaths, those vanishings through the ordinary idiom of administration, the

paperwork and planning that pass for civic neutrality. The novel formalizes this continuity by refusing any consoling interval between then and now: “It wasn’t far off at all. Never will be” (Whitehead 6). Even commemoration is absorbed into the same infrastructure it would correct, reduced to digital metrics and fundraising targets (Whitehead 4-5). The archive, in this dispensation, is not a remedy for secrecy but one of its modern habitats, in which disclosure is delivered already formatted by the civic grammar that made concealment possible in the first place.

Jared Sexton’s critique of multiracial liberal optimism sharpens these stakes to a point. Against narratives that promise progress through classificatory reconfiguration, Sexton insists that “the move beyond the black-white binary and toward a black-nonblack binary is no improvement. In fact, it portends an intensification of antiblack racism rather than its mitigation” (Sexton 256). Whitehead renders this intensification not as the triumph of a doctrine but as an institutional reflex, a habit of mind so ingrained that anti-Black governance is experienced as mere procedure. When Phil, one of the white housemen, encounters Elwood and the other boys in the bathroom, the narration distills racial domination into the lucidity of a job description: “Interpreting the scene was not part of his job. Who was at fault, who started it, why. His job was to keep these colored boys in check” (Whitehead 63). The institution trains its agents to forgo interpretation altogether, and this cultivated refusal becomes part of the novel’s epistemic atmosphere. What happens to Black boys is not treated as anomaly, crisis, or scandal. It is routinized.

At this juncture, familiar trauma frameworks become necessary, though they prove finally insufficient. Cathy Caruth’s account of trauma as the belated return of an event not known in its first occurrence (4) illuminates Whitehead’s pattern of involuntary recall, in which “The place reached right through the TV screen and yanked him back” (Whitehead 201). Yet the novel is structurally impatient with any assumption that narration tends toward integration or restitution. Nickel is engineered so that coherence cannot become actionable; its terror is infrastructural: “This place was why the school had no wall or fence or barbed wire around it, why so few boys ran: It was the wall that kept them in” (65). Even testimony, when it becomes thinkable at all, reproduces anti-Black exclusions when the survivors’ website represents only white men, raising the question of who can speak for the Black boys (207). Elwood’s counter-archival practice is therefore not therapeutic speech but adversarial recordkeeping (Whitehead 171). Testimony is staged as a risky tactic lodged within an apparatus designed to discredit Black accounts in advance, a tactic that knows it is already overruled by the conditions of its utterance

(Swetha, Aravind, and Uthradevi 5-11).

The book's final torsion, Turner's adoption of Elwood's name, has to be read within an economy of fungibility rather than welcomed as narrative consolation. Survivorship is routed through an improvised credential when Turner adopts Elwood's name to honor his friend and live for him (Whitehead 200). The substitution does not restore the lost subject; it renders legible the conditions under which a Black life can continue at all, by becoming relay, cover, and portable identification. The novel sharpens the violence of that portability by showing how newsprint reduces Turner's own existence to a generic racial classification (200). Even the bureaucratic labor of making the borrowed name durable becomes a necro-archive when Turner learns to secure official identity documents in a dead person's name (201). Read alongside Hartman's account of enslaved women's exchange, maternal disinheritance, and incorporation into the master's genealogy, this ending functions less as revelation than as formalization, since the story can continue only through a displaced and compromised grammar of personhood (194).

What this produces, finally, is a deformation of representational traditions themselves. The novel gestures toward constitutional idealism, but it withholds the customary reassurance that disillusionment is merely a stage on the way to a more mature, redeemed civic faith. Turner's retrospective idiom makes this refusal explicit: "Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, 'I'm going to take a stand,' and the world remains silent" (Whitehead 205). What shatters here is not simply innocence, nor even confidence in particular institutions, but the more basic premise that the world will answer moral address at all. In a similar fashion, the text invokes protest realism only to refuse its comforting corollary that exposure leads to remedy. Instead, it sustains an atmosphere of foreclosure, a regime of knowledge without repair, by invoking "Elwood and his fine moral imperatives" and "his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve. About the capacity of the world to right itself" (205), commitments defeated not by argument but by the persistence of a structure for which such ideas are structurally irrelevant. The damage, in other words, is lodged not at the level of belief but at the level of form, of what can be made to matter.

In terms of evidence and method, this essay treats form itself as the primary evidentiary field rather than as ornament or secondary illustration. The argument proceeds through close reading of narrative structure, including temporal dislocation, ellipsis and deferral, archival incompletion, affective restraint, and name substitution, and through sustained attention to the novel's institutional vocabularies of administration, discipline, and documentation. Historical reference appears

only selectively and instrumentally, not as a rival explanatory archive vying with the novel for authority. When we invoke the real-world logics on which the text draws, including reform-school regimes, carceral bureaucracy, and memorialization practices, it is to clarify what Whitehead formalizes, not to reconstruct that history exhaustively (Stulov 185-87). We are therefore not estimating prevalence, measuring causal impact, or offering a sociological account of reform schools in Florida. We ask how the novel renders institutional afterlives, how violence persists as procedure, timing, and legibility, through the specific affordances and constraints of narrative form. Secondary theoretical sources, including Afropessimism, trauma theory, memory studies, and wake work, are enlisted to sharpen the interpretive stakes of those formal choices rather than to predetermine the conclusions toward which the reading must move.

The exposition follows a deliberately stepped sequence rather than a merely additive one. Section II establishes Afropessimism's account of social death and antagonism as the paper's analytic baseline, clarifying both what the framework illuminates and what it risks over-naturalizing when imported into literary reading. Section III then reads Nickel Academy as an institutional technology of disposability, showing how discipline, administration, and routinized coercion manufacture fungibility rather than "rehabilitation" or civic incorporation. Section IV shifts from ontology to narrative procedure, demonstrating how the novel's braided temporality, archival incompletion, and affective restraint formalize delayed legibility and the foreclosure of reparative closure. Section V elaborates what we call an "ethics beyond redemption" and uses the novel's staging of testimony and memory to show why obligation persists even when recognition cannot culminate in repair. Section VI finally complicates Afropessimist closure by tracking the novel's counter-memories and attenuated futurities without reverting to liberal recovery narratives. In its emphasis on governed legibility and procedural form, the argument departs from approaches that center concealment and unveiling (Martín-Salván 2022), necropolitical neo-slave narration (Ferreira Junior 2023), or tautological revision as repetition (Scully 2023) as the novel's primary engine.

II. Framework: Afropessimism and the Question of Social Death

Afropessimism, in its strongest formulations, does not operate as critique in the conventional liberal key of grievance, inclusion, and reform. It reads modernity as structured by an antagonism in which Blackness is positioned as a limit-case for the category of the Human: not simply a subject exposed to oppression, but a positionality rendered structurally expendable within the very logics that administer

recognition. Within that analytic, Orlando Patterson's account of "social death" is repeatedly reactivated less as a historical descriptor of slavery than as a grammar for political ontology, in which permanent violent domination, natal alienation, and generalized dishonor name the conditions under which civil society secures its coherence (Patterson 13; Wekker 88-93).

At the same time, Afropessimism is not a settled doctrine but a live dispute over what "social death" is and what it licenses as method. One fault line concerns whether social death should be read as a transhistorical ontology (a structural position that persists across regimes) or as an analytic that must remain historically specified and internally differentiated to avoid totalization. Another concerns political implication: whether antagonism forecloses coalition and repair outright, or whether it names the limit of liberal repair while still permitting forms of struggle that do not mistake recognition for remedy. Sexton's critiques are decisive here, especially his insistence that "Multiracialism, to recast our earlier claim, is a tendency to neutralize the political antagonism set loose by the critical affirmation of blackness" (65). This paper depends on that internal tension: it treats Afropessimism neither as a template to be imposed on the novel's violence nor as an all-purpose foreclosure of interpretation, but as a pressure that becomes legible when read through the novel's formal procedures, where the question is not whether violence happened, but how legibility, testimony, and repair are structurally governed (Coleman 50-55).

The Nickel Boys does not merely thematize antagonism; it builds antagonism into the novel's very machinery. From the first pages, the narrative withholds the consolatory rites that might convert loss into mourning: the secret cemetery offers neither crosses nor names, only bones awaiting discovery (Whitehead 3). In that refusal, the dead become only partially administratively nameable, folded back into the ground as though the world had been designed to metabolize their erasure, and the line "Even in death the boys were trouble" (1) promotes "trouble" from description to predicate, fastening it to Black presence as such, a diagnosis that outlives the particular bodies it marks. Nickel Academy is thus tuned to make brutality feel routine, dispersing it across chores, corridors, and dormitories so that violence is apprehended less as rupture than as the institution's baseline function, a pedagogical machine that trains boys not for citizenship but for fungibility.

This narrative disposition also unsettles the reparative aura frequently bestowed upon testimony, trauma, and the archive. Trauma theory famously locates trauma in "the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4);

Whitehead's novel insists that what comes back is not only the belated cognition of an exceptional wound but the same order of things, still in working order. Elwood's dogged devotion to writing, "'I've been writing everything down,' Elwood said. . . . 'The deliveries. The yard work and chores. The names of everybody and the dates. All our Community Service'" (Whitehead 171), does not secure transmissibility or redress; it hardens instead into an ethics of persistence within a structure already proven capable of outliving exposure. Hartman's question, "Why else begin an autobiography in a graveyard?" (130), clarifies what the novel's opening scene enacts: the graveyard is the ground floor of intelligibility, the place where one apprehends what the social order has made disappear even as it continues to govern, and where the maritime juridical discourse Hartman records can designate the high seas as a domain "where all life is violence" (149). There is no workable distinction between everyday life and catastrophic event. Even Rothberg's refusal of zero-sum competitive remembrance acquires a darker corollary here: memory's surfacing does not entail repair when the archive itself is embedded in the management of disposable life (11).

The novel's belated exchange of names sharpens this argument by converting identity into an instrument rather than a recovered self. When the diner owner inquires after his name, Turner "said, 'Elwood Curtis.' . . . He used the name from then on when anybody asked, to honor his friend. To live for him" (Whitehead 200). The gesture toward witness never settles into reassurance, because the newspaper names Turner as the other escapee but reduces him to "a Negro youth," followed by "[n]o description apart from that" (200). The book's formal twist therefore translates Afropessimist claims into a stubbornly literary key: fungibility is not merely what the institution inflicts upon bodies; it becomes a narrative procedure for organizing legibility and survival, and for staging, yet again, the exhausted but inescapable promise of repair.

III. Institutional Violence and Social Death in *The Nickel Boys*

In *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead does not simply recount history; he exposes an infrastructure of racial governance. Nickel Academy is not a grotesque deviation from "civil society" but an aperture within it, a lens that brings the racial logics of the ordinary into forensic focus. The novel pointedly refuses the regional alibi of "Southern cruelty" or the soothing translation of its practices into mere carceral excess. What comes into view instead is a continuous institutional field in which Blackness is produced and maintained through social death, invoking Patterson's preliminary definition: "slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natally

alienated and generally dishonored persons" (13). The emphasis falls on continuity rather than metaphor, on an order that does not end when the novel does (Ali 42-46).

Nickel is instruction through annihilation, pedagogy as a sovereign choreography of unmaking. Elwood Curtis does not simply undergo discipline; he is conscripted into a doctrine whose rhetoric of reform stages care even as it hollows out its own semantic promise: "Everybody's here because they haven't figured out how to be around decent people. That's okay. This is a school, and we're teachers. We're going to teach you how to do things like everyone else" (Whitehead 46). Reform speaks in the grammar of correction, but the institution breathes in the logistics of slow death. Punishment ceases to be an episodic measure aimed at improvement and becomes instead an ontological targeting, a technique for manufacturing fungibility. The boys are not reformed; they are rendered interchangeable.

It is therefore apt that the novel begins where liberal historiography so often breaks down, at the grave and at the problem of legibility. "The school records, though incomplete and haphazard, narrowed down who WILLIE 1954 had been," while "[o]f the forty-three bodies, seven remained unnamed" (Whitehead 2). What might appear as bureaucratic incompetence reads, within this frame, as the institutional production of absence rather than as evidence of a documented strategy; the archive organizes and perpetuates absence and distributes anonymity as an effect of its operations. Nickel becomes at once archive and erasure, a carceral curriculum in which the boys are rendered ungrievable inside the state's pedagogical performance. The institution teaches even as it deletes.

The violence at Nickel is never only bodily; it is acoustic, procedural, environmental. At the White House, Elwood encounters not corrective discipline but formalized harm: "The beating room had a bloody mattress and a naked pillow" (Whitehead 67). The narration separately suggests, "Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why" (66), while the industrial fan "covered the boys' screams" and allowed the staff's instructions to be heard "perfectly" (67). The aftermath is not silence but saturation, the continuing hum of what Sharpe names "the weather," the total climate of anti-Blackness (104): violence not as residue but as atmosphere, circulating as the ordinary condition of life. In such a climate, brutality becomes administratively unremarkable; denial is foreclosed in advance because the violence has been routinized into the environment itself.

The archive extends that saturation by regulating what may count as credible.

The boys' accounts circulate for years yet remain illegible until an external authority ratifies them: "Plenty of boys had talked of the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it" (Whitehead 3). This is not a matter of accidental misrecognition but a regime of disbelief in which Black testimony is structurally impermissible, rendered admissible only through external institutional confirmation. In that register, Sharpe's wake work names a practice of attending to Black life and suffering while thinking through "containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity" (22), a practice of reading against a record that has already decided, in advance, whose suffering can enter history.

Within this regime, Elwood is not mistakenly processed. His punishability is structural, not accidental, an effect of design rather than error. Nickel does not "correct"; it administers fungibility: "There was no higher system guiding Nickel's brutality, merely an indiscriminate spite, one that had nothing to do with people" (Whitehead 83). That "indiscriminate spite" is the system. As Wilderson argues, "this violence is gratuitous, not contingent" (227); as Sexton argues, racial position is established through one's relation to "the state-sponsored social organization of violence and sexuality" (9). Reform appears, then, as calibrated dismemberment, a method for distributing pain without cause while preserving the emollient rhetoric of care.

Whitehead stages this world with a deliberate formal restraint: procedural tone, muted affect, relentless continuity. Against trauma theory's account of belated, repetitive response to catastrophic events (Caruth 11), *The Nickel Boys* insists on the impossibility of rupture in a world never given as whole. Caruth's account of traumatic belatedness gives way to an atmosphere that precedes the subject and saturates the everyday as policy. The novel begins and remains inside that atmosphere. Even the prologue frames a split field of perception between the visible Nickel and the institution whose effects remain concealed (Whitehead 4). The distinction names not two institutions but two regimes of visibility. Under such conditions, looking away becomes complicity: "If everyone looked the other way, then everybody was in on it. If he looked the other way, he was as implicated as the rest" (79). To look away is to become implicated.

Exposure, finally, does not become justice. Survivors gather remnants in a digital archive and circulate links as explanations and apologies to their families (Whitehead 5). The act of sharing is both confession and failed translation. Graves are unearthed, media arrive, a proposed government statement of apology remains pending, and the state performs a rhetoric of reckoning without structural sequel

(4). Nothing in the order of things shifts. Elwood's death produces no institutional redress; it is absorbed into sediment, converted into another tolerable datum in the ledger of obliteration. The novel therefore repudiates redemptive aesthetics: vulnerability is not an appeal that secures recognition but a disclosure of how racialized bodies are systemically devalued and exposed, a visibility that predictably fails to elicit response. Whitehead's narrative procedures, dislocation, substitution, and muted affect, do not resolve trauma; they stage the already-foreclosed terms of liberal repair. The text offers no culminative futurity. It offers, instead, weather and recursion, and an archive in which justice is not merely delayed but structurally precluded, consigned in advance to the category of the unrealizable (Aqeeli 563-70).

IV. Formal Innovation: Temporality, Affect, and the Limits of Narrative

Form in *The Nickel Boys* does not decorate content so much as materialize a social ontology. Whitehead's temporal dislocations, muted affect, and strategic substitutions read less as "technique" than as protocols for staging how anti-Black violence organizes what can be known, felt, and recognized. As Eve Dunbar argues, neo-slave narration repeatedly punctures linear-progress time by returning the plantation's afterlife as an ongoing structure of unfreedom, where injury recurs without any guarantee of repair (53-73). The novel opens, tellingly, not with recovered truth but with managed remains: investigators "divided the area into search grids," and what surfaces is a mixed, bureaucratically leveled debris field where "bones and belt buckles and soda bottles lay scattered on their trays in an inscrutable exhibit" (Whitehead 2). The phrase "inscrutable exhibit" is doing formal work. It turns evidence into display without guaranteeing intelligibility, as if the archive can be made visible while remaining structurally unreadable. At Boot Hill, the official cemetery, markers of personhood arrive as a partial allocation: "Names were carved into two-thirds of the crosses; the rest were blank" (2). When the archaeology students remove and pile those concrete markers beside the excavation site, someone smashes them "into chunks and dust" (2). The secret graveyard discovered afterward radicalizes this official incompletion: there are "no white crosses, no names," only unmarked remains (3). What looks like vandalism reads, in the book's grammar, as the archive's native condition: not the accidental failure of recordkeeping, but the ease with which identification can be routed back into anonymity.

That rationing is procedural as well as epistemic. Truth becomes admissible only when routed through sanctioned channels, and Whitehead narrates that authorization

with the flat inevitability of institutional habit. The archaeology students tell the survivors what they have found, and then the story is converted into public reality by a media dispatch: "a local Tallahassee station dispatched a reporter" (Whitehead 3). In other words, testimony does not fail because it is absent; it fails because it does not arrive in the correct format. The novel's ellipses and deferrals therefore function less as an abstract ethics of refusal than as a mimetic index of credibility's external idiom: Black knowledge must be translated into broadcast speech before it can count as knowledge at all.

The late turn to substitution intensifies this logic by relocating ontology inside paperwork, images, and administrative prompts. In the epilogue's airport counter scene, identity is not interior continuity but a document-problem managed in dialogue: "'Flying to Tallahassee,' Turner said. 'Last name Curtis.' 'Identification?'" (Whitehead 200). The narration lingers on the gap between self and credential: "He didn't resemble the picture. The old him." It then delivers its blunt temporal verdict: "It was history" (200). This is not a metaphorical "identity crisis"; it is the social ontology of the file. The self becomes a past image that the present cannot match, while the name "Curtis" operates as a usable key in institutional space. Whitehead pushes the point further by showing how the name is literally manufactured as survivable legitimacy: Turner learns "how to get a birth certificate for a dead man. Dead boy," and "He put in for a Social Security card two years later and it arrived in the mailbox, sitting on top of an A&P flyer" (Whitehead 201). The shocking element is not that the state can be deceived; it is how ordinary the deception is, how seamlessly the dead can be converted into an administratively live identity. Personhood is not restored by narrative time; it is rerouted through bureaucratic time.

