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## Table of Contents

<b>From the Editor</b> Alfonso J. García-Osuna	<b>1</b>
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Reading Mom Lit: Feminism, Postfeminism and the Maternal Dilemma</b> Srijanee Roy	<b>9</b>
<b>Becoming a Man: Construction of the Somali Raganimo in <i>Maps</i></b> Sehnaz Rofique Saikia	<b>23</b>
<b>Reimagining Witches in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Study of “Bulbbul” and “Roohi”</b> Riya Mukherjee Suraj Gunwant	<b>37</b>
<b>Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa’s <i>The Blue Between Sky and Water</i> and <i>Against the Loveless World</i></b> Farhan Ahmad	<b>53</b>
<b>Dangerous Femininity: Looking into the Portrayal of Daphne Monet as a Femme Fatale in Walter Mosley’s <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i></b> Prerana Chakravarty	<b>63</b>
<b>Can the “Mutelated” Subaltern be Free? Reading Friday’s Subversion in J. M. Coetzee’s <i>Foe</i></b> Hemangi Bhagwat Tanya D’souza	<b>73</b>
<b>Literary Writing and Personal Identity in Borges and Pessoa</b> Shlomy Mualem	<b>85</b>
<b>The Incompetent Antagonism of Wit: A Study of <i>Hamlet</i> and <i>Catch-22</i></b> P. A. Shifana	<b>101</b>
<b>The Islamic Other in Post-9/11 America: Reading Resistance in <i>Hamid and Halaby</i></b> Pathik Roy	<b>117</b>
<b>The Beasts and the Beastly: Colonial Discourse and the (Non-)Human Animals of Pantisocracy</b> Monirul Islam	<b>131</b>

**Fellini in Memoriam – The Absurdist Elements of Fellini’s Cinema  
as a Reflection of our Disrupted COVID-19 Reality** 143  
Jytte Holmqvist

**Editorial Board** 161



## From the Editor

Welcome to the *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities – Volume 9 – Issue 1*.

Most of the authors that have contributed to this issue demonstrate a grounding on a critical model whose imprint on the major areas of humanist analysis is uncontested: feminist theory. Thus, several articles may seem to present similar types of argument by foregrounding the victimisation of women in patriarchal society, but the diversity of cultural environments analysed makes for a variegated panoply of investigative prospects.

In “Reading Mom Lit: Feminism, Postfeminism and the Maternal Dilemma”, Srijanee Roy looks at a genre of popular paperbacks, written by and about would-be or new mothers, called mom lit. The paper analyses issues that include the debate regarding the performance capabilities of working mothers, the influence of self-help books in structuring the mother’s consciousness, the cycle of trying to balance work and children, “time-debt” and its attendant feelings of guilt, the psycho-somatic disorders that correspond to motherhood, and the social hindrances attending single parenting and “unconventional” motherhood that in so many ways victimise women. A study is undertaken of three iconic mom lit novels and the multiplicity of concerns that are voiced by these mothers, from psycho-somatic disruptions to post-pregnancy socialization issues.

In “Becoming a Man: Construction of the Somali Raganimo in *Maps*”, Sehnaz Rofique Saikia argues that the social aspect of gender is of pivotal concern, and it needs to be examined not only from a feminist perspective but from masculinity studies as well. As it is men who wield power in society, it is crucial to understand the implications of gender-based expectations on men who possess that privilege.

In “Reimagining Witches in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Study of ‘Bulbbul’ and ‘Roohi’”, Riya Mukherjee and Suraj Gunwant study two films that subvert the conventional genesis of witches and witch-hunts, arguing that in the process of undermining superstitious belief, these films situate witches as embodiment of an emancipatory discourse that resists the silencing of women, a practise that still serves the patriarchal standards of a heteronormative, bourgeois society.

In “Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World*”, Farhan Ahmad analyses the gendered impact of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Conflict victimises women in many specific ways, so the paper aims to offer an insight into the experiences of women during the conflict and beyond, highlighting their loss of dignity and independence and indicating how they grapple with all these issues. The study explores the ways in which Palestinian women are beleaguered by the incessant political power struggles that have fashioned their social environment, shaping their mindsets in their unending conflict with the patriarchy.