Affective restraint operates in the same register. Whitehead repeatedly refuses the expected arc in which violence yields expressive surplus, confession, catharsis. At Elwood's death, the narration offers not melodramatic interiority but a stark spatial figure: "Elwood's arms went wide, hands out, as if testing the solidity of the walls of a long corridor, one he had traveled through for a long time and which possessed no visible terminus" (Whitehead 200). The body is staged as a sensor probing architecture, not as a subject releasing emotion. The next move is formally even colder: Turner later cannot confirm whether Elwood made any sound: "He asked himself later if he heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound but never did figure it out. He was running and there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head" (200). This is not merely "understated style." It is the book's diagnosis that the social world has already been trained to metabolize atrocity as procedure, so that even the event's acoustic trace can be left undecided, a missing datum.

Read against trauma theory's emphasis on belatedness, the novel's temporal disarticulation sharpens further. Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Whitehead certainly deploys delay and return, but he redirects their meaning away from exceptional psychic rupture toward an enduring structural condition. The prologue's own vocabulary of "progress" is bitterly literalized: "Identification was difficult, but competition between the young archaeologists made for constant progress" (Whitehead 2). In that sentence, liberal time, "progress," is refigured as a professional incentive structure operating over bones. Repetition here is not primarily the mind reliving what it could not assimilate; it is the institution reproducing what it was built to do, then outsourcing its recognition-work to controlled protocols of expertise, media, and managerial verification.

This is also where the book presses on the politics of memory. Rothberg writes, "Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (3). Whitehead's prologue flirts with that promise: investigators, survivors, journalists, public scandal, only to expose how easily remembrance is absorbed as audit rather than mourning, as managerial incorporation rather than ethical transformation. Hartman's suspicion toward redemptive narration clarifies what this test does to the reader: the temptation to "pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion" and to "say, 'It all happened so long ago'" is precisely the consolation the novel refuses (153). Instead, the archive remains a technology of disappearance even when it surfaces: crosses can be blank; crosses can be pulverized; identities can be posthumously activated through paperwork; the dead can be made legible only as a system's afterthought.

In this light, the novel's formal strategies are infrastructural. Temporal fracture registers how domination outlives any single episode. Substitution registers fungibility as a condition of survival rather than a symbolic flourish. Affective restraint registers the normalization of injury within bureaucratic life. The archive, partial and reversible, registers not the failure of recordkeeping has the effect of making Black suffering only conditionally knowable.

V. Testimony, Memory, and the Ethics Beyond Redemption

By "ethics beyond redemption," I mean an obligation to testify and to answer for the dead without presuming that recognition will culminate in repair, reconciliation,

or moral closure. It is an ethics under conditions in which the social order can acknowledge violence only as procedure, convert suffering into administrative speech, and absorb exposure as managerial routine. In this register, liberal recognition functions less as remedy than as format: it treats visibility, apology, memorialization, and institutional admission as if they were convertible into repair, and it mistakes the appearance of responsiveness for transformation. Nor is this a "trauma cure" model in which narration primarily serves psychic integration, healing, or the restoration of a coherent self. The imperative to speak persists precisely because the field is foreclosed, and speech is undertaken in full awareness that it will be processed, budgeted, and neutralized.

Whitehead stages the conditions of that foreclosure in the prologue's memorial apparatus, where even perception arrives already split between the governable surface and what cannot be safely rendered legible: the camera produces "the Nickel you could see going in and then the Nickel you couldn't see coming out" (4). The survivors' memory-work is not romantic excavation but a collective reconstruction, their "own phantom archaeology," organized around the fragment: "Each man with his own pieces" (4). What makes the scene ethically severe is not simply commodification but the way testimony becomes publicly admissible as an administered project: "A blinking digital widget kept track of the fund-raising for the proposed memorial" (4-5). The archive does not arrive as sanctuary; it arrives as interface. The injunction to remember is routed through protocols of posting, linking, and display: "Sharing a link with your family was a way of saying, 'This is where I was made. An explanation and an apology'" (5). Explanation and apology are not outcomes of justice here; they are communicable artifacts that can circulate without obligating structural change.

The novel's later return to this apparatus makes explicit what the prologue implies: liberal repair cannot resolve the racial problem of address because the very channels of recognition reproduce exclusion. Turner tracks the White House boys' website, noting their "attempts to be recognized." "They wanted a memorial and an apology from the state. They wanted to be heard" (Whitehead 206). Yet the representational economy that sustains the site also erases: "All the men on the website were white. Who spoke for the black boys? It was time someone did" (207). The question is not therapeutic, and it is not an aspiration to cathartic wholeness. It names a vacancy produced by the same regime that produced the graves, a world in which Black suffering becomes institutionally legible only when it can be curated through authorized channels, racially partial online platforms, and externally ratified narratives. "It was time someone did" is an ethical compulsion stripped of salvific fantasy: the demand is to speak anyway, even

when speech will be received as content.

This is why the movement from website to vow should not be mistaken for redemptive closure. Turner recognizes that the institution had to be safely dead before testimony could be socially permitted: the state closed Nickel, and "everyone, all the boys, had to wait for it to be dead before they told the tale" (Whitehead 207). The reassurance that follows, "It couldn't hurt them now, snatch them up at midnight and brutalize them. It could only hurt them in the old familiar ways" (207), does not announce safety so much as a rearrangement of harm, from immediate punishment to durable aftereffects. The vow is forged inside that temporal trap: "To speak about Elwood's story, no matter what happened to him" (207). Even its forward motion is anti-cathartic, a sequence of address without guarantee: "Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood's story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to their crimes. Tell the White House boys that he was one of them, and he survived, like them. Tell anyone who cared that he used to live there" (207). Ethics beyond redemption crystallizes here: speech is compelled not because it will repair the past, but because silence is one of the past's ongoing techniques, and managed remembrance threatens to become yet another mode of disappearance.

Read in this register, trauma's latency cannot be reduced to psychology alone. Caruth's structural description of trauma as "a delayed experience" (114) clarifies belatedness as a predicament, but *The Nickel Boys* sharpens the point by locating delay in institutional design: recognition arrives only once the institution's immediate coercive power has been removed, once the site can be toured, filmed, and posted even while the old familiar harms persist. What remains, then, is not a complete story but testimonial debris, an archive that cannot totalize itself. The pieces do not resolve into catharsis; coherence would be the wrong genre, and yet the piecework does not collapse into refusal either. Rothberg's insistence that "memory is not a zero-sum game" (11) helps name the minimal productivity of this circulation: links shared, fragments gathered, a public trace assembled, while Whitehead keeps testing its limits by showing how remembrance can be absorbed as audit rather than mourning, as managerial incorporation rather than ethical transformation. The endpoint is not redemption but persistence: speech undertaken with full knowledge of foreclosure, fragments maintained as pressure, because the world has been built to ensure they are never properly heard.

VI. Complicating Afropessimist Closure: Counter-Memory and Futurity

The Nickel Boys does not stage a dialectic between despair and hope, nor does it "balance" Afropessimist foreclosure against liberal ethics. Whitehead instead

constructs a narrative architecture of suspension in which testimony persists as remainder: compelled, belated, and structurally unable to deliver the satisfactions of recognition. In this novel, anti-Black violence is not chiefly a theme to be interpreted; it is the condition the form itself must breathe: ambient, procedural, continuous. McKittrick's account of Black livingness as a practice of rebellion provides a counterpressure to any purely death-bound account (79-83). Whitehead's prose, in this sense, does not dramatize enclosure but inhabits its atmospheric persistence, what Christina Sharpe calls the weather: "the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (Sharpe 104). The consequence is stark: Elwood dies, and what endures is not redemption but substitution: a name made mobile within the same administrative order that renders Black identity fungible (Ringer 242-46).

Whitehead plants this logic early, not as foreshadowing but as topography. When Elwood is taken on his first tour, the yard crew crests the hill and the landscape resolves into Boot Hill: "A low wall of rough stones enclosed the white crosses, gray weeds, the bent and lurching trees. The boys gave it a wide berth" (Whitehead 60). The diction matters. Rough, gray, bent, lurching: the cemetery is not a sealed past but a warped present-tense boundary that organizes movement and speech and commands a "wide berth" on campus. Boot Hill is less a destination than an instruction; the school's daily routes are plotted in relation to an unacknowledged field of death. The graveyard is neither symbol nor subplot. It is infrastructure, what Nickel quietly routes you around and, by routing, trains you to accept.

By the time Turner returns south decades later, the novel has made explicit that "speaking" becomes imaginable only when the institution is sufficiently dead to be safely narrated. Turner watches the public investigation unfold and grasps the grotesque condition of its belatedness: the state closed the school three years earlier, and the boys could tell their stories only after Nickel was dead (Whitehead 206-7). Testimony here is not a sovereign act that breaks silence; it is an aftereffect permitted by closure, a narrow window opened only once Nickel can no longer seize and brutalize them directly (207). Even then, the narrative refuses to sanctify disclosure as repair. Turner's resolve to speak for the Black boys appears as ethical compulsion shadowed by fear, not a confident entrance into justice (207). The time of testimony is thus structurally compromised: it is late not because people lacked knowledge, but because the world required the institution's death before it would consent to listen.

Rather than delivering a consoling logic of survival, the identity torsion formalizes fungibility: the self is not restored but redistributed, and the proper name

emerges as a bureaucratic instrument rather than the seal of interior continuity. In the epilogue, Turner retrofits the assumed name through documentation: in 1970, he returns to Florida, requests Elwood's birth certificate, and learns to secure official documents for the dead. In other words, the logic governing identity is not psychic coherence but administrative intelligibility; names are kept, discarded, or reassigned according to what can circulate and operate within the system.

In this respect, the novel's final movement echoes Hartman's account of return: "The hope is that return could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you" (100). Turner's life in Elwood's name is not rescue from oblivion; it is the form survival is forced to take within a regime that already treats Black being as replaceable. Whitehead's close is therefore not a ritual of closure but the persistence of an ethical remainder: testimony must happen, but it cannot complete; it can only revise, return, and try again. Turner has, in fact, been "telling Elwood's story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right" (Whitehead 202). The phrase "getting it right" is quietly brutal: correctness displaces consolation, and testimony hardens into labor undertaken without any guarantee of reception.

If Sharpe insists that "Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster" and that "[t]he disaster and the writing of disaster are never present, are always present" (5), Whitehead's novel makes that atmosphere formal. It forces us to read belatedness not as a narrative device but as a condition of legibility itself. One could invoke Caruth's definition of "latency" as "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (17), yet *The Nickel Boys* sharpens the claim: latency is not merely psychic delay but an externally administered timing, a schedule for what the public can bear to know, and when. The novel ends, then, not by converting graves into meaning or names into justice, but by leaving testimony where it actually lives in this world: in revision, in fear, in belated speech that cannot undo the structure that made speech dangerous in the first place.

VII. Conclusion

This article has not so much concluded as circled: a necessary reiteration of what *The Nickel Boys* refuses to resolve. What the novel offers is neither a confirmation of Afropessimist ontology nor a deviation from its logics, but a textual arrangement in which social death is neither represented nor redressed, only sedimented. Violence, in Whitehead's hands, does not escalate; it persists. The book formalizes that persistence not through spectacle but through atmospheric imposition, affective

evacuation, and a vocabulary of delay, disidentification, and recursive substitution.

To read *The Nickel Boys* as merely illustrative of Afropessimist thought is therefore to miss what it is doing. The text neither shores up theory nor stages a rebuttal. Instead, it reworks the oppositions on which criticism so often leans: fatalism and futurity, trauma and recovery, voice and silence, by making their resolution structurally unavailable. Turner's occupation of Elwood's name is not a narrative solution; it is a metaphysical remainder: not symbolic resurrection, but a sustained misalignment of subject and referent, speech tethered to absence, grief lived under erasure. What remains, then, is not synthesis but friction. The novel inhabits the space between exhaustion and endurance, not to adjudicate between them but to keep their unresolvability open. There is no epistemological comfort in this movement, no theoretical consolation. There is only a demand that literary form be read as a site of ontological tension, where memory, narration, and Black being circulate without anchorage.

Approaching *The Nickel Boys* as a trauma narrative, historical fiction, or critical allegory is therefore inadequate. The novel is not illustrative; it is interruptive. It renders narration itself suspect, exposing how even the most conscientious testimonial impulse can be folded back into the very structures it seeks to contest. In this sense, Whitehead stages the impossibility of representation under racial fungibility, where persons are rendered interchangeable and therefore disposable. The critical task, then, is to resist the urge to conclude. What this reading attempts is not resolution but a theorization of impasse, a recognition that literature, inadequate to repair, may nonetheless fracture the grammar of legibility through which repair is imagined. *The Nickel Boys* does not offer hope. It offers structure: broken, looping, saturated with refusal. Not a path forward, but a terrain in which we are compelled to learn how to dwell.

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Madrid Defeated: War and Otherness in the Narrative of the End of the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract This paper examines the symbolic transformation of Madrid during the final months of the Spanish Civil War (1939) through an interdisciplinary analysis of literary, memorialistic, and historical narratives. It argues that Madrid transcended its physical reality to become a liminal space embodying the Republic's collapse—shifting from a mythologized bastion of resistance to an emblem of defeat, despair, and fractured identity. Focusing on the Casado coup and the subsequent collapse of Republican resistance, the study analyses works by Max Aub, Arturo Barea, Elena Fortún, Valentín de Pedro, and Carlos Morla Lynch, among others. These narratives operate in a liminal space where memory and subjectivity intertwine to contest official histories, revealing how "othering" mechanisms justified repression and reshaped postwar Spanish identity by portraying the Republic as selfdefeated. Madrid's physical and moral degradation emerges as a universal metaphor for the Republic's tragedy, reflecting both material ruin and the suppression of dissent under Francoism. The paper also explores how fiction and memoir become privileged vehicles for transmitting collective memory, particularly when official discourse sought to silence alternative perspectives. It concludes that these subjective accounts offer indispensable insights into the psychological dimensions of defeat, exposing how collective memory legitimizes power while underscoring literature's vital role in preserving the complexities of contested pasts.

Keywords Spanish Civil War; Madrid; Memory Studies; Otherness; Spanish Contemporary Literature

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Introduction: Narrating the Defeat

Writing about the Spanish Civil War is, by itself, a challenge. Much has been researched and written about this conflict, to the point that it is difficult to navigate the complex web of studies that confront the novice researcher. The war not only meant a drastic period of hunger and pain for millions of Spaniards, but it has marked the social and political life of the country up to the present day (Beevor; Bolloten; Payne; Preston; Thomas; Trapiello; Viñas). It would be difficult to understand the contemporary reality of Spain if we did not approach, with a critical voice, the traumatic moment that is still present in the collective memory of Spanish society. Beyond polemics and false inventions, the study of what happened from objectivity and academic rigor continues to be an effort as necessary as it is essential. Only through the critical evaluation of our past will we be able to glimpse the reality of our present.

Historiography must confront the relativity of objectivity in historical discourse, recognizing that narratives of the past are enmeshed in a web of culturally derived meanings. Societal ambivalence is inherent in how we narrate reality, using it to stitch together the fabric of in-group identity. Defining the out-group is central to this process, as it delineates the boundaries of belonging by specifying exclusion and inclusion. Homi K. Bhabha, analyzing the nation —a potent in-group (Anderson; Redfield; Gellner; Castelló; McCabe; Patkin)—, notes how this narrative establishes cultural limits containing "thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased and translated" (Bhabha 4). Bhabha reveals a dynamic of reinterpretation, framing postcolonial identity issues through the lens of the colonizer's persisting in-group identity, which casts the colonized as an enduring other. Consequently, intergroup antagonism is an inevitable outcome of othering processes seeking to impose partial perspectives to define a problematic 'us'.

This relational dynamic occupies a liminal space, fundamental to constructing the image of the other. This image transcends the self, incorporating the otherness projected onto it by the in-group's specular gaze. The out-group thus achieves definition within this liminality, highlighting the difficulty of accessing this ambiguous zone where we attempt—and inevitably struggle—to apprehend the perpetually redefined external conception of the other.

Individuals navigate their environment using cognitive schemata—

preconceptions, not verified facts—that allow rapid, functional orientation. Intergroup dynamics introduce conflicts that shape individual behavior and attitudes, differing based on individual versus group identity. Crucially, the dominance of these group narratives empowers in-groups to enact collective modifications of reality that can potentially transcend the material world itself. It can be stated that

> las características restantes del DP (Dangerous Speech) son la *atribución de culpa*, la *construcción de amenazas*, la *destrucción de alternativas*, la *autoimagen virtuosa* y el *sesgo de futuro*. Aceptar que un exogrupo es culpable o que supone una amenaza, estar convencido de que la auto-conservación de un endogrupo requiere tomar medidas drásticas y aceptar promesas de que esas medidas drásticas producirán los resultados deseados, son actitudes que explotan las emociones morales y el razonamiento moralizado [The remaining characteristics of Dangerous Speech (DP) are *blame attribution*, *construction of threats*, the *destruction of alternatives*, the *virtuous self-image*, and *future bias*. Accepting that an outgroup is guilty or poses a threat, being convinced that the self-preservation of an ingroup requires drastic measures and accepting promises that such drastic measures will produce the desired outcomes are attitudes that exploit moral emotions and moralized reasoning] (Marques 227).

Discourse violence can thus be fueled by narratives deliberately crafted to establish and maintain a specific group's control and worldview. The other becomes a reflection of ourselves, facilitated by the notion of our collective identity being bounded by frontiers defined through this constructed difference. An artificial dichotomy between good and evil fosters a Manichaean societal perspective, enabling the in-group to reinforce its cultural and sociological boundaries, regardless of the impact on the out-group. Crucially, such narratives only emerge within the liminal space where conceptions of us and them are articulated.

Ambivalence therefore becomes essential for reconfiguring the past within these frontier zones (Al-Saji; Baker; Miller). It allows the weaving together of a disparate web of meanings, a process of resignification necessary for grasping a memory that is inherently heterogeneous. The narrativization of events thus becomes a historiographical necessity once it acknowledges the relativity of societal objectivity concerning the past. Consequently, the present appears before us as a provisional step towards a fragmented and elusive past—a necessary precursor to understanding our own temporality. Reality is positioned as an object of yearning for the in-group, while simultaneously, the very concept of the present—as a necessary

boundary between past and future, a temporal entity existing in either moment depending on our perspective—becomes indistinct.

The Final Countdown: Narrative about the Fall of the Spanish Republic

Throughout this project, we can appreciate how the works of the different authors treated were involved in the same problems, although each one carried out this process from his particular vision of the war. The personal experiences that in many cases form the substratum of these narratives —as well as the vision of the collective memory on which they are based— authorize us to build a complex collage that—far from presenting few relationships between its components—allows us to reconstruct a reality that is difficult to glimpse because of the varied perspectives.

The recollection of what happened is thus constructed —as I have pointed out in previous occasions (García Martín)—through the interrelation between contrasting and complementary experiences that do not cease to affect and revise the same basic ideas. Indeed, Casado's coup d'état not only meant the definitive blow against the republican power structures —precipitating the end of the conflict and closing the possibility of carrying out a wider evacuation of those who would later be persecuted— but it also meant the change of perspective on an already decayed and diminished myth such as the city of Madrid itself (Aguilera; Bahamonde; Bahamonde y Cervera). Far from remaining in the materiality of the conflict —present, however, in each of the texts treated— the place occupied by the capital surpassed its spatial limits to take up residence in the realm of legend. To speak of Madrid in the final weeks of 1939 is, for each of the authors we have analyzed, to try to unravel how it was possible for disaster and defeat to rage in such a way against the Republican power structures and the fighting spirit that had kept the battles alive up to that moment. For it was not only a problem of lack of war material, supplies or physical fatigue after almost three years of conflict, but the defeat transcended its material scope to take its toll on the spirit of resistance and the confidence in the Republic that existed among those who continued to support the legitimate government. Defeatism permeated among the civilian population and among the military commanders, allowing Franco's fifth column to take control of the streets of Madrid long before Casado's Consejo Nacional de Defensa [National Defense Council] left the capital. It is, therefore —as reflected in the texts studied— the feeling that it was not possible to continue any further that put an end to the republican fighting capacity; and not to the same extent the conviction that there was a communist conspiracy to seize power, or that Franco would bend to the

interests of a shared military class.

Casado's coup d'état thus centers, in one way or another, the background of most of the texts that have been the object of study in this work. However —and without diminishing the importance of analyzing how this second blow to the legitimacy of the Republican government was experienced and felt— the analysis of this historical process transcends the materiality of what happened to allow us to observe how the feeling that the Republic was finished, ended up burying the confidence in the resistance of a large part of the population. The deception to which Franco subjected Casado and the rest of the members of the Consejo Nacional de Defensa was thus the fruit of this need to find a way out —even a miraculous one— of the desperate situation in which they believed they found themselves. The belief in the lack of a way out of the war thus meant the establishment of an atmosphere of credibility that made it possible to ignore the continuous news that reached the capital about the persecutions and assassinations that the military rebels were perpetrating throughout the conquered territory. Without this implying that Casado, Mera, Besteiro or other members of the Consejo Nacional de Defensa had any responsibility in this process —nor, on the other way, that which corresponds to President Negrín and members of his government such as Álvarez del Vayo himself— the fact remains that it was the breaking into a million pieces of the city of Madrid as a symbol of resistance that provoked the beginning of the end.

The analysis of a situation that transcends the objectivity of historical discourse and needs to resort to the subjectivity of memory to try to recompose a vision of what happened revolves around Madrid. At the same time, the idea built around the capital during the years of conflict goes beyond the physical limits of the capital to coexist within a liminal space formed by the ideations and symbolizations that were carried out on this place. Madrid denotes resistance, at the same time as defeat, in a permanent dance that will only be resolved when it comes to signifying victory. Many other spaces of the state geography could have been analyzed as part of the vision of the conflict that we intended to offer. The fall of the Catalonian Front meant the flight of hundreds of thousands of Spaniards across the Pyrenees and was followed by an enormous human drama around the hundreds of concentration camps that were devised to try to stop their advance. The drama will also continue in places like Alicante, the last Republican stronghold in March 1939, where the hope of being able to flee from the massacre that Franco's troops were perpetrating throughout the Republican territory. Places like these, and many others, could have been used for a work of these characteristics. But not only the need to establish limits to our effort has forced us to focus on the analysis of what happened in the

capital, but the assumption that it is in the symbolization of this city where the physical limits of the war were transcended to embody the tragedy of the entire Republic. That is why Franco devoted so much effort in his capitulation without arms, to obtain a symbolic surrender that would establish the strength of the New Spain that he intended to raise from the ashes of the previous democracy. Only from the awareness of a Republic defeated by itself and surrendered from within could this level of identification with the new victorious capital be achieved, which would serve as a barrier between the reality of repression and the new ideology to which Spaniards would be subjected for the next four decades.

The reality of Franco's victory is shown, in this way, through texts that, in most cases, observe this situation from the presence of what is going to happen, without this feared future having yet come to fruition. Madrid felt defeated weeks before the troops of the military rebels entered the capital. The memory of what happened is thus transmitted from the anticipation experienced by its own protagonists, as shown in works such as Morla Lynch's. The awareness of the end became an absolute that would allow the fifth columnists to deploy their gradual control over the capital, while the efforts of the Consejo Nacional de Defensa were answered from Burgos with silence, if not with delations or unrealizable demands. From this perspective, the different authors who have approached this period allow us to appreciate snippets of a conflictive and confused memory that submerges the characters in the morass of fear towards the future. The present thus becomes a space of clash and changes between a past of resistance that is rejected and a future that does not want to be recognized. Both the former, still present in the symbology of Madrid, and the latter, which is introduced through continuous conversations and admissions, force the characters to move through a slippery present in which they are unable to find their place.

That is why Madrid acquires a grayish and decayed tinge in some narratives in which people struggle to survive in the midst of war, as point out Sánchez Zapatero (2020). Between the ruin and the material and symbolic destruction of the capital, the different diegesis and recollections studied strive to narrate the untellable, while striving to explain that for which the characters themselves seem unable to find a solution. The horror of the conflict is thus intermingled with dismay at a defeat that seems to devour Madrid through fiction. In this way, Elena Fortún presents us—in her novel *Celia en la revolución* [*Celia in the Revolution*] (1987)— with a diegesis in which an innocent and external point of view such as that of the child's gaze shows his dismay at the changes he observes around him, and at a reality that is too cruel to be easily admitted. The other is thus reflected in the eyes of a

protagonist who ends up offering the reader a different vision of reality, marked by a desperation that joins the need to continue believing in life (Bravo and Maharg-Bravo; Capdevila-Argüelles; Iglesias). The gradual degradation of Madrid shown by this author contrasts with a hope that is never questioned, while the justifications that led to the creation of the Consejo Nacional de Defensa show their cracks in the face of a defeatism that does not correspond to a Madrid that still retains its original symbolism. In the same vein, the adventures of Argos that Valentín de Pedro relates in *La vida por la opinion* [*Life for the Opinion*] (1942) also have the advantage of a perspective in which it is the other who speaks, from the margins of a reality that is always difficult to conceptualize and glimpse. The tricks carried out by the fifth columnists are highlighted among the incomprehension of our protagonist, who does not understand how these schemes do not come to the forefront in the conscience of those around him. The degradation of Madrid is thus exacerbated amidst the incomprehension and ignorance of someone who does not share the same state of social understanding as the rest, since he is only capable of observing reality from a liminal space. However, this allows him to glimpse the dangers of a future to which the capital seems to be heading irremediably, without the gradual lack of humanity that he appreciates in his wanderings through the streets of the city preventing him from ceasing in his efforts to understand a reality that appears clearly and coherently to the reader between the cracks of this same incomprehension that Argos shows. The brutality of the entry of Franco's troops will mean the definitive rupture with what was and can no longer be, while the Madrid that Argos was determined to maintain and recover will be accessible only in the oneiric space.

History intermingles with fiction in a diegesis in which the frontier between the two forms of understanding the past is blurred, to the point of confusing one discourse with the other. Fiction seems to triumph where misinformation and disregard for the truth have mired the narrative of the past. Memory is transmitted to the reader, thus, through a novelistic vision of the world, which has the effect of retelling the essence of what happened through the example of a particular experience that, thanks to the diegetic framework, becomes a universal example. It is in this way that Barea strives to transmit the desperation of Madrid that he lived from the confrontation between different and the social fracture, but in which he remained until almost the end of the conflict (Eaude; Fernández Gutiérrez and Herrera Rodrigo; Florentín). With Arturo Barea's *La forja de un rebelde* [*The Forge of a Rebel*] (1940-1945), Madrid ends up becoming a gigantic prison from which there is no choice but to flee, as it threatens to trap inside anyone who decides to stay. The tragedy that can be seen in the spirit of Aub's character Vicente Dalmases

in wanting to resist until the end in the besieged city has its counterpart in the figure of the refugee who observes the capital from the distance of Barea's Parisian exile.

The human disaster becomes a symbol of a tragedy that the Republic leaves with its disappearance. Barea thus shows us, among the fragments left by the democratic regime, the desolation of a city that has lost its fighting spirit and extols the exodus as a natural consequence of the disaster. Javier Quiñones, for his part, explores in *Años Triunfales. Prisión y Muerte de Julián Besteiro* [*Triumphal Years. The Imprisonment and Death of Julián Besteiro*] (1998) the integrity of Besteiro's character in the face of the decision taken; not as a form of repentance, but as an assumption of a destiny that never had to come, but which is presented before the reader's eyes as an inexorable fact. The presence of what is going to happen to him is interviewed by the reader from the conscience of a death as real as it is direct, with which begins a diegesis that pretends to symbolize in Besteiro the destiny of a Republic submerged in its contradictions, but faithful to its moral destiny. The prison into which Francoism will turn Spain after its victory radiates from the Madrid of the victory to the whole State, in a process that follows the steps of Besteiro's character in his obligatory journey to Andalusia. The prison atmosphere established in this diegesis exemplifies the fears that are so present in most of the texts we have worked on, as a consequence of the symbolic rupture of the Madrid of the resistance. Quiñones, together with Barea, Fortún and De Pedro, explores the fall of the capital from the margins, with the aim of trying to acquire a new perspective on the process of destruction of an other that should not have been, but was forced to face a conflict of the magnitude of our civil war. The tragedy of the fall of the capital is thus experienced, whether from inside or outside, as the tragedy of those who resist accepting reality while it imposes itself before their eyes. As San Martín Sala states,

> La alienación humana es fundamentalmente cosificación, aquella concepción del hombre que se esfuerza en verlo como cosa, como producto natural determinado. La cosificación no es ni exteriorización ni objetivación. El ser humano no se cosifica al objetivarse mediante el trabajo o al producir cosas culturales, momento en el que por su actividad las cosas quedan impregnadas de sentido humano, por tanto al producir e incorporar ideas en la naturaleza. Todo esto, lejos de suponer cosificación alguna, es lo contrario, humanizar el mundo. No nos cosificamos al humanizar la naturaleza, sino al revés, nos cosificamos cuando nos vemos a nosotros mismos como naturaleza [Human alienation is fundamentally reification, that conception of man which strives

> to see him as a thing, as a determined natural product. Reification is neither externalization nor objectification. The human being does not become reified by objectifying himself through work or by producing cultural things—a moment in which, through his activity, things become impregnated with human meaning, and therefore by producing and incorporating ideas into nature. All of this, far from implying any reification whatsoever, is its opposite, humanizing the world. We do not reify ourselves by humanizing nature; on the contrary, we reify ourselves when we see ourselves as nature]. (278)

Alienation is conveyed in the texts we studied as something necessary in the face of confrontation with the different. The reification caused by this process immerses us in a natural environment in which the human being as such only has a place without rationality. The naturalization of the repression carried out by Franco obviated the rationality that the process of symbolization of the struggle for Madrid had given to the Republic. The loss of meaning in the fall of the symbol in which the capital became is what other authors tried to combat who, from the political field, tried to transmit in their memoirs the need to reconstitute the change produced and try to keep alive a struggle that already seemed impossible after Franco's victory. The humanity of the other, fractured by Franco's regime, returns before the reader's eyes to combative and polemical texts that seek to draw the West's attention to the damages and injustices committed by the new dictatorial regime.

In this line, Álvarez Del Vayo —in *Freedom's Battle* (1940)— tries to launch a cry—almost desperate—to an international community that he has been trying to reach during the three years of conflict. Defeat does not prevent the new world conflict that has been unleashed from serving as a new framework for action to try to put an end to Franco's regime, in the midst of a positive vision of the situation that expresses, through words, the strength that the other republican still has, in spite of Franco's propaganda apparatus. The voice of the reprisals—even when exposed in circumlocutions that seek to defend the work of Negrin's government and avoid criticizing the presidential cabinet—is introduced in Del Vayo's politicized discourse as a need to restructure the vision of the past based on the legitimacy of the Republic, seen as a victim of the injustices of the military rebels. The struggle continues in a narrative that refuses to accept reality and starts from this ontological rejection to express a truth that seeks to transcend the war to approach the Western powers as a whole. The defense of the rights of the refugees and of all those repressed by Franco's regime thus animates a series of lines focused on the naturalization of otherness as a window of opportunity in the face of a present that

we seek to avoid and circumvent. The past becomes a refuge, even a painful one, for those who can only avoid looking into the eyes of a contemporaneity in which an entire out-group is being destroyed.

Isabel de Oyarzábal, on the other end—in the same line of political defense of republican legitimacy as Del Vayo—departs in *I must have liberty* (1940) from the account of his life and intimacy to explore a contradictory and encompassing otherness based on the individual and his particular freedom as necessary corollaries of any political struggle; as I have pointed out before (García Martín). The dehumanization that Oyarzábal sees in these processes, by attempting to turn women into objects in the hands of patriarchal society, responds to a conception of the human being that seeks to erode and attack the factors that give rise to the objectification of the individual. Our author intends to fight against these treatments through her personal history, by highlighting how her life and the reality of the republican combat she has experienced firsthand. Constant work and commitment to justice will lead Oyarzábal to maintain her effort for the different as a reflection of her own struggle not to be subjected to the interests of a society that tried to reduce her role and silence her voice in the face of the needs of an oppressive tradition. Memory is thus presented to the reader as a vindication of what could have been and should be in a rejection of conformism that, even from exile, tries to approach what happened not to create a space of evasion, but with the intention of building a place of responsibility and collective conscience that serves to continue opposing the dictates of the Franco regime.

In the search for a meaning that avoids and circumvents us, the temporality that traps us becomes both a space for reflection and an impossible escape. Mera, in his search for an explanation of what happened, seeks in *Guerra, exilio y cárcel de un anarcosindicalista* [*War, Exile and Prison of an Anarcho-syndicalist*] (1976) to reflect from the immediacy of her writings on her decision to join the Consejo Nacional de Defensa based on her criticism of many of the decisions taken by Casado. This contradictory position responds, precisely, to the temporality to which he is subjected to as a historical subject of a past time that continues to affect the present, but which can no longer be easily reached. In the midst of this diatribe, Mera's position is to denounce the ideological traps that he observes in the memory of his reality in order to present the reader with an alternative, from the present to the memory of what happened. Mera seeks, in this way, to reconstruct an account of the facts based on pragmatism in order to accept the temporality to which his acts were subjected. In a certain sense, as Martínez Martínez points out,

> Desde este punto de vista el sentido de la vida no se busca en una relación sincrónica, estructural, con un manantial de sentido coexistente con el individuo, bien sea la comunidad o un ser divino, sino que se busca en un plazo diacrónico, histórico, lo cual supone que se haya concedido importancia al tiempo, es decir, que se haya adquirido cierto sentido histórico. La noción de sentido histórico supone una concepción del tiempo que lo considera como un escenario en el que se puede producir la novedad, como un ámbito heterogéneo que no es siempre el mismo [From this point of view, the meaning of life is not sought in a synchronic, structural relationship with a source of meaning coexisting with the individual—be it the community or a divine being—but rather in a diachronic, historical framework. This implies that importance has been granted to time, that is to say, that a certain historical consciousness has been acquired. The notion of historical consciousness presupposes a conception of time that regards it as a setting in which novelty can occur, as a heterogeneous realm that is not always identical to itself]. (Martínez Martínez 456)

Time is thus shown to us as an ideal space to recall the image of Madrid at the beginning of the war while at the same time visualizing the space of ruin and defeat in which we are immersed in prose such as those of Corral and Méndez —in *La ciudad de arena* [*The City of Sand*] (2009) and *Los girasoles ciegos* [*The Blind Sunflowers*] (2005), respectively—. Madrid is no longer the city of the resisters, and the memory becomes painful in the face of a defeat as inevitable as it is painful. The degradation of the city is thus shown to the reader as a necessary imperative in the face of the physical and moral situation of the characters, trapped in an inexorable temporality from which they cannot escape. The antagonisms of the conflict are now revealed as predators of characters who witness the atmosphere of oppression and defeat from the conviction that the present has gone from being the time of the possible to become the liminal space of necessity. The abjuration from temporality carried out by the characters of Méndez and Corral is precisely due to the assumption of this inexorable path towards the disappearance of the Madrid they knew, which leads them to reject this same temporality as a moral position in the face of what has happened. The apparent futility of their action does not prevent it from being presented to us as a necessity. The position of these characters is thus the deaf cry of those who, despite not being understood by those around them, refuse to submerge themselves in the present that surrounds them and decide to take control of their own thoughts. The word, then, becomes the last redoubt of a memory that

continues to struggle to come to the surface, even when it seems to be irremediably swept away by this pressing temporality. The present becomes the place of ignorance at the moment when the protagonists of Corral and Méndez manage to observe what happened from the prism of otherness, superimposing the reality of the different to the ease that they themselves could have found in the situation. The tragedy of this presentified past we are analyzing is thus found in the apparent admission of the grotesque and the unforeseen as a form of struggle in the face of the irremediability of this temporality. All this in order to revisit the other and to try to overcome —even from the awareness of defeat—

> las dificultades que se alzan y que es preciso superar para lograr alcanzar la noción de común humanidad. Pues por más que dicha noción aparezca en un principio afirmada religiosa o filosóficamente, lo cierto es que se ve de inmediato puesta en entredicho por la tajante división que se establece entre griegos y bárbaros, hombres libres y esclavos, cristianos y paganos o también por la afirmación de la superioridad natural de los hombres sobre las mujeres o de unas razas sobre otras [the difficulties that arise and must be overcome in order to attain the notion of common humanity. For no matter how such a notion may initially be affirmed on religious or philosophical grounds, the fact is that it is immediately called into question by the stark division established between Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves, Christians and pagans, or also by the assertion of the natural superiority of men over women, or of some races over others]. (Morán 92)

Madrid thus becomes a space of grays and shadows where blackness becomes the main feature of a space that seems to have lost its identity. The memory is diluted in the prose of an author like in Francisco Galván's *Cuando el cielo se caiga* [*When Heavens falls down*] (2003) where the criminal investigation intermingles with the presentation of a corrupt and emaciated society that resolves the confrontation with the other from the pessimistic assumption of the impossibility of putting an end to the observed difference. Inequality therefore joins the rottenness of a society that is falling apart under the weight of defeat, without even the entry of Franco's troops being necessary to provoke this loss. Madrid is turned into a realm of terror and flight in the midst of a triumph of grayness that threatens to swallow up all the characters in Galván's diegesis. The truth ends up being despised as a handicap in a society that reveals itself to be without values or future, submerged in a mortifying present from which there can be no escape. Temporality triumphs,

paradoxically, from the awareness of its non-existence, as it unravels in a wait that is eternalized through the pages of diegesis. Madrid, as a space of expectation, does not seem to be able to resort to its memory to escape from this morass, which symbolizes the triumph of a defeat that is as physical as it is spiritual. Defeat takes shape in narratives in which the pain of loss is intermingled with the anguish of a future of persecution to which the characters of these diegesis are doomed. Madrid takes shape from degradation, in a manner similar to that of Galván, in the prose of a work like Eduardo Zúñiga's *Capital de la gloria* [*Capital of Glory*] (2003), where the ruinous image of the environment interweaves with the unwavering yearning of characters who know they are part of a story much broader than their personal memories. The narrative triumphs in stories that rely on the memory of what happened to transmit the spirit of an entire era, while the debasement and degeneration in which Madrid is submerged are combated by means of a hopeful memory that seeks to pursue an ideal as a particular position in the face of the apparent lack of future. The future is thereby observed in the mists of a present too humiliated to serve as a reference, but whose epic continues to be hidden under the dust and rubble of the bombings.