In “Dangerous Femininity: Looking into the portrayal of Daphne Monet as a *femme fatale* in Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*”, Prerana Chakravarty analyses novelist Walter Mosley’s treatment of the *femme fatale* figure. Through the character Daphne, a woman that has been sexually assaulted by her own father and does not allow herself to be controlled by men, the author offers an analysis of the figure of the *femme fatale* in its function as catalyst for men’s behaviour and examines how the *femme fatale* was created. The *femme fatale* is an

archetype for the transgressing woman, who threatens men with identity erasure and causes outcomes that often lead to their downfall.

In “Can the “Mutelated” Subaltern be Free? Reading Friday’s Subversion in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”, Hemangi Bhagwat and Tanya D’souza study J. M. Coetzee’s 1986 novel *Foe*, which tells the story of Susan Barton, a woman that has boarded a ship bound for Lisbon in her search for her kidnapped daughter. After a mutiny on the ship she is set adrift, washing ashore on the island inhabited by “Cruso” and Friday and intruding into their ongoing adventure. Her account is then inserted into the original *Robinson Crusoe* story line, which is redrawn following Susan Barton’s perspective. There is a critical emphasis on the character Friday, Cruso’s slave, analysing his subversive subalternity in an attempt to hear and understand his silences and his non-verbal modes of performing freedom.

Shlomy Mualem moves in a different direction in “Literary Writing and Personal Identity in Borges and Pessoa”, wherein the author argues that Borges and Pessoa—perhaps two of the greatest writers of the twentieth century—conceive the interplay between writing and self-identity in rather complex fashion. Pessoa’s term “heteronym” relates to the way in which an author’s subjectivity abruptly gives way to an idiosyncratic identity who composes the poem. This recalls the Kabbalistic idea of God’s contraction (*tzimzum*), the creator preserving his or her passive self-identity while giving birth to other beings from his or her inner void. Discussing Shakespeare and Whitman, Borges proposes that the act of writing is a form of self-creation in which the writer begets a unique narrative identity out of himself or herself that, transfigured, is simultaneously both the same and the other.

P. A. Shifana, in “The incompetent antagonism of wit: A study of *Hamlet* and *Catch-22*”, argues that wit is unique, as it can appear complex and banal at the same time. In studying these two great exemplars of English-language literature, the author states that, despite the complexity of the device, wit only offers a momentary chuckle or clarification of events, easily forgotten in a larger context. This dichotomy of wit operates in the plot and theme in these two as well as in many other literary texts.

In “The Islamic Other in post-9/11 America: Reading Resistance in Hamid and Halaby”, Pathik Roy engages with the politics of the emergence of a discursively constructed “Islamic Other” in the post-9/11 national imaginary. Using the Foucauldian ideas of Power/Knowledge and “regime of Truth” along with Said’s major premises as are found in the works *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, the paper attempts to debunk the idea that “innocent”, neutral and objective representations in western, especially US media have been the norm.

In “The Beasts and the Beastly: Colonial Discourse and the (Non-)Human Animals of Pantisocracy”, Monirul Islam studies Coleridge and Southey’s plan (1794) to set up a utopian community on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania; the proposed society was christened Pantisocracy. The study focuses on the root causes of the project’s failure. The differences between Coleridge and Southey regarding the place of servants in Pantisocracy and an uncertainty over the role of women in the community have often been cited as the key issues that led to the failure of the project. However, a close attention to Coleridge and Southey’s writings on Pantisocracy reveals that a third reason for the abandonment was the anxiety of the two poets over the non-human animals and native humans of America.

Jytte Holmqvist, in “Fellini in Memoriam – The Absurdist Elements of Fellini’s Cinema as a Reflection of our Disrupted COVID-19 Reality”, undertakes a comprehensive comparison

between the bold and absurdist cinema of the Post-Neorealist filmmaker and today's also strange and perplexing social environment. Contextualising his cinema within an auteurist framework, the work highlights how ground-breaking Fellini was in embracing the unconventional; by doing so he provided a practical guide for navigating contemporary reality.

We trust that the contents of this issue will be of interest to a diverse audience.