The interrelation that we can appreciate between diegetic and memorialistic texts exposes the capacity of the discourse to start from a particular subjectivity as a way of explaining the objectivity of the past. The recollection is intertwined between the lines of narratives that seek to express the collective memory of the Civil War from a multifaceted perspective that addresses both the reality of what happened and the experiences of the protagonists. The war is thus recounted between the narrativization of all kinds of daily experiences that singularize the moment of evocation by means of showing a face of reality that is not only a reflection of the truth of what happened but also of the experiences of the protagonists.

The Chilean diplomatic Carlos Morla Lynch, driven by a focus on the individual — aiming to capture how each person acted during the conflict, irrespective of their political allegiance or his own prior assumptions about them— sought to transcend the barriers created by entrenched division. He collects in his diaries—*España sufre* [*Spain suffers*] (1936-1939)—, through reasoned analysis, he aimed to construct a more human, and consequently more complex and contradictory, understanding of his wartime observations. The challenge of politically pigeonhole him, of attaching a definitive ideological label, stems precisely from this consistent effort to engage with the 'other'—the presumed adversary—, and strive for comprehension. Neither circumstances, nor his own preconceptions and political stance, deterred Morla from confronting the war as

authentically as possible. Though it interrupted his diplomatic career, he never avoided it. Thus, the paramount value of these texts lies in the multiplicity of voices they encompass, the candor of their examination, and the persistent endeavor to verify facts and reach an elusive truth during an era dominated by propaganda and distorted reality. Ultimately, Morla Lynch's reflections offer an escape from the divisive boundaries the war wove between Spaniards, guiding us towards a space where, despite everything, reflection and analysis attempt to combat division. They exemplify how, transcending an individual's starting position, humanizing the opponent and those involved can foster a much more faithful grasp of the situation, empowered by memory.

The narrated memory is thus written from the paradigm of indeterminacy that seeks to overcome the existing group categories in order to recognize the individual within the other, and to demolish, as far as possible, the easy identification that has led precisely to the conflict seen in Morla Lynch's writings. Thanks to this work of introspection we can observe the human side of a conflict in which life goes on among the ruins of wartime Madrid, while its inhabitants struggle to continue with their daily existences. The living memory thus serves as a means to confront the cruelty and debasement of the moment, so that the narrative that gives meaning to the present is constructed from the immediacy of what happened, from a subjectivity that seeks to reflect the thousand shades of gray that make up the panorama of the Civil War confrontation. The Casadistas thus battle against the troops still loyal to Negrín's government in the streets of Madrid that contemplates itself from the assumed tragedy of a reality that must be remembered. The transcendence of this position takes shape, therefore, in a word that brings together in itself both the past and the future, in the work of narrating an untellable present that seems to escape our comprehension. Accordingly, it is that

> diese Narrative sind deshalb so mächtig, weil sie nicht nur das Außen, sondern auch unser Innen bestimmen. Und das viel mehr, als den meisten von uns bewusst ist. In der Erzählung durch andere entwickeln wir überhaupt erst so etwas wie einen Geist, eine Idee von Identität [These narratives are so powerful because they determine not only the external but also our internal world. And to a much greater extent than most of us are aware. It is through narration by others that we first develop something like a mind, an idea of identity]. (El Ouassil y Karig 30)

We depend on the other to find an identity that shuns us and distances itself from

us, for it is only from this approach to the different that we can construct a global narrative about ourselves that brings together both our inner subjectivity and that which is presented to us from the outside. Morla and Aub, from memory and fiction, reflect on this approach and try to see the other as part of themselves, in an effort to describe a reality full of grays that avoids any hint of Manichaean space. Only from the assumption of a multifaceted and changing reality can we approach an instrumental memory that brings us closer to a problematic past that is not capable of offering us a single truth, but rather the multiform fragments of different faces of what happened. Through the other, diegesis such as Max Aub's *Campo del moro* [*Moor's Field*] (1940) manage to explore the complex liminal space that configures a vision capable of residing both in the present and in the collective memory, and that aspires to become a reference for an entire society. For it is only from this mixture of otherness and awareness of a Madrid too complex to be understood from a single perspective that the depth of a tragedy such as that experienced during the end of the Spanish Civil War can be understood.

The univocity of being is expressed through these narratives in an effort of synthesis that displaces the problem of truth to situate itself in a problematic and convulsive temporality. War seems to occupy every space of reality, while Aub's characters travel through Madrid submerged in defeatism and loss. The need for transcendence in cases such as Dalmases or Manuel El Espiritista exemplifies this desire to oppose a situation that threatens to devour even the very space in which the capital is located. Everything becomes war in a constant struggle to live among the ruins of memory, and to survive among the remains of history. Thus, for Aub, the effort to understand the different and try to enter into his vision of reality is an attempt to overcome facts that, through their potentiality, submerge the individual in the narrative of the facts at the same time as they shape his identity. It is in this way that

> le problème est donc de savoir comment l'individu pourrait dépasser sa forme et son lien syntaxique avec un monde pour atteindre à l'universelle communication des événements, c'est-à-dire à l'affirmation d'une synthèse disjonctive au-delà non seulement des contradictions logiques, mais même des incompatibilités alogiques. Il faudrait que l'individu se saisisse lui-même comme événement. Et que, l'événement qui s'effectue en lui, il le saisisse aussi bien comme un autre individu fieffé sur lui. Alors, cet événement, il ne le comprendrait pas, ne le voudrait pas, ne le représenterait pas sans comprendre et vouloir aussi tous les autres événements comme individus, sans représenter tous les autres

> individus comme événements. Chaque individu serait comme un miroir pour la condensation des singularités, chaque monde une distance dans le miroir. Tel est le sens ultime de la contre-effectuation [The problem, therefore, is to know how the individual might surpass his form and his syntactic link with a world in order to attain the universal communication of events, that is to say, the affirmation of a disjunctive synthesis beyond not only logical contradictions but even illogical incompatibilities. The individual would have to grasp himself as an event. And the event that takes place in him, he would have to grasp it also as another individual established upon him. Then, this event, he would neither comprehend it, nor will it, nor represent it without also comprehending and willing all the other events as individuals, without representing all the other individuals as events. Each individual would be like a mirror for the condensation of singularities, each world a distance in the mirror. Such is the ultimate meaning of counter-effectuation]. (Deleuze 208-209)

The narrator highlights specific details portraying a defeated Madrid that has lost its defining uniqueness. The city's monuments, buildings, and streets seem uniformly gray, erasing the capital's soul. The war stands as both victor and the ultimate cause of the city's death, which observes like a character its inhabitants trying to carry on, but without their former nerve and vitality. Within the local setting Ángel María De Lera's *Las últimas banderas* [*Last Banners*] (1967) describes, the future is impossible; internal struggles leave no space for it. In joyless, colorless urban spaces, oblivion becomes the dominant reality and emblem of defeat, making the capital a trap for the final resisters. Defeat of the republican cause and its subsequent oblivion are thus interwoven in a novel that seeks to voice republican experiences while establishing the war as a universal enemy and the root cause of events.

Conclusions: The Long Memory of the Defeat

The threads of History are interwoven in the narrative discourse as a complex web of ideations and intentions that conceal both the interests of the writer and those of an entire community. When we try to approach the analysis of these processes, one of the greatest difficulties we may encounter is to face a multiform and complex truth that is difficult to adapt to preconceived frameworks. Our job is, therefore, to try to glimpse what lies beneath the elaborate discourse, and which brings us closer to a vision of reality, if not complete, then at least reliable. Walking the fine line that separates fiction from reality, the texts we have studied seek to recover a particular vision of the past that, even with all its subjectivity, seeks to confront and fight

against the distortion of a reality that is seen in a more or less twisted way by the official discourse. From the careful attention to the present that we can see in Morla Lynch, to De Lera's attempts to circumvent a Francoist censorship that was always too strict, to the use of diegesis as a privileged instrument to relate what happened in Aub, the memory is presented before the reader's eyes as a cry —we would almost say desperate, in many cases— to collaborate and work on a collective memory that takes into account the role of both victims and perpetrators.

In an era of antagonism and destruction of the opposite, when the military rebels not only succeeded in the coup d'état of 1936, but continued the war effort until they defeated the legitimate government of the Republic three years later, the complementary processes of forgetting and re-construction of what happened that operate in memory show their full potential as creators of meaning and producers of sense. The necessary re-elaboration of what happened through the memorialistic treatment carried out by the community thus unfolds all its capacity to shape the identity structure of a given in-group. Thus, the vision of the other is devised within this mechanism as a necessary corollary to the perceived differentiation that this same antagonism exacerbated during the war.

Within this development, the recollection thus appears before our eyes as an absolute for those who refused to bow to history as a repetition of the political slogans of a regime whose only objective was the consolidation of the victory achieved against the republican government. Our main purpose in this work has been to show how, while maintaining the necessary differentiation between the subjectivity of one type of discourse and the objectivity of the other, fiction can become a privileged vehicle to transmit what the pretended objectivity of the official historical discourse tried to hide in periods such as the one we have studied. Thus, from memory to fiction, the recollection of a community can be transmitted from the subjective vision that a given individual has of reality. Thanks to these fragmentary approaches to the past, and, paradoxically, to the freedom of re-creation offered by this same subjectivity, the reader can come to contemplate the reality of an other who has been denied both his entity and his own story.

Throughout this paper, our analysis of otherness has sought to highlight the artificiality of the construction of difference for the in-group that seeks to devise its own out-groups. In this sense, we have explored how the symbolism of Madrid is crucial to understanding the meaning of a conflict such as the Spanish Civil War. The city acquired a status that, after the Battle of Madrid, transcended the limits of its reality to mythologize itself as a force of resistance against the military rebels. The fall of the capital was thus experienced amidst despair and the presence of a

future as feared as it was hoped for. In the works of Fortún, Barea, De Pedro and Quiñones, Madrid thus becomes a contradictory space, seen between the longing for what it was and a present in which the republican symbol that it was is no longer more than a memory. In other texts it comes to be seen from the political point of view of a Republic subjected to its own discordance and which seeks to reflect on its political legacy even when defeat has already been consummated, as can be seen in Álvarez Del Vayo, Oyarzábal and Mera. It also becomes a space that succumbs to the desperation and anhedonia of those who know they are almost ready for the gallows and only seem to live in injury time —as we have seen in Corral, Méndez, Galván and Zúñiga—. But, above all, Madrid is the complex symbol of what was and could not be; of what reality hides in memory and is unable to express objectively, because it keeps in itself the otherness that tried both sides tried to fight and destroy. Madrid, as reflected in the fictions studied in this work —and especially in the works of Morla Lynch, Aub and De Lera— was this forgotten and re-constructed recollection that transcended its physical reality to reside in the fiction of the end of a war that has marked the history of Spain to the present day. A space of grays that triumphed in defeat, since it remained in collective memory as a symbol of the tragedy of oblivion.

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Itineraries of the Disappeared: Subaltern Labor in Han Suyin's *And the Rain My Drink*

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Abstract My paper contributes to ongoing conversations about how Han Suyin's Malayan Emergency novel, *And the Rain My Drink* (1956), foregrounds the intersections of gender and racial exploitation in the plight of indentured laborers on British Malaya's rubber plantations. Distinctly, Han's *Rain* prefigures what would subsequently be termed in critical discourse as the subaltern condition of labor, stemming from colonial "negation" or racist and sexist dehumanization. As such, I initially demonstrate how the novel anticipates Gayatri Spivak's formulation of the gendered subaltern presence in discourse as an indeterminacy. However, I also show that a religious ritual among the women rubber tappers serves as a moment of subaltern self-making that interrupts colonial structures. Thus, while *Rain* may be considered a realist meditation on the life-negating processes of colonial labor, the novel also reveals the trajectories of the disappeared, profaned, and banished women laborers as discontinuous with empire and colonial war.

Keywords Malayan Emergency; plantation labor; subaltern consciousness; Hungry Ghost Month; realist war novel

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Introduction

Renewed interest in Han Suyin as a twentieth-century author and public figure has shed light on her leading role among Third World intellectuals, artists, and writers in advocating for Asian decolonization and integration, against the ideological polarization of the region during the Cold War. Specifically, her novels and nonfiction from the 1950s to the 60s, written during her Asian sojourns, have been studied for the prescient ways in which they captured the moment of decolonization

as specific experiences or issues that would subsequently define critical theory in its various turns toward feminism, postcolonial studies, and, of late, decoloniality (Hussein; Chin; Poon; Lee, F; Tickell; Zhang; Lee, C). Notably, her Malayan Emergency novel, *And the Rain My Drink* (1956), has been garnering the most critical attention in this emerging field of Han Suyin studies.

Comparing *Rain* with other novels, Anne Wetherilt and Christopher Lee separately examine how Han rewrites the novel form, either as a middlebrow critique of colonialism or as a means of narrating crisis by clearing space for a differential position within her own revolutionary politics. Meanwhile, a couple of critical commentaries focus on *Rain*'s sympathies with labor exploitation and resistance amid the British counter-insurgency campaign of "winning the people's hearts and minds." For instance, Ina Zhang shows how *Rain*'s subversive depiction of colonial violence against the Malayan Chinese "squatters" or rubber tappers was strongly informed by Han's internationalism, or a "third position," that she forged through her cross-racial and grassroots immersion in Malaya as a community doctor (Zhang 162). Finally, Grace V. S. Chin embarks on a feminist interpretation of key scenes of laughter or ritual to reveal the agency of rural Chinese women in colonial Malaya.

In this paper, I contribute to this ongoing conversation about how *Rain*, as a realist novel, problematizes the intersections of gender and race in the plight of indentured laborers in British Malaya. Specifically, I posit *Rain* as a narrative that fills the lacuna created by what Donald Nonini calls "conjunctural episodes of dispossession," or the violent obliteration and epistemic erasure of the practices and histories of the anti-colonial, interracial labor solidarities in Malaya, through counter-insurgency Emergency measures happening concurrently at the imperial, national, and local levels, and enforced both legally and illegally, overtly and secretly through the British administration (Nonini 339). However, I nuance my argument further by showing that *Rain* surfaces a labor history quite different from what Nonini describes as a "Communist-inspired anti-colonial movement" (356). That is, if *Rain* counters the colonial efforts to blank out labor struggle in Malayan history, then it complicates this attempt by, first, tracing the experience of migrant labor as a process of subalternization and, second, by opening up instances in the narrative when the unwaged and invisible labor, that is, women, children, and the elderly, embody the impacts of labor expropriation, erasure, hence, negation. In other words, Han's text presciently questions the notion of the "negative class consciousness" (Guha 20) as not simply a potentially insurgent, revolutionary subjectivity.

In the following discussion, I will examine two specific encounters with the female subaltern laborer, which vex this rather linear trajectory of a negated consciousness towards political consolidation. Initially, I will demonstrate that the narrative registers the authorial narrative persona's chance meeting with the subaltern female figure as an instance of non-representation and, in a manner that anticipates Gayatri Spivak's formulation, as a fundamental indeterminacy. Subsequently, I illustrate how *Rain* negotiates with such an incommensurable presence by shifting to the third-person narration of the haunting and possession of detained women rubber tappers during the Hungry Ghost Month. In doing so, the narrative glimpses how a subaltern religious event transforms the "negatively defined space" (Lloyd 7) of the women's prison into a site of a "counterpossibility" (Spivak 82; Lloyd 7) where a collective ritual invalidates their subordination to the colonial labor system. Yet even as *Rain* recasts negativity in this religious event as transformative of these women's abject condition (Jabbar 106), it links back, as importantly, to the negation of the female subaltern body, through her emotional pain and physical death, to empire and capitalism. Thus, Han's painstaking negotiation of her already unavoidably distanced position as a sojourner in conflict-ridden Malaya towards forging a differential narrative relation with the migrant labor sector results in a precariously narrated novel form. But in risking the literary form to open junctures where subaltern laborers embody dispossession, deracination, abuse, loss, grief, pain, and death, *Rain*, ultimately reorients the vantage point from which to understand the Cold War ideology against political resistance that defined the dovetailed systems of colonialism and imperialism in 1950s Malaya.

Narrated from multiple perspectives and accommodating various narrative forms (Poon 253, 255), the novel resists a simple summary. However, *Rain* can be tentatively described as a work of historical fiction that unravels the violence and tensions of the Malayan Emergency, the anti-colonial uprising in British Malaya, through the precarious lives of interstitial figures such as the government spy Ah Mei, Malayan citizens, and largely Chinese rubber tappers. Thus, *Rain* can be considered as an accounting of how the grassroots sectors, plantation laborers, and agents of war in Malaya straddle the ideological loyalties demanded by both the colonial government and the Communist forces.

In this article, I focus on specific details of Han's vast narrative. I am mainly concerned about two chapters in the book that feature women rubber tappers in distinct ways. First, in one of the opening chapters, Han participates in the scene as "Suyin," the newly arrived "Lady Medical Officer" in the Johore countryside hospital, and, as she conducts consultations in the women and children's clinic,

encounters Fong Kiap. "Suyin" narrates her encounter with Fong Kiap, a rubber tapper who brought her sick child for a check-up and who, at the time, was being detained for suspicion of aiding the rebels. The encounter with Fong Kiap is brief and fleeting as "Suyin" speaks with all other characters, including her fellow doctor, the nurses, the wardress, even the police informer, Ah Mei, while everybody, including the women patients, laugh off the unresolvable difficulties of the Emergency. Second, in one of the most climactic moments in an otherwise episodic novel, the chapter "Seed of Ants" finds the women rubber tappers segregated and detained in the Todak detention camp involved in what Rosie Yip, the wardress, calls a "riot" during the "Devil's Jubilee" in the "lunar seventh month" (164). Based on sociological studies, the overseas Chinese trace the origins of their "ghost month" practices back to folklore (Li 621) as well as to an eclectic mix of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs (DeBernardi 25-28). During the seventh month of the lunar year, Chinese communities believe that the gates of hell open for the spirits of their ancestors (Heng 62) and ghosts to join the realm of mortals (Li 621). So that the spirits may be appeased in their journey through the human realm and so that they may ascend the "courts of hell" (DeBernardi 26) towards reincarnation (Li 621), communities offer food and clothing (DeBernardi 25; Heng 62) and carry out festivities in public places (DeBernardi 27).

In the narrative, migrant labor is the economic foundation of the empire's rubber business in Malaya, and yet the community of rubber tappers is culturally and politically unassimilable to the colonial system. As *Rain* problematizes the centrality of labor and the extraneousness of these laborers' realities to colonialism, it also acknowledges the impossibility of witnessing as a form of authorial narrative intervention. Therefore, *Rain* becomes an important precursor to future inquiries into subalternity. If the novel treats the ambivalences of the spy and the incongruousness of the Malayan masses as potentially agentive, it contrastingly and insightfully positions itself differentially in relation to the figure of the rubber tapper who, as the subaltern, "is not the colonial subject under development" (Lloyd 21). Thus, I trace in this paper how the narrative confronts the problem of subalternity as difference (Spivak 79, 102), that is, as a presence unlike the political subjects of colonialism. Not only is the subaltern reality in *Rain* derived by subtracting colonialism's "wealth, status, and culture" (Guha 18), but it is also, more importantly, understood as the elusiveness of political subjectivity. Han suggests that she can narrate labor and struggle differently only if she begins with an acknowledgment of subalternity as a negation of her own privileges as an intellectual or historian (even as she disidentifies from colonialism). One may therefore consider *Rain* as, borrowing

from Gayatri Spivak, a "text [that] articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility" (80). In attempting the impossible, that is, in trying to narrate subalternity and colonialism from an irreconcilable position of a medical doctor and intellectual, Han gives rise to a "differential politics" (Lloyd 21). One may then ask, what particular narrative form in narrating subalternity does this differential politics take? Fundamentally, in what way can a narrative proceed with relating the experience of the rubber tappers, if it foregrounds their subaltern condition as a disjointed reality from the historian's own? The relevance of Han's novel is in its response to this question, specifically in its recognition of the contradictory implications of capitalism's negation of women laborers' lives and realities. Hopefully, my particular reading of this 1950s text will clarify the connection of its improvisational nature, on one hand, to Han's coming to grips with a fundamental "unrepresentab[ility]" of these disjointed lives (Spivak 80; Lloyd 23) and, on the other, to her politically embedded, gendered insistence on her representational responsibility to comment on the material impact on the female body of such capitalist negation.

Subaltern Presence as an Indeterminacy

In the first chapter of the novel, Fong Kiap, one of the rubber tappers, first expresses her people's condition as entrapment. A seized diary of a rebel will later explain that Fong Kiap, a supporter of the "People Inside," was captured by the police along with other rubber tappers and sent to a detention camp. While in custody, she asks to see a doctor for her baby's *sakit*, or illness. She is also pregnant and denies that it is by her husband to protect his identity as a rebel. As she takes her turn after Ah Mei in the queue of patients, she comes face-to-face with the doctor, "Suyin." Thus, the doctor finds herself in her only encounter with a rubber tapper from one of the new villages. The doctor recounts the meeting with Fong Kiap, who is jovial at first but soon becomes panicked. Worried by the realization that her sick baby may be hospitalized and separated from her, Fong Kiap tearfully bursts into a nervous exhortation of her husband's supposed ghost. Finally, in a desperate attempt to deflect her audience's suspicion that her husband is alive and that he is pregnant by him, she screams out her people's situation of being caught in the crossfire, with a final hint of suicide: "We are between fire and water, we the people,' wailed Fong Kiap. 'We are caught between two terrors, the Police, and the People Inside. I do not want to live anymore" (Han 39).

Rosie Yip, the wardress who escorts her, mocks and brusquely silences her pronouncements. As the scene concludes, Ah Mei also exposes Fong Kiap to the

doctor, who, in turn, listens unwillingly about the latter's incriminating secrets. There is, thus, a puzzling quality of this contact scene in the hospital, where, on a rare occasion that a rubber tapper finds herself outside of the barbed wire, her pronouncement to the public about the gravity of her people's situation is received incredulously. What the narrative reveals, instead, is how the picture of a helpless mother and laborer in suicidal despair is unsettled by her other images as a cunning wife and supporter of the People Inside. Indeed, as I will show subsequently, this whole scene introduces the subaltern figure from varying perspectives; but just with the isolated focus on Fong Kiap, the narrative already suggests that the subaltern, who equates her and her people's non-belonging with death, can only articulate herself as an insubstantiality, that is, as an other to oneself. Thus, outright in *Rain*, Han grasps difference more acutely as radical alterity in the figure of the female subaltern.

From the beginning of the whole encounter with Fong Kiap, even before the tense ending described above, the scene already continually shifts to the differing constructions of Fong Kiap's identity. In a passage below, one finds that there are at least two perspectives at work in framing and re-framing the image of Fong Kiap: the doctor, out of fascination, scrutinizes Fong Kiap's facial features, and then Rosie, in a state of hilarity, recalls a story where a British journalist mistakes her name for "s*akit."*

> 'There is also this babee, if doctor would see,' said Rosie, pulling Ah Mei back by the arm and shoving Fong Kiap forward.
> Fong Kiap smiled broadly, her round pointing stomach, ill-covered by her short flowered top, shook with repressed laughter. She politely bared her teeth to the gums at us. The four top teeth were edged with gilded brass. The original enamel peered from heart-shaped windows cut out of the glittering metal framework. Hearts and diamonds were the commonest shapes found in Chinese mouths in Malaya, and I had discerned a stray spade on the top row of a Malay special constable.
> '*Sakit*, very sick,' repeated Fong Kiap, gurgling with pure misery. The baby had a shrunken, wizened face, a glaze drawn tight over its open eyes.
> 'Haha,' laughed Rosie Yip, whose round Chinese face and boot-button eyes, neat as her uniform, made her the Asian counterpart of a typical London bobby, 'Fong Kiap said "*sakit, sakit*" yesterday to the red-haired devil newspaperman who came to the detention camp to write about it. "*Sakit, sakit*," said Fong Kiap. The red-haired devil thought she was telling her name. '"That's a pretty

> name, *Sakit*," he told her.' Rosie Yip slapped her thighs at the story, and laughed again. (37)

Here, Suyin, the narrator, who is particularly attuned to physiognomy, notes the cultural and political ambivalences suggested by Fong Kiap's appearance. Notably, the doctor's keen observation of the latter's heart-shaped, brass-framed teeth parallels her impressions of the Malay women with whom she later comes into contact at a political rally. The attempt here is to locate these presences of women in colonized Malaya outside or beyond the categories and labels imposed on them by the Emergency. However, the seriousness of the doctor's efforts to establish the ambivalence of Fong Kiap's presence in the existing political scene is undercut as Rosie takes over the narration with her mockery of Fong Kiap. Immediately, Rosie relates how the British media mistook Fong Kiap's name as "*Sakit*." And in this egregiously assumed equivalence between Fong Kiap and *sakit,* the colonial state, through its media, as the novel suggests, constitutes its episteme of subalternity as a sickness, or more specifically, as a political malady. Here, the narrative reveals the "foundational violence" that the empire is responsible for (Lloyd 15): silencing the Chinese woman laborer, who speaks of her son's sickness in the Malay native tongue, with its own reconstruction of her image as a political frailty requiring rehabilitation. Thus, ultimately, this scene in the novel satirizes the British administration by rendering visible the racialized and sexist bias embedded and yet covered up in its counter-insurgency program.

The historian Susan S. Carruthers investigates the racialized colonial propaganda during the Emergency period. Just as the British propaganda "played upon" the predominant Chinesenness of the MCP's cadre to discredit it as a representative Malayan revolt, so did colonial officials relay intelligence reports to the British colonial office on Chinese coolies in upcountry Malaya as "sitting on the fence," with the veiled conviction that these laborers are more inclined than not to side with Communism because of their ethnic affinities with the guerrillas (Carruthers 78). *Rain* addresses the gendered racism more acutely with a scene told from the perspective of Resettlement Officer Tommy Uxbridge, who relocates "eight thousand Chinese" in Todak, one of the resettlement camps or "new villages." Maddened to find that most of the men among these newly relocated families are missing and have probably "gone underground," he agrees with Crufts, a police officer, that the Chinese women, left to themselves, cannot be trusted. If these officers anticipate that the mothers, wives, and elders will be "organizing and passing food in no time" to the rebel camps, then they regard the girls as "the

worst" and are like "poison…in any resettlement camp" for tending to hero-worship and fall in love with "the guys in the jungle" (Han 118). To Uxbridge's question on the whereabouts of their husbands, the women only respond with "laughter [that] rose, jeered, spiraled, and spread" (117). Primarily, this scene dramatizes how colonial officers justify their vision of a civilized society by reforming Chinese women laborers for their perceived proclivities. More importantly, as Grace Chin underscores in her analysis of gendered subversions in the novel, the women's laughter mocks the colonial fantasy of colonizers being heroic rescuers of colonized women (275). Thus, Han's fiction traces the gendered dimension of the racist marginalization of the subaltern, a dimension that, according to Spivak, gets lost in investigations into macrological structures of imperialism and empire (82).

Gendering the "Negatively Defined Space" of the Subaltern

In his study of the subaltern revolts in nineteenth-century India, Ranajit Guha frames the self-negation among peasants because of socio-economic inequalities and injustices. Economic and cultural dispossession became the "point of departure" for politicized subalterns towards radical, even violent, action (20, 24). While Guha's project is an important reorientation of Gramsci's study of subaltern leadership and hegemony in 1920s Italian labor history, Spivak underlines the problem in such political trajectories that, when transposed to collective formations against imperialism in South Asia, for instance, render indistinct to the point that it dissolves the subaltern woman's "itinerary" (Spivak 78,82). I do not intend to locate Han's narrative anywhere outside of the imbricated systems of empire and imperialism in Malaya, nor to claim that her narrative recuperates the drowned-out voices of the female subaltern. Premised on Han's authorial self-referentiality in her own text as the basis of her acknowledgment of her contradictory enmeshment in British Malaya, I argue, instead, that her narrative, in gendering the subaltern's "negatively defined space" (Lloyd 7), glimpses a non-hegemonic "counterpossibility" (Spivak 82; Lloyd 7). By specifically examining in *Rain* the scene of the haunting of the women rubber tappers detained in camp during what is in the Chinese belief system known as the "Ghost Month" (Li 621) or the "Hungry Ghost Festival" (Heng 62), I will partly read the ritualistic trance in the camp as instances of self-making and overturning political-legal hierarchies. I will also illustrate how such a transient and singular performance of what the character Rosie Yip refers to as "the Devil's Jubilee" (Han 164), in evoking its "past iterations" (Heng 75), disrupts the colonial space-time. Moreover, given the sense that the subaltern reality is irreducibly heterogeneous, the text nonetheless frames "the Devil's Jubilee" as a material

happenstance and thus traces a discernible aspect of such haunting in the women's bodies and sensibilities.

The third-person narrative of the "riot" in the women's camp is told from Rosie Yip's perspective. Aware that her promotion as chief wardress happened in time with the end of the Korean War, the nosedive of demand for rubber, and the near depletion of Britain's coffers because of the Malayan Emergency, she commits to the "practicalities" of closing down the camp as peacefully as possible (Han 163). Although subtle, there is a fascinating turn in the tone of the narrative here, where Rosie, portrayed mostly contemptuously for her opportunistic ambivalence, this time through her religious side begins to behave coincidingly with the detainees' mystical sensibility. In a sense, she marks the point when, in turning to this haunting of the detained women laborers, she unmoors the narrative from the rigid political atmosphere of the Cold War, defined by the British vs. Communist conflict. For a text that will later sink into obscurity, *Rain* importantly links the transnational and far-flung sites of imperialism and the Cold War through a parallel, albeit a passing one, between the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency, whose forgetting many scholars today decry.

Compliantly, Rosie commits to her task of enforcing "Whiteskin" orders to process the detainees either for deportation or for reinstatement as plantation workers. And yet, the daily grind in the camp, which includes the English literacy classes and the interrogation of detainees, the translation and sifting through their testimonies by the "Interrogation Units," is punctuated by episodes of listless sighing as the women yearn for their men, of shouting, screaming, fainting, and falling ill as the women are beleaguered by the rape of an eight-year old girl, of the cry of the epileptic in a fit melding with the "cataleptic chanting" (173) of the group led by Mother Wu, the witch and medium. The anticipation of the haunting during the ghost month thus throws the routine out of kilter and, as I will show later, even the chain of command in the camp.

Soon enough, the disquiet in the camp evolves into a "hysteria," fulfilling Rosie's belief that the women are now "constrained by devils out of hell" (170). As the narrative singles out Rosie and Fong Kiap as the only ones— fixed in their positions as "jailer and jailed"— "immune, stolid and unconcerned" in this "whirlpool of smothered chaos which sucked in all the females of the camp," it breaks off into an account of the collective entrancement. The eruption of such pandemonium comes alongside the introduction of the women involved. Remarkably, the text lists down the names of the detainees and their ignorance, handicap, failures, omissions, and losses as their faults:

> Boh Heng, six years detained for possession of a small communist paper flag forbidden, found in a drawer. It was a flag not forbidden in 1945, when her son bought it and forgot it in the drawer, where it was found in 1949 by an informer. And now whenever her case came up for revision it was turned down, until she had accepted voluntary repatriation, a device whereby Chinese born in Malaya could choose to go to a China they had never seen.
> […]
> There was Toh Kim, nineteen, still saving for a wedding dress she should have worn three years ago. She did not know why she was detained….
> There was Se Chin, arrested for failing to inform on a terrorist in the next house, whose old mother was blind in the death house, waiting for her and for death;
> There was Ah Kiew the idiot, deaf and epileptic;
> There was Cha Boh, arrested while worshipping at her mother's grave with a small bowl of rice and a tiny cup of wine, convicted of passing food to the terrorists because of her worship at the grave;
> There was Lim Nee the hunchback, who did not know why she was arrested;
> There was Neo Saw, wife of Neo, slowly destroyed by grief;
> There was Old Grandmother, and two seventeen-year-olds, and many others, the innocent, the guilty, the foolish, the astute, they and their children and their longings for husbands, sons, lovers in the camp or outside, in the jungle or not, each a world of dispossession, revolving now within a heat haze of terror which wrested from them their last property, the solidness of earth, invested the final security of their prison with the unreal vacillation of an old film, a chimerical land sinking the eye to a blur, a fantastic landscape deposit of hearts unpeopled and bereft, corrupt with caging. (171)

Indeed, in the naming, each woman becomes visible. There is a traceable itinerary of the subaltern here, that of Boh Heng's, the first on the list, who, against her will, opts to be deported to China, a country alien to her. Like Fong Kiap in the earlier example, who, as the exception, can traverse the space within and beyond the barbed wire fence, Boh Heng will soon be able to "flee the green hell of Malaya." This way, they can both be described as threshold subjectivities who undergo a becoming despite and because of their negated being. And yet, as I wish to establish in the ritual, this becoming, including their individuation through naming, does not lead to conventional self-actualization. Rather, the ritual illustrates a process by

which the very vacuity of self, because of each woman's conscription as surplus labor into empire, becomes a foundation of individual and collective release through a ritualistic event.

Here, I must quickly remark how *Rain* prefigures Spivak's investigations in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" into the British East India Company's recording of sacrificed widows' names to stop the practice of widow burning or *sati* in colonial India. In the end, Spivak finds that the list, overdetermined by contending ideological interests, covers over the widows' "voice-consciousness." That is, the Indian nativist assertion that the widows willingly sacrificed themselves could only, ironically, justify the civilizing mission of "White men […] saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 93). Ultimately, the findings can only show "the unfixed place of the woman as a signifier" in the colonial and traditional discourses in India (95). Despite the obvious parallels, I wish to nuance my reading of Han's fictional inscription of women's names in *Rain* by arguing that this is a result of her political disidentification with empire. Thus, the novel is not simply a function of Han's acknowledged privilege within systems of power. Instead, as committed writing, *Rain* is her attempt to approximate the role of a political intermediary even in the face of the class and ideological barriers between her and the subaltern community.

So far, I have shown how the unrepeatable contact with Fong Kiap frustrates Han's authorial persona, Suyin, from discerning any political substance in the image of the female subaltern. In the following section, I argue that through the third-person narrative, Han, as the author, negotiates this sense of irreducible heterogeneity by dwelling on what is supposedly the unrepresentable, that is, the mystical event among the subaltern women of the Todak rubber plantation, where they unite with their gods and save the spirits of ancestors and unknown ghosts during the Ghost Month, to catch an instance where their ignorance, weaknesses, and failures, ascribed to them by empire, becomes the basis of negating this "social death" (JanMohamed 105) without necessarily erasing the direct culpability of empire for such negation.

By no means can one equate such momentary and spontaneous ritual with a programmed action for political liberation. Instead, this religious moment links with an ancient and transnational practice of appeasing ghosts and the spirits of the community's ancestors which, in turn, historically and politically exceeds even as it partly coincides with the very systems that expropriate these women of any sense of self. Understanding its historicity, one can more fittingly describe such a paradoxically singular iteration, whereby each woman is plucked out, as it were, from her "world of dispossession" (Han 171), as the material world and the prison

dissolves. The event turns into an "extinction of the self…as a prerequisite of the union with the divine" (Jabbar 105). Accordingly in *Rain*, the ritual ends in the following manner:

> All things amass to an end, so these, in entanglement of dread and strenuous longing, came to the rapt hours of another self, the ecstasy delivered from the wire, when they issued forth unsubstantial gods, their destiny strongly in their hands, and not the whim of others. (172)

Paradoxically, the subaltern condition of grief, loss, and longing becomes the basis for the women to "c[o]me to the rapt hours of another self" or to undergo what Naheem Jabbar, in his study of Lahore's enclaved female subaltern groups, calls "self-realization-by-negation" (105). In a way, this section of the novel marks the point of "breakdown" of representation (Lloyd 21) and the taking over of the language of ritual to allow a glimpse of "the ecstasy" and the self-made "destiny" of these women, that is, their lived realities momentarily freed from the laws of the Emergency. I will return to this point shortly, but it must be mentioned outright that Abdul R. JanMohamed foregrounds a related arc of "negating the negation" in Richard Wright's minoritized autobiographical persona in *Black Boy* (JanMohamed 102). Through a Marxian lens, JanMohamed traces how a proletarian subjectivity overturns the racist and class oppression in Jim Crow America through transformative action. Although this "negating actuality" (JanMohamed 120) may be incomplete or even inconceivable in the 1950s setting in *Rain*, Han was already problematizing the peculiarities of indentured labor in colonial Malaya—such as their dehumanization and exemption from basic human rights—that hinder the rubber tappers from productively transforming their colonial negation.

Put another way, the subaltern women in *Rain* do not fit the frame of potential proletarian heroes. The female subaltern's negation of the negation--the first negation being the racialized and sexist expropriation of their labor— does not translate to recognizably agentive or oppositional acts against the colonial state. For instance, Neo Saw, one of the detained women, in succumbing to her compounded grief, fulfills the same death spiral of the mother figure in Chinese religious folklore, who jumps into a well to die (DeBernardi 26). In the folk story, the mother sacrifices herself over her son's unfilial ways. In turn, the son, who later grieves for his mother, embodies death and mourning and turns into the Wealth God, one of the gods of hell, who is appeased and worshipped during the Hungry Ghost Festival (27).