Dr Alfonso J. García-Osuna  
Editor

## Notes on Contributors

Article 1:

### **Reading Mom Lit: Feminism, Postfeminism and the Maternal Dilemma**

**Dr Srijanee Roy** is currently employed at Rishi Bankim Chandra College, West Bengal, India, in the capacity of assistant professor in English. On graduation from University of Calcutta, she went on to obtain her PhD in English literature from Jadavpur University and served the same institution as UGC-JRF/SRF. She was awarded the Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Fellowship to visit the University of Pennsylvania in 2016. She has fourteen years teaching experience – both at undergraduate and postgraduate – and research experience. Her publications include several scholarly articles in various international and national books and journals. She has co-edited the book *Women & Empowerment: A Challenge in the 21st Century* (2018). Feminist studies, popular culture and postcolonial studies are her areas of interest.

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Article 2:

### **Becoming a Man: Construction of the Somali Raganimo in *Maps***

**Sehnaz Rofique Saikia** is a PhD Scholar in the Department of English, Gauhati University, India. Her current research area is pathographies and masculinity. She did her MPhil on the representation of Somali masculinity in Nuruddin Farah's novels. She has received Junior Research Fellow (JRF) award letter by University Grants Commission (UGC), India. Her research areas of interest include Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, Environment and Climate Fiction, African literature, and Health Humanities.

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Article 3:

### **Reimagining Witches in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Study of “Bulbbul” and “Roohi”**

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Article 4:

**Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World***

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**Dangerous Femininity: Looking into the Portrayal of Daphne Monet as a Femme Fatale in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress***

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Article 6:

**Can the "Mutelated" Subaltern be Free? Reading Friday's Subversion in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe***

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Article 7:

**Literary Writing and Personal Identity in Borges and Pessoa**

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Article 8:

**The Incompetent Antagonism of Wit: A Study of *Hamlet* and *Catch-22***

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Article 9:

**The Islamic Other in Post-9/11 America: Reading Resistance in Hamid and Halaby**

**Dr Pathik Roy** teaches English Literature at St. Joseph’s College, Darjeeling, West Bengal. His research interests are Gender Studies, Postcolonial Theory, Film Studies and Culture Studies generally. He has many invited lectures to his credit and has extensively published in various literary/academic journals and contributed many book chapters on his areas of interest. His doctoral thesis was on the American literary and cultural milieu in the post 9/11 years focussing on the interface between trauma and memory. He has successfully completed two UGC sponsored Research projects one of which was on the representation of the Darjeeling culturescape in Bengali cinema while the other explored select folk literature of the Rabhas of North Bengal from an ecological and gender perspective.

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Article 10:

**The Beasts and the Beastly: Colonial Discourse and the (Non-)Human Animals of Pantisocracy**

**Dr Md. Monirul Islam** is Assistant Professor of English at Presidency University, Kolkata, India. He is keenly interested in posthumanist discourses in literature and films, especially in the intersections of posthumanism, anthropocentrism and postcolonialism. He has published a number papers in the area of posthumanism and he is a founder member of Indian Posthumanism Network (<https://posthumanism.in/>). Another area of his interest continues to be European romantic poetry. His monograph on the Eastern connections of the British Romantics, *Oriental Wells: The Early Romantic Poets and Their Eastern Muse* has recently been published by Bloomsbury India (New Delhi: 2020).

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Article 11:

**Fellini in Memoriam – The Absurdist Elements of Fellini’s Cinema as a Reflection of our Disrupted COVID-19 Reality**

**Dr Jytte Holmqvist** lectures in the Film and Media degree programme at HBU-UCLan School of Media, Communication & Creative Industries. She holds a PhD in Screen and Media Culture from the University of Melbourne with a doctoral thesis that compares the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar and Catalan filmmaker Ventura Pons from an Urban Studies and postmodern perspective. Jytte Holmqvist is sole editor of the interdisciplinary volume *The Patient-Doctor Dynamics: Examining Current Trends in the Global Healthcare Sector* (Brill 2018) and has contributed with film reviews and interviews for the *Segmento* Italian magazine since 2017. She is increasingly interested in philosophy and Cultural Studies, psychology, mental health, and human resilience and connection in the face of adversity. With a preference for the Italian

cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Federico Fellini, her interest in the latter lies in the interdisciplinary and absurdist aspects of his repertoire and the applicability of his films to our own reality of interrupted realities. Dr Holmqvist was conferred the International Award for Excellence from *The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge, and Society* (May 2022) for her interpretation of Orwell's *1984* revisited in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on people and societies.