In Neo Saw's case, her separation from her husband and children already

causes her grief. But the colonial administration's unfounded blaming of a rape in the detention camp on her son finally devastates her. While folklore serves as a screen through which the plight of Neo Saw may be understood, the narrative falls short in its attempt to bear witness to the truth, as the unresolved allegation of the rape gets lost in the chaos and confusion in the detention camp. On the one hand, the rape may be likened to Lyotard's concept of the *differend*, which Spivak defines as the point of "inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another" (Spivak 94). On the other hand, *Rain*, given its limits as a realist narrative being written amid the Emergency, can only signal the impossibility of redress for the harmed subaltern female bodies via (representation in) colonial politics and law.

Similarly, Fong Kiap, to cross borders to smuggle in contraband for her guerrilla husband, hides pork meat in her privates. Thus, Fiona Lee notes the double vulnerability of Fong Kiap who, to pass through the checkpoint from the resettlement to the rubber estate, performs her loyalty to the state but, consequently, comes to be identified as a profane and sexually promiscuous woman (Lee, F. 14). Meanwhile, Boh Heng, despite being a British subject born in Malaya, accepts her deportation. To a certain extent, her voluntary repatriation may be read as a form of "social death," borrowing from JanMohamed. However, her "woeful" banishment is also her departure from the "fate" of detention and exploitation that empire had set for its indentured laborers (Han 180). Thus, if initially, the traceable trajectories of the disappeared, profaned, or banished bodies of the female subaltern reveal the marks of the violence of colonial law, these negated bodies nevertheless cross or enter new counterpossibilities that become irretrievably discontinuous with the imperialism and war.

Itineraries of the Disappeared, Profaned, and Banished

Nevertheless, as Jabbar describes the subaltern as the "negative element" of a milieu renders anachronistic any critical methodology that attempts to categorize them as an "emancipatory demographic" (Jabbar 97). In this light, I circle back and re-examine the dramatization of the Hungry Ghost Month in *Rain*. If the event resists being read as a liberatory moment, the series of hauntings and possessions is nevertheless important in creating a religious space-time in which the prevailing socio-political hierarchy is temporarily reversed. Although noting that this process is often incomplete, Jabbar notes how ritual brings about the "transformation of phenomenal reality by religious practice" (106) from the way "inversion of the … social norms that place a specifically commodified form on [women's] bodies…"

(114)." In *Rain*, the ritualistic reversal begins when the narrative literally shines a light on the detained women while they are entranced and enraptured by religious ritual. As described in the novel, "the policewomen flash[] their torches upon the women on the planks" (Han 173) as they try to subdue, to no avail, the rising commotion. At this point in the detainees' camp, matters are brought to a head by an unsolved rape of one of the detained women, which results in a chain of skirmishes, accidents, confusion, longing and melancholy among the women. The agitation in the camp, thus, culminates in a night of entranced imploring of Kuanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. Indeed, there is a risk here of exoticizing the sexed subaltern in the various instances where the narrative names the entranced women, or dwells on the sensuousness of their mesmerism, and finally stages the possession. It may be possible to argue that the narrative here dangerously takes the form of what is Han's tendency in her early writings — an Orientalist voyeurism of a gendered scene of subaltern entrancement (Hussein 284; Wetherilt 259, 262; Theodoridou 199).

However, the play on Rosie's perspective, through which the third-person account of the Ghost Month unfolds, offsets this violence of opening the women's bodies to view. While it is true that the policewomen, on Rosie's command, expose the detainees as a set of bizarrely twisted bodies and hands caught in a frenzied pleading for Kuanyin's protection, the police do so as "[i]nsubstantial automatons, fingering guns strangely unreal to themselves." Rosie herself, as she orders her subordinates to ready their guns, has turned "[s]tiff with hypnosis" (Han 173). Perhaps the most unexpectedly climactic part of this reversal involves Fong Kiap, now possessed by Kuanyin, who transfixes Rosie and the policewomen, as the latter absentmindedly light their torches and aim their guns. Confronted with the grotesque goddess figure of Fong Kiap, Rosie, as her "jailer," calls Fong Kiap by her name to jolt her and to fix her back into her place as the "jailed"; but, as a sort of comeuppance for her derisive dismissal of Fong Kiap in her first and only encounter with the doctor, a policewoman abruptly silences Rosie lest she kill the medium in the midst of possession. At every turn, Rosie realizes the crumbling of her authority as she is enfolded into the chanting of the "detainees[,…] policewomen, and all, Malay and Chinese" who "br[ing] their hands together in prayer and bow[] to Fong Kiap" (173). The narrative, animated by an event whose logic exceeds it, finally turns the tables on Rosie when she, in a worshipping stance, lets Fong Kiap step past her "into the moonlight" so that she can give Rosie the future blessing of a son. As if by necessity, the narrative demonstrates the consummation of the reversal where Rosie becomes the receiver of Fong Kiap's mystical insight: "Thus Rosie Yip

received her Annunciation from Fong Kiap" (174).

In a way, the third-person narrative is Han's experimental approach in narrating a fundamentally unrepresentable reality, one that exceeds the logic of capital and colonialism. As a result, Rosie's perspective proves inadequate in the face of a subaltern reality, which, in turn, undermines it. It may be fitting to borrow Neil Lazarus' rephrasing of Raymond Williams' descriptions of the early Dickens, who, disenchanted by drastic modernization, struggles to find the "literary register" to depict the onslaught of alienating change. As such, in Dickens' early writing, the unfamiliar reality is told through a "narrative voice which issues from outside the frame of what it describes…" (Lazarus 126). Although Dickens' and Han's circumstances are vastly different, there are parallels in how their narratives attempt to keep up with realities that surpass representation. For instance in *Rain*, even before Rosie's attempt to control the disturbance, an external voice has breached into Han's narrative, one that not only demotes the police force into helpless subordinates of the goddess Kuanyin but, ultimately, converts the detention space into the temple of the Deity: "As ineffectual wooden demiurges standing diminished and badly in need of paint at the doors of temples shielding vast Deity, stood the policewomen, their lips mumbling the litany…" (Han 172). The voice is not one of estrangement like in the nineteenth-century Dickensian encounter with industrialization. Instead, the voice forays into the text because of Han's risky attunement to the subaltern condition and her pronouncedly ironical stance towards colonialism and war in Malaya. It is thus specific to a twentieth-century writer like Han, whose social commitment complicates her cosmopolitan view, to let her already dialogic war narrative finally give way to an outside perspective. And in superimposing instances of ghost haunting and spirit possession onto the reality of the detention camp, this external narrative voice surfaces a conception of the subaltern body as a "'pre-political' form of capital" (Jabbar 155) recovered from its invisibility in Malaya's rubber labor system.

However, the ambiguity in the way the text traces the link between state and subaltern life must be noted. On one hand, there is a fundamental disconnect between the colonial and subaltern cultural-political structures. As I have mentioned, the text averts the spectacularization and commodification of the ritual and the bodies that enact religious processes as the distinction between audience and hysterics among the police and detainees dissolves. Moreover, the eruption of the ghost haunting in the camp happens alongside and yet disjointedly with the reality of colonial labor exploitation. Also, Rosie's actions suggest the profound irreconcilability between the two realities. Her conspiratorial reluctance to disclose

the "Goddess' riot" to colonial authorities (Han 176), in the same way that, prior to the ritual, she could only coyly allude to and, in effect, omit the fact of the rape to the Commandant (169), attests to the fact that subaltern systems of life, one that is by default considered as a "counter-legality" by the state, are untranslatable and unrepresentable in colonial law (Lloyd 21). And yet, as it situates the female body in this subaltern instance as a "'pre-political' capital," the text also resurfaces and materializes this raced and sexed body's connection to empire.

With Neo Saw's remains, the text suggests that the claim of the community's religious belief on the subaltern body does not nullify the colonial state's culpability for her death. In Chinese Buddhism, the likes of Neo Saw, who died in deplorable conditions— separated from family, dishonored by her son, and finally, as it is implied, driven to suicide— become the "malevolent" hungry ghosts (Esler 515). Therefore, as the text implies, her ghost assures that the disturbances of this religious belief will endure. In sociological studies, communities attest that such vengeful ghosts, bereft of any family to guide them toward salvation (Li 617), could cause sickness and death among children, quarrels in families, and other harms (Esler 515). Fearing them the most, society is thus obliged to perform rituals for them, especially during the ghost month. In the text, it is Rosie who becomes the most anxious as she locates the dead body ensnared, as it were, by the "green mocking water" of the well (Han 174). Rosie finds Neo Saw's face illuminated by the water and "star[ing] up at her like her reflection from the shining hole of a pupil…" (175). The gleam in Neo Saw's ghostly eye, if it entails a spiritual realization for Rosie, paradoxically can only anathemize her. If, in a religious sense, Rosie's image as reflected in the corpse's eye encapsulates the entirety of her actions and their consequences within the time of war, then it links her back, damningly, to the abuse and death of the female subaltern laborer.

Han's representational wager, if one will, is thus to treat the body of Neo Saw, who succumbs to physical death, as a foil to the ever-slippery image of Fong Kiap, who can only echo the law in professing her social death. As an onlooker, Rosie finds that the eye of the dead mirrors back and concretizes her complicity in what had been Neo Saw's melancholia and suicide as the extent of capitalism and empire's perniciousness. Thus, for a moment in this reflexive instance, the text treats the lifeless body of Neo Saw unsentimentally as the detritus of the negation of subaltern labor and life in Malaya's rubber industries. In this sense, the corpse of the subaltern woman is the narrative's practical reminder of the reprehensible reality of the colonial exploitation of labor.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to draw attention to the aleatory nature of narration in *Rain* in that the narrative negotiates what it initially realizes as the unknowable otherness of the discriminated and stigmatized female subaltern. This is to say that, already in its first chapter, the narrative conveys through its structure an ethical recognition of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a representational and discursive relationship between the writer as historian and the female subaltern. This ethical grounding motivates various narratorial movements and shifts that largely compromise the narrative's stability. Specifically, from an initially unsuccessful autobiographical accounting of Suyin's encounter with the female subaltern subject, the narrative changes its tack to test out an experimentally dialogic omniscient point of view which registers the excluded and negated space of women laborers as the space-time of ritualistic renewal and social reversals, even as it traces this site back to the life-negating processes under capitalism in empire. If only to consider the writer's venture into novelizing the sexed and raced struggles of women rubber tappers, then one can thus consider *Rain* as a product of Han's differential narrative practice: a persistent reinvention of narrative to instantiate encounters with the denied and concealed lives of the subaltern.

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Ethical Trajectories and Narrative Strategies in Sima Qian's Four Lords

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Abstract This study examines the narrative structure of the "Biographies of the Four Lords of the Warring States" (战国四公子列传) in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (史记) through the framework of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC). It argues that their sequential arrangement functions as an intentional ethical evaluation mechanism rather than a neutral compilation. This paper contends that the deliberate placement of the four lords constitutes a "bell-shaped" ethical trajectory, reflecting the differentiation and evolution of *de* (德 , virtue). Building upon existing scholarship that identifies Lord Mengchang's leadership as *haoke zixi* (好 客 自 喜)—an expression of self-satisfying "animal nature"—this research establishes his narrative as the baseline for moral evaluation. The analysis demonstrates that Sima Qian reconfigures narrative hierarchies according to the quality of the "ethical selections" made by these figures within their volatile "ethical environments." While Lord Mengchang instrumentalizes virtue and Lord Pingyuan remains confined to passive conventionality, Lord Xinling represents the pinnacle of the trajectory, illustrating the triumph of "human nature" through authentic moral agency. In contrast, Lord Chunshen's violation of social taboos due to primal desires leads to a rapid moral and narrative decline. Furthermore, the study explores how Sima Qian utilizes specific narrative strategies—such as the asymmetrical granting of the title "Prince" (公子) and the distribution of agency—to deliver his final judgment through "narrative reward and punishment." Ultimately, this causal structure provides readers with "ethical enlightenment," proving that the legitimacy of leadership is rooted in moral authenticity rather than the mere accumulation of resources.

Keywords *Shiji*; patronage; moral agency; Sphinx factor; bell-shaped curve

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Introduction

Sima Qian's *Shiji* (史记) is not only the foundational archetype of ancient Chinese historiography but also a significant historiographical narrative that examines the complexities of human conduct. Writing under the existential shadow of the humiliation of castration (宫 刑), Sima Qian reconstructed history not as a mere chronological ledger of past events, but as a testament to creative indignation (发愤) and subsequent moral triumph. He captured human agency at the intersection where personal virtues collide with historical contingencies. By encapsulating these actions within the distinctive "Biographies" (列 传) format, he infused historical narrative with a potent ethical energy. For Sima Qian, the act of historiography was an endeavor to transcend temporal boundaries in search of a "knowing soulmate" (知 音)—an intellectual peer capable of recognizing a figure's true worth—and a narrative effort to establish human moral legitimacy.[1]

This narrative strategy is most clearly manifest in the discourse of patronage (好客) during the late Warring States period. In this era of transition—where the authority of the Zhou (周) royal house had collapsed and the logic of raw power prevailed—the culture of patronage surrounding the Four Lords of the Warring States served as more than a record of talent recruitment; it functioned as a vital arena for ethical observation where subjective decision-making converged with the nature of power. This patronage serves as an analytical framework for investigating how individuals prioritize specific values within a precarious and harsh Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101). The narrative of the *Shiji* precisely tracks the metamorphosis of Ethical Identity (Nie, Introduction 74) that emerges from the complex relationships between minister and monarch, and individual and state.

Of particular significance is the organic narrative progression revealed through Sima Qian's sequential arrangement of the four lords. This study examines the hypothesis that this arrangement forms an Ethical Trajectory that facilitates the observation of the "maturation and collapse of virtue" (德). This trajectory follows a bell-shaped structural flow: it establishes Lord Mengchang's (孟 尝 君) private pragmatism as the narrative baseline, progresses through Lord Pingyuan's (平原君) passive conventionality, reaches a moral apex with Lord Xinling's (信陵君) public

1 Sima Qian's concept of *fa fen* (发愤) is inextricably linked to his search for a *zhi yin* (知音), or "knowing soulmate." By reconstructing the lives of those who were misunderstood or undervalued in their time, Sima Qian sought a retrospective ethical recognition for his own suffering and historiographical mission. This intellectual bond between the historian and his subject serves as a meta-narrative layer in the Biographies of the Four Lords.

righteousness, and finally descends into the tragic ruin of Lord Chunshen (春申君).

Through this structural analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate that Sima Qian did not merely compile historical records but meticulously designed a narrative hierarchy to deliver a profound moral lesson. By identifying the asymmetrical distribution of narrative rewards and punishments, this study will prove that the legitimacy of leadership in the *Shiji* is ultimately rooted in the subject's proactive ethical selections rather than the possession of secular resources.

To verify this hypothesis, this study adopts Nie Zhenzhao's (聂珍钊) Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC) as its primary methodology. The Ethical Selection (Nie, Introduction 26) made by characters within the text is recorded by Sima Qian and manifested as Narrative Reward and Punishment (Nie, Introduction 32), reflecting the historian's critical perspective. Rather than viewing the concept of Ethical Enlightenment (Nie, Introduction 211) as a merely didactic intent of the author, this paper focuses on its effect on the Ethical Cognition of the reader. Sima Qian's narrative functions not by providing moral answers, but by inviting readers to witness the characters' choices within a harsh ethical environment, thereby fostering reflection on human nature. By analyzing how the baseline formed by preceding figures contributes to the moral evaluation of subsequent lords, this study explores how Sima Qian's narrative formalizes an ethical pillar that transcends time.

The Narrative Structure and Moral Spectrum of the Biographies of the Four Lords

Sima Qian's arrangement of the Biographies of the Four Lords in the *Shiji* is far from a neutral chronological compilation; rather, it is a sequential mapping of a moral spectrum that demonstrates how the singular act of "hospitality" (好客) yields divergent ethical consequences depending on an individual's virtue. The Ethical Trajectory discussed in the introduction begins with Lord Mengchang, reaches its zenith with Lord Xinling, and culminates in a descending curve toward Lord Chunshen's destruction. This trajectory serves to starkly contrast the triumph of human nature with the tragedy of animal nature.

This narrative disposition maximizes the Priming Effect, guiding the reader's moral judgment. By positioning the case of Lord Mengchang—who was consumed by private interests—at the beginning, Sima Qian establishes an Ethical Baseline for the reader. According to Nie Zhenzhao, literature serves as a vehicle for Ethical Enlightenment, which occurs as readers witness the fates of characters within a constructed Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 85). The subsequent accounts of Lord Pingyuan and Lord Xinling are perpetually compared against this baseline, with Lord Xinling's commitment to public righteousness becoming more

pronounced when contrasted with Lord Mengchang's secularization. Ultimately, the structure of these biographies functions as a process of quantifying the qualitative differences in the Ethical Selections made by each figure within their respective environments (Nie, Introduction 25-30).

Lord Mengchang: Haoke Zixi and the Instrumentalization of Virtue

The narrative of Lord Mengchang (Tian Wen, 田文) encapsulates the process of the Instrumentalization of Virtue, illustrating how the core Warring States values of virtue and "righteousness" (义) can degenerate into mere tools for personal prestige. In particular, the expression "hospitality for self-satisfaction" (*haoke zixi*, 好客自喜) is a critical interpretive keyword that penetrates the essence of his leadership.

As noted in prior research (Yang, 2025), this term suggests that his hospitality was centered on self-congratulation and the ostentation of power rather than authentic concern for others. For Lord Mengchang, patronage was a strategic instrument to solidify his political standing rather than an appointment of talent based on interpersonal trust. Sima Qian astutely observes that while Tian Wen was obsessed with the quantitative expansion of hosting 3,000 retainers, the qualitative bond of these relationships remained confined to the secular value of "mutual interest."[1]

Sima Qian exposes how Lord Mengchang's choices, made within his ethical environment, were heavily dictated by personal emotion and primal instinct. A representative example is the massacre that occurred as he passed through the state of Zhao (赵). His act of slaughtering an entire county because the inhabitants mocked his "small and unattractive" appearance is a quintessential case where animal nature overrides human nature within the Sphinx Factor (Nie, Introduction 31-35). According to Nie Zhenzhao, the core of the 'Sphinx factor' lies in the human capacity to control the lower 'animal factor' with the higher 'human factor'. Lord Mengchang's violent reaction in Zhao demonstrates a failure of this control, where his "animal nature"—driven by primal instincts—overwhelms the moral reason that should define a human being. This proves that his professed "tolerance" and "hospitality" were not internalized moral values but an instrumental veneer utilized selectively according to necessity. By revealing that his relationships were rooted in this instrumentalization of interest, Sima Qian creates a deliberate contrast with the

1 The term *hao ke zi xi* (好客自喜) is a critical appraisal unique to Sima Qian's portrayal of Lord Mengchang. As argued in prior research (Yang, 2025), this descriptor functions as an ethical signifier that distinguishes Mengchang's instrumental hospitality from the authentic altruism found in Lord Xinling. It marks the boundary where patronage ceases to be a moral act and becomes a tool for personal vanity.

moral authenticity of Lord Xinling.