## **Reading Mom Lit: Feminism, Postfeminism and the Maternal Dilemma**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to look at a genre of popular paperbacks, written by and about would-be or new mothers, called mom lit, which itself is a sub-genre of chick lit, and to investigate how it negotiates with the tropes of mothering, neotraditionalism, work and domesticity. Though books have been published worldwide that can be classified under this genre, here the focus will be on British and American mom lit (limiting ourselves to three novels) and how the legacy of a variety of popular productions like childcare books and mothering blogs – among others – inform it. A review of the critical literature, feminist as well as postfeminist, will be undertaken so as to contextualize these novels. Issues analysed include the debate regarding the performance capabilities of working mothers, the influence of self-help books in structuring the mother's consciousness, the cycle of trying to balance work and children, "time-debt" and its attendant feelings of guilt, the psycho-somatic disorders that correspond to motherhood, and the issues of single parenting and unconventional motherhood. This analysis highlights the treatment given these issues in mom lit novels. As an inadequately investigated genre of popular writing, mom lit's ascent to prominence and eventual waning off is critically considered.

*Keywords:* chick lit, feminism, mom lit, mommy blogs, postfeminism

Popular literature has been so frequently relegated to the realm of substandard and quasi-serious light entertainment, that by and large it has been ignored in the discussion on serious literature. Chick lit, which started flooding the market beginning with *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) in the United Kingdom and *Sex and the City* (1996) in the United States, eventually went on to become a global phenomenon a decade later. The genre was adapted in several areas according to diverse market forces and cultural standards, giving rise to Hungarian chick lit, Asian chick lit, Chikana lit, Brazilian chick lit, Latina chick lit, Sistah lit, and Indian chick lit, to name just a few. In a nutshell, chick lit was a revamped popular romance, featuring a young woman that ventures out into the world negotiating work, love and life. Though at its onset chick lit was meant for a niche audience, the protagonists being “young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas” (Smith, 2008, p.2), with its growing popularity and expansion into a diversified readership, eventually chick lit got further categorized into sub-groups like “workplace tell all”, “single girl in the city”, “bride lit”, “mom lit”, “hen lit” or “matron lit” and “widow lit”. Interestingly, the major thematic subgenres of chick lit reveal an important differentiation in terms of protagonists as well as of intended readership. Authors develop topics and storylines by identifying certain social categories, like the woman’s age, her marital status and the level of socialization allowed her. As Cecilia Konchar Farr (2009) puts it, “most of chick lit may not be literature in the traditional aesthetic sense, but it is certainly another chapter in the unfolding adventure and changing fortunes of the novel in today’s consumerist and print-resistant world (p. 212).

Soon after the arrival of the single girl narratives came mom lit, with the protagonist reflecting the simultaneous aging and development of the writer and the reader. It was quite natural that the young, sprightly girl of the chick lit novel, who was worrying about her weight, professional and love life and desperately looking forward to coupledness, would very soon be facing the challenges of motherhood and, given her hapless, desperate nature, she would be struggling to balance it with her profession and her love life, often with little success but with great trepidation. Mom lit is for the most part chick lit written for and directed to new mothers, and as the authors are frequently mothers who write the novels as autobiographies, they faithfully reflect the readers’ experiences.

This paper intends to study three iconic mom lit novels and the multiplicity of concerns that are voiced by these mothers, from psycho-somatic disruptions to post-pregnancy socialization. There is also an investigation into the very concept of successful motherhood and how it is constructed following social standards. In this context the concerns of employment, work, nurture and caregiving are analysed as they come across in mom lit novels.

### **The Concept of Motherhood**

Before delving into the treatment of motherhood in mom lit novels, it would be worthwhile to look at how motherhood has been culturally constructed through the ages and how feminism has worked to redefine it in different ways. Whether the mother should entirely devote herself to the care of her children or have an individual profession that demands her attention and time has been the crux of the modern debate regarding motherhood and employment. The major point of dissociation occurs between the demands of motherhood (private sphere) and those of employment (public sphere). As Tuula Gordon (1990) notes, the public world of paid work is quintessentially attributed to men whereas the private sphere of reproduction has been culturally attributed to women (p. 11). This facilitates the patriarchal subjugation by controlling the woman’s sexuality, but the formula is strongly challenged when the woman exits the home

to join the workforce. Lara Descartes and Conrad P. Kottak (2009) write, “[t]his separation is based in an ideology that associates the inside world of home and family with femininity and the outside world of work with masculinity. Given this dichotomy wives – but not husbands – have to justify why external employment does not make them a bad parent” (p. 15).

It is noteworthy that this prejudice still survives, even though economic realities – something as basic as the very cost of raising a family – has made it imperative for women to work. It is this spectre of being a bad parent – according to the norms of society – that is instrumental in setting personal standards; this spectre haunts the mothers in most mom lit novels. So the rhetoric of guilt and limitation forms one of the major underlying themes in mom lit: the mothers who are forever under obligation, in a time debt, always desperately trying (and for the most part failing) to make up for the lost time which could be devoted to their children but that has been taken away by her work. Often these anxieties are exaggerated and distorted; they serve to censure the mother who obsesses because she does not question the legitimacy of the social system that burdens her with outmoded concepts of motherhood. Katherine N. Kinnick (2009) writes, “[m]edia morality tales frequently suggest dire outcomes for women who decide to climb the corporate ladder rather than to focus on marriage and motherhood” (p. 7). The markers of good and bad motherhood as constructed by media constantly trouble the mom lit protagonists: the good mother “makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity”, while the bad mother is “self-centered, neglectful, preoccupied with career, or lacking in traditional femininity” (Kinnick, 2009, p. 9).

In mom lit, like in the other subgenres of chick lit, the dilemma between alleged neo-traditionalism and efforts of breaking away from the quintessential markers of womanhood are worked out in multiple ways. Many chick lit heroines are shown to keep away from motherhood as a matter of personal choice (like Carrie in *Sex and the City*), while there are others (like Bridget Jones, or Becky of the *Shopaholic* series) who go on to embrace motherhood and its challenges. Mom lit therefore becomes instrumental in exploring how motherhood is constructed in the postfeminist context, as this form of popular literature has become one of the key cultural assets that deal extensively with the concerns of today’s mothers.

Second-wave feminism’s efforts to assert individual freedom, to ensure equal pay for equal work and to defend proper professional opportunities often enter into obvious conflict with notions of fruitful and idealized motherhood. Being a mother invariably jeopardizes the individual choice that feminist ideology so idealistically champions, as it binds the woman to domesticity in the form of childcare. Moreover, the very myth of domesticity as a mark of effectual motherhood is never exorcised and the working mother is more often than not deemed deficient in essential mothering instincts. The pressure of societal expectations becomes detrimental in the mother’s own perception of herself, and she regularly worries about her merit. Ann Taylor Allen (2005) terms this as “maternal dilemma”: the question of whether it is “possible to be both a mother and an autonomous individual” (p. 1).

The World Wars in Europe and the United States required the active participation of women in the work front and, consequently, suspended their domestic duties. Things would not return to the *status quo*: there began a widespread movement by the European and US feminists to establish women more firmly in the professional world of which they were now active participants. A new balance between the roles of the working professional and the efficient mother came into play, despite the efforts by political players, religious entities and media

messaging to vilify the working mother. As part of these efforts, the concepts of happy homemaker and working mother were consistently pitted against one another: as Allen (2005) puts it, “[t]wo models of motherhood—one based on full-time homemaker status and the other on a combination of domestic work and employment—competed for legitimacy” (p. 141).

Gradual development and popularization of the methods of contraception and the rising educational level of women rendered motherhood in the post-war era “an option to be chosen rather than a destiny to be accepted” (Allen, 2005, p. 209). But still considering the constraints of the patriarchal society, feminists like Simone de Beauvoir denounced the prevailing concepts of motherhood as nothing short of slavery, since maternity invariably came with the loss of personal independence. Several early second-wave feminist texts like that of Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone were branded as anti-motherhood: their criticism of the limitations that are imposed on women with motherhood in a patriarchal system was wilfully misread as an abhorrence to motherhood.