Furthermore, the relationship between Lord Mengchang and his retainer Feng Xuan (冯 谖) clearly manifests this instrumental nature. The episode of "purchasing righteousness" (市义), where Feng Xuan burned debt records to win over the populace, superficially appears as virtuous governance; however, it was essentially the byproduct of political utility—the "third rabbit hole" prepared for future crises. Sima Qian inserts scenes where Lord Mengchang becomes enraged over the treatment of retainers or seeks to confirm his own prestige, thereby exposing the reality of his relationships as a calculative union.[1] This stands in sharp contrast to the trajectory of Lord Xinling, who practiced public righteousness through a subjective and reflective attitude.

Consequently, Lord Mengchang is positioned at the start of the narrative sequence as a symbol of the "secularization of virtue." Sima Qian records the subsequent extermination of the Tian clan (田氏) following Mengchang's death—precipitated by his sons' struggle for power—as a dispassionate account of the inevitable Narrative Punishment (Nie, Introduction 32) awaiting organizations bound only by interest without moral integrity. This serves as the Ethical Baseline for the figures that follow, forming the lower bound of the moral spectrum that permeates the Biographies of the Four Lords.

Lord Pingyuan: Passive Correction and Conventional Virtue

Sima Qian's decision to position Lord Pingyuan (Zhao Sheng, 赵胜) immediately after that of Lord Mengchang suggests a subtle shift toward the Conventionalization of Virtue. This marks a transition from the private instrumentalization of moral values toward a more public-oriented ethical stance. While Mengchang actively manipulated virtue for personal gain, Lord Pingyuan appears as a liminal figure; he adheres to established moral norms, though his subjective moral agency often remains suspended. The passive correction observed in his narrative—decisions catalyzed by external reproach—implies that he occupies a space closer to human nature than the secular baseline, yet his moral impetus still leans heavily on conventional duty rather than an internal, proactive will.

The narrative hallmark of Lord Pingyuan lies in this reactive ethical posture, where errors are rectified only through the counsel of others. Actions such as executing a beloved concubine or distributing his household wealth during a crisis

1 The massacre in the state of Zhao (赵) serves as a primary text for analyzing the "Sphinx Factor" within ELC. Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊) posits that the human-animal duality in literature is most apparent during moments of crisis where rational moral will fails to suppress primal instincts. Mengchang's inability to transcend a personal slight demonstrates a regression from social reason to animal nature.

emerge as responses to external stimuli—specifically, the sharp reprimands and suggestions of his retainers. Through the lens of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), these moments illustrate how an Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 85) can sculpt an individual's choices. His actions, therefore, may be read less as products of proactive moral will and more as ex-post facto adjustments to objective ethical pressures.

Yet even this reactive stance signals a degree of ethical evolution, an attempt to govern instinctive drives—what Nie terms animal nature (Nie, Introduction 31)—through the lens of social reason. By subordinating personal affection or the instinct to hoard wealth to the public duties of a "noble man" (君子), he enters a more developed register of human existence than Mengchang. However, a crucial limitation remains: his virtue is often a performance of social imitation rather than an internal awakening. This reflects a state of suspended Ethical Identity (Nie, Introduction 74-75), reminiscent of the identity confusion Nie identifies in Hamlet, where the self is defined more by reputation and social signifiers than by personal resolve.[1]

The episode with Mao Sui (毛遂) further delineates the boundaries of Lord Pingyuan's conventional vision. His failure to recognize Mao Sui's potential over three years suggests an insight that is still ripening, still tethered to traditional hierarchies. Yet, his eventual receptivity to Mao Sui's protest reveals a flexibility missing in Mengchang. Sima Qian thus portrays Lord Pingyuan not as a villain, but as a transitional figure navigating the gap between hereditary status and moral practice through the medium of conventional etiquette.

Ultimately, Lord Pingyuan's narrative subtly elevates the moral baseline, acting as a transitional narrative layer that primes the reader for Lord Xinling's deeper authenticity. Sima Qian's inclusion of the aphorism, "Profit obscures wisdom," functions as an implicit critical gaze, inviting us to consider a figure who, though mindful of fame and profit, struggled to forge a truly subjective will amidst the weight of secular conventions.

Lord Xinling: Moral Authenticity and Narrative Deference

The biography of Lord Xinling (Wei Wuji, 魏无忌) emerges as the most vivid embodi-ment of the ethical horizon Sima Qian sought to map within the Biographies of the Four Lords. In this account, the historian's deliberate narrative sequencing

1 The "identity confusion" observed in Lord Pingyuan resonates with Nie Zhenzhao's reading of Hamlet. Just as Hamlet struggles with the weight of inherited ethical obligations versus subjective moral resolve, Pingyuan's "passive virtue" is a manifestation of an ethical identity that has not yet attained full maturity. His actions are governed by external reputations and social signifiers rather than internal enlightenment.

reaches its peak, effectively resolving the "moral fatigue" accumulated through the previous portrayals of Mengchang and Pingyuan. By elevating Xinling from a mere aristocrat to a moral pillar that transcends his era, Sima Qian maximizes the resonance of his narrative, inviting the reader to witness a higher register of human existence.

What fundamentally distinguishes Lord Xinling from his peers is the authenticity of the relationships he cultivates. While Mengchang reduced his retainers to instruments of prestige—a manifestation of animal nature—and Pingyuan remained tethered to a conventional identity, Xinling establishes a subjective ethical identity. Unlike the hesitation and identity confusion Nie identifies in Hamlet, where the self is caught between external obligation and internal morality (Nie, Introduction 74-75), Xinling operates from a resolute sense of self: an unwavering commitment to recognizing talent and practicing righteousness. His treatment of the gatekeeper Hou Ying (侯嬴) transcends simple patronage; it is a profound personal commitment. From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, this humility in the marketplace represents a sophisticated Ethical Selection (Nie, Introduction 31), where the animal factor—manifested here as status-driven arrogance or instinctive pride—is disciplined by a higher, rational moral will.

This moral foundation culminates in the incident of "stealing the tiger tally to save Zhao" (窃符救赵), the narrative centerpiece of his biography and perhaps the most striking instance of ethical selection in the *Shiji*. Placed within a volatile Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101; 211)—torn between the King of Wei's sovereign command and the existential threat to a neighboring state—Xinling chooses neither silence nor blind compliance. Instead, he embraces a lonely path of righteousness. The sacrifices of Hou Ying and Zhu Hai (朱亥) in this process do not merely serve the plot; they validate the "interpersonal trust" Xinling has forged, proving that his bonds were rooted in a shared moral agency that had successfully mastered the impulses of social hierarchy.

Sima Qian accords Lord Xinling a singular narrative deference that borders on reverence. Beyond the repetitive use of the respectful title Gongzi, the historian's decision to link Xinling's death directly to the subsequent fall of the Wei state suggests that his presence alone served as the state's moral bulwark. This constitutes a potent Narrative Reward (Nie, Introduction 32), contrasting sharply with the extermination of Mengchang's clan or the quiet vanishing of Pingyuan's descendants. By granting Xinling a form of historical immortality, Sima Qian affirms the legitimacy of his choices. Through this figure, the *Shiji* declares that the essence of leadership lies in moral subjectivity rather than secular wisdom (智). In

doing so, Sima Qian achieves a masterful Ethical Enlightenment (Nie, Introduction 211), guiding the reader to accept Lord Xinling as the sole moral exemplar among the Four Lords.[1]

Lord Chunshen: Animal Nature and Narrative Punishment

The narrative of Lord Chunshen (Huang Xie, 黄歇) reflects a tragic erosion of the ethical subjectivity that reached its apex in Lord Xinling, as it is gradually consumed by private desire—what Nie identifies as animal nature. By violating a profound ethical taboo—the manipulation of royal lineage—Chunshen falls into a deeper moral abyss than even the secular pragmatism of Lord Mengchang, ultimately meeting the most devastating form of Narrative Punishment. If Lord Mengchang represented a stage where human nature remained latent, Lord Chunshen illustrates a stage where it is thoroughly contaminated by animal nature. Consequently, the Ethical Trajectory of the Biographies of the Four Lords concludes with a precipitous collapse, marking a tragic end to the moral spectrum.

In his early career, Lord Chunshen demonstrated intellectual devotion and ethical resolve, even risking his life to secure the escape of the Chu (楚) crown prince from the state of Qin (秦). However, Sima Qian captures a chilling metamorphosis during Chunshen's later years in power, particularly through the Li Yuan (李园) Incident. His decision to present a woman pregnant with his own child to the King, intending to alter the royal succession, constitutes a fatal transgression against the ethical taboo that sustains the social fabric (Nie, Introduction 31). From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), such an act signifies a regression into animal nature, as it destroys the foundational ethical rules of the community for personal power.

At this juncture, Sima Qian draws a stark contrast between Lord Chunshen and Lord Xinling. While Xinling expanded his moral vision by listening to the counsel of wise men like Hou Ying, Chunshen ignores the direct warning from his retainer, Zhu Ying (朱英), regarding Li Yuan's murderous plot. This disregard implies that the space of patronage Chunshen constructed had entered a state of ethical paralysis, where authentic communication was no longer possible. Sima Qian's cynical observation—labeling the elderly Chunshen as "senile" (旄矣)—underscores the tragic irony of a leader once celebrated for his "radiant wisdom" (智之明) becoming

1 In the *Biographies of the Four Lords*, Sima Qian's use of the title *Gongzi* (公子) is highly selective. While the other three lords are often referred to by their posthumous titles or given names as their narratives progress toward secularization or downfall, Lord Xinling is consistently honored as *Gongzi* throughout the text. This "asymmetrical nomination" functions as a linguistic marker of narrative reward, signaling the historian's ultimate ethical endorsement.

intellectually paralyzed and powerless at the very moment his survival was at stake.

The tragic end of Lord Chunshen—his assassination at the Gate of Thorns (Ji Men, 棘门) and the subsequent extermination of his entire clan—represents the most severe form of narrative punishment designed by Sima Qian.[1] Given that a core function of literature is to teach moral values by "praising virtue and punishing vice" (Nie, Introduction 32), the historian uses Chunshen's downfall to illustrate that leadership relying solely on technical cunning, while forsaking moral purpose, is destined for internal collapse. Through this final fall, the biographies complete a structured ethical trajectory: starting from the pragmatism of Mengchang, ascending through the righteousness of Xinling, and concluding with the catastrophe of Chunshen.

Narrative Devices as a Moral Drama

The work performed by Sima Qian in the "Biographies of the Four Lords" transcends a mere cataloging of historical occurrences; it approximates the choreography of a sophisticated "Moral Drama" designed to authenticate specific ethical values. In this staged narrative, the four lords emerge as actors navigating an Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101) constructed by the historian. By carefully arranging and editing their actions, Sima Qian maneuvers the reader toward specific moral conclusions.

This chapter examines the specific narrative techniques utilized by Sima Qian to amplify these dramatic effects. In particular, through an analysis of the asymmetrical narrative style used to differentiate the status of the characters and the issue of leadership agency, I explore how Sima Qian embedded his critical intentions beneath the surface of the text.

Asymmetrical Narrative: The Exclusive Title of "Prince"

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Sima Qian's narrative technique is his use of asymmetrical description—varying the "weight of his pen" depending on the character. This is not a simple discrepancy in the volume of records; rather, it is the narrative manifestation of literature's foundational function: to teach moral values by praising virtue and punishing vice (Nie, Introduction 32).

First, there is the exclusive assignment of the title "Prince." Among the four figures, Sima Qian persistently refers only to Lord Xinling as the "Prince." While

1 Sima Qian's deliberate recording of the execution of Lao Ai (嫪毐) in the same year as Lord Chunshen's assassination serves as a cross-referential narrative punishment. By aligning the fate of a respected lord with that of a notorious rebel, the historian deconstructs Chunshen's former prestige and reclassifies his later actions as fatal transgressions against the ethical fabric of the community.

Mengchang and Pingyuan are primarily identified by their official posts or fiefdom titles such as "Lord"—emphasizing their institutional and secular status—the title bestowed upon Xinling functions as a proper noun that melds his aristocratic lineage with moral dignity. This asymmetrical use of titles invites the reader to distinguish Xinling from the other three "power-holders," rendering him an archetype of moral leadership—a potent form of Narrative Reward (Nie, Introduction 32).

Furthermore, this linguistic preference suggests that Sima Qian found in Lord Xinling the historical manifestation of the "knowing soulmate" he had long sought. In the ELC framework, this narrative intimacy functions as a sophisticated form of ethical recognition. By positioning Xinling as his own "knowing soulmate," Sima Qian validates the figure's proactive ethical selections, thereby securing his place in historical immortality through a specialized linguistic privilege. This authorial choice demonstrates that the historian's subjective insight is the decisive factor that transforms a historical figure from a mere wielder of power into a perennial moral archetype.

Second, Sima Qian meticulously curates episodes that reveal ethical insight. In the narratives of Lords Mengchang and Pingyuan, he foregrounds episodes that expose a "void of insight" essential for a leader. The records of Mengchang's fury toward commoners who mocked him, or Pingyuan's failure to recognize the potential of Mao Sui even after three years, highlight the instrumental nature and passivity of their relationships. These devices expose the limitations of the characters' animal nature (Nie, Introduction 31), subtly guiding the reader's ethical judgment. In contrast, Xinling's narrative is adorned with detailed depictions of Ethical Selection (Nie, Introduction 26), such as the scene where he personally drives a carriage to honor the gatekeeper Hou Ying, showcasing his proactive will and discerning eye.

Third, Sima Qian calibrates psychological distance to steer the reader's emotional and ethical alignment. When describing the downfall of Mengchang and Chunshen, his brush remains dispassionate and objective—at times even cynical. This tone aligns with the severe Narrative Punishment (Nie, Introduction 32) reserved for those who violate ethical taboos or succumb to primal desires. However, when narrating the final years of Lord Xinling, Sima Qian delves deeply into the character's anguish and solitude, eliciting profound empathy.

Crucially, Sima Qian's empathy extends even to Xinling's final retreat into wine and women. Unlike the moral decay of Chunshen, which is portrayed as an inevitable consequence of senility and greed, Xinling's indulgence is framed as a tragic form of resistance against the King of Wei's suspicion and an unalterable

political fate. By depicting this "fall" as a desperate measure to preserve his ethical subjectivity within a suffocating environment, Sima Qian prevents the reader from dismissing it as mere vice. Instead, he elevates Xinling to a "practitioner of righteousness" whose very self-destruction serves as a poignant protest against a corrupt world. In this process, the reader enters a stage of Ethical Enlightenment (Nie, Introduction 211), modeling their own moral cognition after the figure's tragic integrity rather than his apparent failures.

Agency and the Inversion of Host and Guest

Another pivotal mechanism Sima Qian employs in the narrative architecture of the Biographies of the Four Lords is the strategic allocation of agency between the lord and his retainers. From the standpoint of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), authentic leadership manifests through human nature-specifically, the capacity to exercise proactive Ethical Selection (Nie, Introduction 26) rather than being subsumed by one's surroundings. In the chronicles of Lords Mengchang and Pingyuan, however, Sima Qian intentionally exposes an "inversion of host and guest" (主客颠倒), wherein the nominal leader recedes into the role of a passive beneficiary, dependent upon the stratagems of his retainers.[1]

First, this is illustrated through the motif of "achieving success through others" (因人成事) found in the narratives of Mengchang and Pingyuan. In the biography of Lord Pingyuan, the retainer Mao Sui sharply critiques his fellow guests for "relying on others to accomplish tasks." This phrasing serves as Sima Qian's cynical definition of a leadership void of ethical agency. Whether escaping from the state of Qin or securing a political foothold in the fief of Xue, Lord Mengchang rarely displays subjective resolve; instead, his path suggests a preoccupation with "natural selection"—mere situational survival—rather than a reasoned ethical selection. Here, the leader is not the subject driving the narrative but a passive object harvesting the fruits produced by the Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101) created by his retainers.

Second, a contrast emerges in Lord Xinling's narrative through the manifestation of insight and proactive leadership. Unlike his peers, the relationship between host and guest in Xinling's world is governed by the leader's own ethical agency. His decision to personally drive a carriage to the marketplace to recruit the

1 The "inversion of host and guest" (主客颠倒) discussed here is not merely a modern interpretation but is rooted in Sima Qian's deliberate focus on the retainers' brilliance rather than the lords' leadership. By allowing figures like Feng Xuan or Mao Sui to dominate the narrative agency, the historian subtly deconstructs the political prestige of the lords, revealing the void of subjective will beneath their fame.

gatekeeper Hou Ying, or his radical choice to steal the "military tally" (符), reflects a spontaneous and resolute will rather than an external suggestion. According to Nie Zhenzhao, such proactive selection is the primary factor distinguishing human choice from animal instinct (Nie, Introduction 31). In this context, the retainers are elevated from mere assistants filling a void of competence to "moral companions" responding to the leader's sublime resolve.

Third, the text invites us to consider the stability of Ethical Identity (Nie, Introduction 74). The identities of Mengchang and Pingyuan appear inherently fragile, defined largely by the external resource of "hosting 3,000 guests." In contrast, Lord Xinling maintains his agency even in the face of exile and the loss of formal power in the state of Zhao, demonstrating that his identity is anchored in internal ethical principles rather than social status. Sima Qian emphasizes this subjective insight as the decisive factor separating a true leader from a mere wielder of power, thereby warning the reader of the hollowness of authority when divorced from subjective will.

Ultimately, Sima Qian satirizes the "inversion of host and guest"—where leaders are swayed by the cunning of their guests—to expose the immaturity of virtue in Mengchang and Pingyuan. By granting Lord Xinling sustained command over his narrative, the historian completes him as an ethical subject who carves out his own history, rather than a mere beneficiary riding the coat-tails of his retainers' achievements.

Narrative Rewards: Clan Extermination vs. Historical Immortality

Perhaps Sima Qian's most potent critical tool is his treatment of the aftermath—the ultimate fate of a figure and the destiny of their lineage. Within the framework of Ethical Literary Criticism, the concepts of Narrative Reward and Punishment function as the historian's final verdict on the ethical selections made during a character's lifetime. By starkly contrasting the ends of the Four Lords, Sima Qian secures the causal legitimacy of the moral spectrum he has meticulously designed.

First, the text delineates a narrative punishment at the clan level reserved for power that lacks an ethical identity. Despite commanding thousands of retainers and wielding immense prestige during their lives, both Lord Mengchang and Lord Chunshen suffer the catastrophic extermination of their clans after their deaths. This serves as a narrative crystallization of one of literature's foundational functions: punishing vice (Nie, Introduction 32). In Mengchang's case, his sons' internal power struggles led to the total ruin of the family; for Chunshen, his entire household was slaughtered even before his own demise. These tragedies imply that the foundations

of their power were built on the shifting sands of private desire and interest rather than public righteousness. Sima Qian records these clan exterminations not as mere historical misfortune, but as the inevitable consequence of a cunning-centered leadership divorced from a moral base.

Second, Sima Qian reinforces the inevitability of this punishment by invoking the contemporaneous events in Qin. He meticulously records that the year of Lord Chunshen's assassination was the ninth year of Qin Shi Huang's reign—the very year the rebel Lao Ai (嫪 毐) was executed and his entire clan exterminated. By aligning Chunshen's end with that of Lao Ai, both of whom were guilty of violating royal taboos and threatening the sovereign order, Sima Qian implies that Chunshen's catastrophe was a natural and deserved consequence. Within the ELC framework, this historical reference serves as a moral benchmark for the Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101), demonstrating that such fatal transgressions against the social fabric lead to a common, inevitable ruin, regardless of the individual's former prestige.

Third, the narrative provides a contrastive narrative reward for the lord who functioned as a proactive ethical subject. The conclusion of Lord Xinling's story suggests a form of compensation that transcends physical survival or clan continuation. Although he died in solitude, Sima Qian explicitly links his passing to the very survival of the state, signaling that his presence was the nation's final moral bulwark. Furthermore, by recording that Emperor Gaozu of Han (汉 高 祖) later appointed families to maintain sacrifices at his tomb, the historian bestows upon him a status of historical immortality. Just as Lao Ai served as a benchmark for Chunshen's ruin, the Han Emperor serves as a historical benchmark for Xinling's virtue. This represents the highest form of praising virtue (Nie, Introduction 32; 122), validating Xinling's proactive ethical selections as an enduring archetype for the ethics of governance.

Fourth, Sima Qian maintains a stance of narrative indifference toward Lord Pingyuan, positioning him as the neutral baseline of this causal scale. While Pingyuan's descendants continued until the fall of the Zhao state, the historian adds no special honorary notes nor any tragic flourishes to their record. This "passive virtue" exhibited by Pingyuan—characterized by mere situational survival rather than resolute ethical selection—was not wicked enough to merit clan extermination like Chunshen yet not sublime enough to earn the historical immortality granted to Xinling. Sima Qian's reserved brush here functions as a cynical appraisal; he invites the reader to witness the unremarkable end of power when it is stripped of proactive subjective will.

Through these asymmetrical outcomes—ranging from the total annihilation of Chunshen to the eternal presence of Xinling—Sima Qian demonstrates that the essence of leadership lies in the protection of values rather than the possession of resources. This causal arrangement, meticulously designed through narrative rewards and punishments, provides the reader with a profound Ethical Enlightenment (Nie, Introduction 211), concluding the monumental narrative with an enduring moral lesson on the weight of ethical selection.

Conclusion

By examining the Biographies of the Four Lords in Sima Qian's *Shiji* through the lens of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), this study has delineated how their sequential arrangement orchestrates an organic Ethical Trajectory—a mapping of the "differentiation and evolution of virtue." Our analysis suggests that the sequential placement of these biographies constitutes a bell-shaped curve: beginning with Lord Mengchang's private pragmatism, progressing through Lord Pingyuan's passive correction, reaching a moral apex with Lord Xinling, and ultimately collapsing into the tragic ruin of Lord Chunshen.

This trajectory illustrates how Ethical Selections (Nie, Introduction 26), made within a meticulously constructed Ethical Environment (Nie, Introduction 101), define the moral hierarchy of these historical figures. Sima Qian's narrative ultimately serves as a medium for moral teaching, guiding readers toward ethical enlightenment through the characters' ethical selections. By tracing the trajectory from Lord Mengchang's reliance on natural selection to Lord Xinling's exercise of rational will, the *Shiji* illustrates the anthropological process of refining human nature within a complex ethical environment. In particular, the leader's subjective insight emerges as a critical variable, marking the maturation of human nature as it transitions from a state of passive reliance on retainers to a stage of proactive resolve for the public good.

Sima Qian utilizes these historical materials to function as a critical agent of narrative justice. By granting the title "Prince" (公子) exclusively to Lord Xinling and starkly contrasting the posthumous fates of each clan, he fulfills the foundational function of literature: praising virtue and punishing vice (Nie, Introduction 32). The catastrophic extermination of the Mengchang and Chunshen clans serves as a severe Narrative Punishment for power stripped of an ethical identity. In contrast, the historical immortality granted to Xinling represents a supreme Narrative Reward for his subjective righteousness. Through this contrast, Sima Qian redefines the identity of the "Lord" (君) amidst the secularism of the Warring States period, underscoring

that authentic leadership rests not in the possession of visible resources, but in the protection of invisible values.

Ultimately, the Biographies of the Four Lords may be read as a sophisticated narrative device designed for the Ethical Enlightenment (Nie, Introduction 211) of posterity. The collision between the horizontal righteousness embodied by Xinling and the vertical power-lust—the animal nature (Nie, Introduction 31)—of Chunshen serves as a critical warning to rulers who might lose their moral subjectivity. Sima Qian's inquiry into how an individual should forge their identity within a harsh ethical environment continues to offer valid reflections for modern leadership discourse. It is hoped that the tracing of the ethical trajectory attempted in this study will be expanded to other texts within the *Shiji*, fostering a renewed discovery of the ethical values inherent in classical narrative.[1]

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1 As Lee (2016) points out in his analysis of Nie's theory, the "moral teaching" function of literature becomes even more critical in an era dominated by market values rather than ethical values. Sima Qian's *Shiji* fulfills this function by offering a structural baseline for ethical self-cultivation, preventing a regression into a state where animal factors override human factors.

Postclassical Narratologies for an Age of Narrative Proliferation: A Review of *Studies in Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology*

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Abstract Published in 2025, the five-volume series *Studies in Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology*, under the general editorship of Shang Biwu, fills a significant gap in Chinese narratological scholarship by offering systematic critical assessments of five major strands of postclassical narratology: feminist, rhetorical, cognitive, unnatural, and transmedial. Each volume combines theoretical inquiry with textual practice, not only mapping the historical development and key debates within each school but also fostering cross-school dialogue on shared issues such as narrative ethics. By situating these postclassical narratologies within the contemporary landscape of AI-driven narrative proliferation, the series demonstrates the cultural and ethical urgency of equipping readers with diversified critical tools. The series is essential reading for scholars and students of narratology, literary theory, and narrative studies across media.

Keywords postclassical narratology; narrative turn; narrative ethics; narrative proliferation; generative AI

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In 1992, Martin Kreiswirth coined the term “the narrativist turn” to describe a phenomenon that had been unfolding over the previous two decades: an explosive growth of interest in narrative within and beyond academia, resulting in a rapid expansion of cross-disciplinary studies linking narrative to an ever-widening array of fields (“Trusting the Tale” 629-630). The capacity of narrative to penetrate other disciplines lies in its inherent ubiquity. As Hayden White argues, narrative serves

as "a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling" (1), thereby providing the foundation for the construction and representation of all human knowledge. David Herman similarly emphasizes the universality of narrative, defining it as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" ("Introduction" *The Cambridge Companion* 3). Such immanent character prefigures and justifies the later rise of postclassical narratology—or, more precisely, postclassical "narratologies" (Herman, "Introduction" *Narratologies* 1)—while paradoxically exposing the limitations of the classical paradigm that initiated the narrative turn.

The sweeping expansion of narrative was initially shaped by the development of what later came to be called classical narratology, stemming from French structuralism and semiotics, which offered "a heuristic pan-narrative model" (Kreiswirth, "Narrative Turn" 379) capable of accounting for any text deemed narratively organized. However, the structuralist approach soon ran into "crisis" (Rimmon-Kenan 157) as it proved incapable of addressing new issues brought about by the full-scale narrativization of human experience. On the one hand, its preoccupation with universal and essential formal features led it to overlook non-formal factors such as the reader, the context, and the medium. On the other hand, it contributed to what James Phelan calls "narrative imperialism," whereby narrative's relentless expansion into other domains threatens to dissolve its distinctiveness ("Editor's Column" 206). While the former limitation has been addressed by the burgeoning postclassical narratologies with their diverse orientations, the latter remains an enduring point of contention.

To the many outside academia today, "narrative imperialism" or the omnipresence of narrative does not necessarily refer to the analytical absorption of everything into narrative frameworks; rather, it describes a market-driven craving for stories, manifested in the relentless production, promotion, and consumption of narrative content. As Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Crisis of Narration*, the seemingly renewed passion for narrative does not signify a genuine return of narration, because narratives today have become product-like and share many features with information: ephemeral, contingent, and consumable ("Storyselling"). This problem has only intensified with the accelerated development of AI, which has lowered the threshold for ordinary individuals to produce narratives in all forms—at any time, anywhere, and at very low cost. The consequent deluge of AI-generated narratives flooding the Internet for clicks, likes, and profits amounts to what might be called a narrative epidemic, one that calls for serious and systematic reflection on narrative itself. In other words, there is an urgent need to upgrade

existing theoretical tools to address the emerging problems of a new era.

It is against this dual backdrop—the internal diversification of narrative theory and the external proliferation of narrative production—that the five-volume series *Studies in Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology*, under the general editorship of Shang Biwu, acquires its timely significance. Each volume is devoted to a major strand of postclassical narratology—feminist, rhetorical, cognitive, unnatural, and transmedial—and together they offer Chinese readers a systematic and critically engaged picture of how the field has diversified beyond classical structuralism. The series does not merely introduce these schools; it equips readers with the analytical tools necessary to address the emerging challenges of a narrative-saturated and increasingly AI-driven cultural environment.

Chinese academia had long been dominated by classical narratology until the early twenty-first century, when Peking University Press published a series of Chinese translations of seminal Western narratological works, including David Herman's *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* and Susan S. Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. The introduction of Western postclassical narrative theories quickly attracted keen attention from Chinese scholars. However, roughly two decades after its initial reception in China, postclassical narratology still lags behind in terms of both translation and original research, compared with the established dominance of the classical paradigm. Viewed in this light, the publication of the present five-volume series is of considerable importance. As the word "frontier" in the title suggests, the series focuses primarily on postclassical narratologies, with each volume devoted to a different strand of the field. The series constitutes part of the research project "Frontiers of Contemporary Western Narratology: Translation and Research," supported by the National Social Science Fund of China. The same project also sponsored the publication of Shang's companion four-volume translation series, which includes Chinese editions of *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, *Intermediality and Storytelling*, and *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*. While the translation series allows Chinese readers to gain direct access to key works of postclassical narratology, the present critical series goes further: it not only provides readers with a systematic picture of different schools of thought and demonstrates how to deploy theoretical tools for textual analysis—since each volume is divided between theoretical inquiry and textual practice—but, more importantly, guides them to reflect critically on the strengths and limitations of each theoretical orientation and to engage in ongoing debates so as to form their own positions on a

wide range of narrative topics.

The first volume, *Studies in Contemporary Western Feminist Narratology*, offers a clear example of the move from an autonomous formalist discipline toward a contextualized one. Its theoretical chapters reconstruct feminist narratology's emergence and recent development through a critical exploration of the works of well-known feminist narratologists, particularly Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol. The volume then examines the relationship between feminist narratology and other strands of postclassical narratology—including rhetorical, unnatural, and cognitive narratology—thereby initiating a dialogue with the remaining volumes on a series of core issues such as the definition of narrative, implied authors, characters, and narrative value. Notably, the volume does not strictly confine its scope to feminist narratology per se but also approaches the field from the perspectives of ethics and empathy, situating feminist narratology within the broader theoretical movements of "the ethical turn" and "the affective turn." It further explores the unique contributions that feminist adaptations of traditional fairy tales and feminist metafiction make to the theoretical construction of feminist narratology, demonstrating how ideological critique and narrative form are mutually constitutive rather than externally related.

If the first volume examines the ideological power inherent in narrative, the second, *Studies in Contemporary Western Rhetorical Narratology*, places form within the context of communication. The volume resists the tendency—particularly prevalent among Chinese scholars—to reduce rhetorical narratology to the Chicago school led by James Phelan. Instead, its theoretical chapters reconstruct a broader set of rhetorical traditions, encompassing also the Tel Aviv rhetorical-functional school represented by Meir Sternberg and Michael Kearns's rhetorical narratology, both of which are equally important but have not received due attention in Chinese narratological scholarship. In this sense, the volume fills a significant gap by drawing a comprehensive map of rhetorical narratology for Chinese readers, tracing its historical development and distinguishing between the foundational commitments of different schools. As a feature central to literary discourse, fictionality has attracted considerable attention within the circle of rhetorical narratology; the volume accordingly devotes a chapter to Richard Walsh's studies on fictionality as well as related theories proposed by James Phelan and Henrik Skov Nielsen. A subsequent chapter clarifies three approaches to the act of reading—reading position theory, game theory, and deictic shift theory—so as to distinguish rhetorical narratology from possible world theory and text world theory. The final theoretical chapter addresses the overlaps and differences between rhetorical and

cognitive narratology, comparing the ways in which Phelan and Manfred Jahn approach embedded narrative and identifying avenues for mutual enrichment. Like the first volume, this one turns to the issue of ethics in its Appendix, discussing narrative ethics from the standpoint of rhetorical narratology based on an interview with Phelan.

The third volume, *Studies in Contemporary Western Cognitive Narratology*, most explicitly exhibits the convergence of C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the sciences and the humanities. Drawing on recent research findings in cognitive science, cognitive narratology reemphasizes the importance of the reader and the context while reciprocating with its own distinctive insights and perspectives for the sciences. The volume provides a comprehensive assessment of the current state and future trends of cognitive narratology, focusing on its philosophical and empirical foundations, its main characteristics, and the innovations it has brought to classical narratology. At the same time, it discusses major concepts and models—storyworlds, world-making, natural narratology, cognitive maps, theory of mind, psychonarratology, and fictional minds—proposed by David Herman, Monika Fludernik, Lisa Zunshine, Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, and Alan Palmer. It is worth noting that one chapter is devoted to Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao's theoretical construction of "brain text" and "brain concept," exploring the connection between ethical literary criticism and cognitive narratology. This chapter not only brings the issue of ethics back into the domain of cognitive science but also demonstrates how Chinese scholars are beginning to contribute original theoretical frameworks rather than merely receiving Western ones.

The fourth volume, *Studies in Contemporary Western Unnatural Narratology*, moves the series toward a different boundary. Unnatural narratology emerged partly in response to theories that made everyday human cognitive parameters the implicit measure of narrative intelligibility. It directs attention toward anti-mimetic elements such as nonhuman narrators, impossible spaces, broken timelines, unnatural events, and unnatural emotions that resist straightforward naturalization. Although unnatural narratology has generated vigorous discussion internationally, it remains a relatively unfamiliar topic in Chinese academia. The volume fills this lacuna by reconstructing the major positions associated with figures such as Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, and Henrik Skov Nielsen, and by critically analyzing the divergent definitions of foundational concepts such as "unnatural" and "anti-mimetic," the research subjects of unnatural narratology, and appropriate reading methods, while tentatively putting forward alternative solutions to the current debates. Rather than focusing exclusively on unnatural narratology itself, the volume prizes dialogue with the

other postclassical narratologies and explores possibilities for complementary and integrated research methods—a commitment that reinforces the series' overarching concern with cross-school conversation rather than theoretical isolationism.

The fifth volume, *Studies in Contemporary Western Transmedial Narratology*, completes the series by questioning yet another assumption inherited from the literary origins of narratology: that the verbal text should serve as the implicit norm for narrative theory. In Chinese academia, the study of narrative poetics is still largely driven by literary scholars, while scholars from other humanities disciplines tend to apply narrative theories without interrogating the limitations imposed by their verbal origin. The volume addresses this imbalance by providing the basic analytical toolkit for scholars undertaking studies of films, dramas, comics, and games, while simultaneously prompting them to reconceptualize the relationship between narratology and media studies as a genuinely two-way channel. Before examining narratives carried by different media, the volume approaches transmedial narratology as a whole, scrutinizing core concepts such as medium, narrativity, and storyworlds, and distinguishing between intermediality, multimodality, transmediality, and related terms. The chapters devoted to textual analysis then move across dramas, graphic narratives, film and television, and digital technologies, greatly enriching the diversity of narratology's objects of study. The result is not simply an enlargement of the corpus but an attempt to determine what aspects of narrative are portable across media and what aspects are materially transformed by particular affordances.

Viewed collectively, the five volumes share a discernible ethical orientation in both their theoretical constructions and their textual analyses, ranging from the intersection of ethics and ideological power in feminist narratology, through the ethical accountability embedded in the rhetorical act, to the connections between ethics and the functions of the mind in cognitive narratology. This ethical thread is no coincidence, as "the ethical turn" occurred around the same period as "the narrative turn." Yet the ethical dimension acquires particular urgency in the current age of AI. When narratives can be generated en masse by artificial intelligence at negligible cost, narrative ethics becomes not a theoretical luxury but a practical necessity. Readers, critics, and citizens alike need to ask what source materials are used to train AI systems, how those systems are designed, what prompts are given, how subjects are represented in the resulting narratives, what media and rhetorical devices are deployed, what values are conveyed, and how such narratives might affect their recipients. These questions can be productively addressed by the very postclassical narratologies surveyed in the series: feminist narratology can

expose how AI-generated narratives reproduce unequal social relations; rhetorical narratology can clarify the persuasive intent and ethical accountability behind AI narratives; cognitive narratology can examine how synthetic voices manipulate emotion and cognition; unnatural narratology can question the assumption that an AI narrator possesses a coherent humanlike consciousness; and transmedial narratology can track how ethical meanings shift when AI transforms narratives across text, image, audio, video, and interactive media. Familiarizing oneself with both classical and postclassical narratologies can thus help cultivate a critical sensibility and equip one to use AI ethically and appropriately in the creation of genuinely valuable narratives. In this light, the series proves useful not only to advanced scholars from both inside and outside the field of narrative studies but also to students, literature enthusiasts, and anyone who consumes, produces, or circulates narratives in the digital age.

The series does, however, leave room for improvement in one respect. The narrative texts employed as case studies in the first four volumes are exclusively verbal. This is understandable, given that all contributors come from the literary field, but it represents a missed opportunity: greater diversity in the chosen texts would have enabled more sustained dialogue between the fifth volume and the others. It would be instructive to observe how the portability and interpretive power of feminist, rhetorical, cognitive, and unnatural narratology change when applied to texts in different media. Graphic narratives offer a particularly apt case in point, as a substantial body of scholarship already demonstrates the productivity of such cross-fertilization: Warhol's readings of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Phelan's deployment of David Small's *Stitches* to illustrate his positions on fictionality ("Fictionality") and rhetorical narratology ("Authors, Resources, Audiences"), Herman's focus on word-image combinations to explore how graphic narratives trigger inferences about storyworlds ("Multimodal Storytelling"), Baroni's exploration of unnatural temporalities in comics, and Kilgore's reassessment of functionalist theories of narration in comics through the lens of unnatural narratology. Including such multimodal case studies in the first four volumes would not only have enriched the analytical practice of each postclassical school but would also have demonstrated one of the key arguments of postclassical narratology: that the medium through which a narrative is conveyed shapes how it produces meaning.

In sum, *Studies in Frontier Theories of Contemporary Western Narratology* makes a substantial and timely contribution to both Chinese and international narrative scholarship. The series demonstrates convincingly that the proliferation of narrative in contemporary culture demands not a single overarching theory but

a diversified and mutually corrective set of critical tools. By mapping five major strands of postclassical narratology with both theoretical rigor and analytical demonstration, the series equips its readers to navigate an era in which narratives are ubiquitous, AI-generated, and ethically fraught. It is a landmark contribution to Chinese narratological scholarship and an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to understand how narrative theory has evolved to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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