A reverse reaction to this popular myth was brewing which manifested itself in the form of the policy or practice of “pronatalism” which Amber A. Kinser (2010) defines as “the excessive and sometimes obsessive focus on babies and children that often obscures the impact that raising, educating and caring for children has on families, institutions and individuals” (p. 97). Pronatalism was a widespread social phenomenon that constructed much of the popular notions of mothering and motherhood post 1980s in the United States. As Kinser (2010) points out, a certain section of feminists, who called themselves postfeminists, were trying to include the pronatalist rhetoric into feminism itself. A return to domesticity and motherhood was now being held as new norms of feminist emancipation. The widespread dissatisfaction felt by women regarding their working status had nothing to do with their professional exposure, but it was rather because women were now supposed to be professionally active and at the same time care for the family and children. It was this double burden that revalidated the domestic space as the peaceful refuge from the continuous fatigue of running between home and work. Kinser (2010) writes about the pro-motherhood postfeminist argument:

At the end of the 20th century, media, corporate and religious dialogue seemed to adopt the propaganda campaign strategy used before and after World War II to ground women once again in their domestic roles. Nearly eight hundred books were published about motherhood in the last two decades of the century [...] obsessive media coverage of stories about risk to children, risks that could be countered only by equally obsessive management of every minute detail of children’s lives, risks whose countering became the responsibility of mothers, further had domesticating effects on women’s thinking, if not their entire lives. (pp. 120-121)

The two options that are offered to women in this context were either to sacrifice every other aspect of their identity to motherhood or be branded as a bad mother. The threats of being the bad mother and the unnatural obsession over one’s child are two of the thematic threads that feature regularly in mom lit narratives. Popular media has often been blamed for cultivating “mommy wars”, which presumably reflected the conflicting ideologies of at-work and at-home mothering. The image of the ultra-efficient “Supermom” managing her profession and family with equal expertise that was rampant in the media productions up to the 1980s was by the 90s changed to the new image of “the frantic, fatigued woman who worked only because she had to” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 20). The media was clearly stating that “moms with successful careers were reviled as selfish and materialistic, putting their own ambitions ahead of their children’s

need” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 20). The expectation of “having it all” was being portrayed as unrealistic, and the concept of motherhood as full-time occupation as rather appealing.

Reflecting on the media images of women produced during the 1980s, Kathryn Keller (1994) notes that women’s magazines were clearly segregated according to the two different reading circles they tried to address – the housewife’s magazines and the working woman’s journals, though most of them “seemed to favour a return to the hearth” (p. 108). Suddenly the full-time mother was the cultural icon of proper American womanhood, engaging the central position of all popular discourses. Neotraditionalism came up with the new and evolved image of the homemaker, defined by the keyword of choice: “Articles emphasized that the Neotraditionalist was different from the bored and angry housewife of the 1950’s described by Betty Friedan. The homemaker of the 1950’s was a housewife by default, as society allowed her no other role. In contrast the Neotraditionalist of the 1980’s had chosen housewifery over a career” (Keller, 1994, p. 111). The rhetoric of choice that is central to the postfeminist lingo once again provided the central impetus for returning to unhampered domesticity.

### **Precursors of Mom-lit**

The writing of mom lit has a close precursor in the form of the numerous mommy blogs that crowd the Internet, sharing personalized accounts of the mothering experience aimed at providing guidance to fellow new mothers as well as establishing a connection to the world through the act of mothering, which is essentially a solitary endeavour in the modern nuclear family setup. This virtual sharing of personal space to educate and inform others can be seen as a consciousness raising exercise. May Friedman (2013) notes how her book on mothering blogs was inspired by her own experience: she writes, “[i]n my pregnant and slowly expanding state, the words of a woman I didn’t know seemed to hold the key to the secret reality that awaited me” (p. 3). Friedman (2013) elucidates that compared to traditional parenting books, the blogs provided a range of personal accounts which seemed worthy of a true connection, though the experiences were largely varied and often contradictory. She writes, “The intimacy, diversity, and community of the mamasphere quickly made me an avid reader and, while the selection of blogs I followed has shifted considerably over time, I consider reading these blogs to be an important part of my self-development as an individual and as a parent” (p. 5). It is important to note that concept of influx of knowledge which is associated with sharing of experience is underlined here. Friedman (2013) calls this process of writing blogs a way to overcome “maternal isolation” and therefore a way to capture “maternal experiences” (p. 11).

Mom lit moves towards a similar end, where a personal first-person narrative, often autobiographical, aims at a one-to-one connection with the reader. Julia Grant (1998) considers the history of the popularity of baby-care books in present day parenting as she notes that it was the change from extensive motherhood (where mothers were responsible for multiple children) to intensive motherhood where they “concentrated their attention on the physical and emotional nurture of individual children” (p. 15), which was instrumental in the major shift in the middle-class American woman’s view towards mothering during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sharon Hays (1996) defines intensive mothering as “a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (p. x). Grant (1998) relates the appearance of baby-care books and their proliferation and popularity in the world of parenting to the process of social modernization. She writes, “[w]hile parents in traditional societies learn informally about how to raise children, parents in modern Western societies are inclined to seek “expert” advice on child rearing, often from professional or written sources” (p. 13).

These baby-care manuals were initially predominantly expert advice by healthcare professionals or renowned philosophers on what should be the ideal nature of bringing up children and how to handle the health hazards children are prone to. Eventually instructions diverted from physical development to spiritual wellbeing of the children, and simultaneously the emphasis on the parents' combined role in child rearing was superseded by the insistence on the mother's importance in the physical and spiritual development of the child. Melissa Buis Michaux and Leslie Dunlap (2009), in their study on guide books for mothers, trace how the insistence on mostly expert advice in the form of the oracular paediatrician as in Dr. Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1945) was rejected by the feminist help book *Ourselves and Our Children* (1978), which "presented itself not as an advice manual but, following the practice of consciousness-raising, as a place to share and analyse experiences" (p. 142). They also note that it was Heidi Murkoff's *What to Expect When You're Expecting* which stole the show with its appearance in 1984; it was conspicuous in its focus on stay-at-home mothers, with the working mothers treated as a minority, who were trying to balance the impossible dual responsibility of work and child and therefore were beyond help through instructions. Mommy blogs deftly combined the two forms of narration employed by child care manuals—on the one hand they are instructional, on the other they tap on the commonality of experience. Mom lit often seems to be an extension of mothering blogs with similar insistence on sharing the personal experience, and, on another level, it often engages in a dialogue with real help manuals with its constant references to such books.

Jacqueline V. Lerner (1994), in the introduction to her book *Working Women and their Families*, puts forward an interesting example where a mother going off to work while leaving her child with the caregiver is thoroughly troubled by the guilt of acting as an unnatural mother while the child in reality is not much distressed – it has food, sleep and comfort of the home – but the mother continues to suffer through the day. This self-driven guilt of the working mothers surfaces very frequently in mom lit narratives. In the opening sequence of one of the earliest mom lit books to hit the market, Allison Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), the protagonist and mother of two, Kate Reddy, appears to be tampering with readymade mince pies so that they may pass as homemade and save her grace at her daughter Emily's school carol concert, where parents have been requested to send refreshments. Kate's social conditioning makes her read the message as the school's order to send mother-made food and since, as a working professional, she does not have the time to cook, she struggles to keep up appearances. She neurotically tries to rub out every trace of the pies' readymade status from her kitchen so that none finds out about her forgery and worries herself sick that she is not living up to standard.

Lerner (1994) notes that the present mother's relationship with her own mother, and the perceptions she imbibed from the later, often become important in the way that she formulates motherhood (p. 1). Kate too seems to be indoctrinated by the notions of the previous generation when working mothers were held to be an anomaly: "So before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided into two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the washtub, and there were the other sort" (Pearson, 2002, p. 1). Kate is forever anxious of being branded with this otherness: her husband unsuccessfully tries to convince her that she is not really expected to live up to the so-called pointers of fruitful motherhood, but Kate, in her state of sleep-deprived neurotic obsession just refuses to listen. She is convinced that her role as a mother is critical in her child's development. Fiona Joy Green (2004) writes about the social conditioning of mothers and says that "women are subjected to external pressure to conform to the dominant image of the ideal mother and are

punished when they do not” (p. 128). This notion of punishment gains a novel significance when Kate starts reading her daughter’s juvenile outpour of dissatisfaction at her being away from the home because of work responsibilities; the daughter is delivering just punishment for her supposed negligence of domestic duties.

Punishment, as in Kate’s case, is internalised as a gnawing of guilt. The child, Emily, appears to be both the antagonist and the embodied voice of conscience for the erring mother: Kate feels distressed by Emily’s actions that clearly chide her for being away. Julia Grant (1998) points out that from the physical, emotional and clinical wellbeing of the child to the very question of salvation everything becomes a matter of responsibility of the mother (p. 22). To her husband’s reassurance that with her busy working schedule nobody expects her to be the homebound mother, Kate retorts “Well, *I* expect me to” (Pearson, 2002, p. 2) (emphasis original), thus making herself a wilful victim of the norms of mothering that she has internalized from her own childhood.

The reader sees another generation of potentially guilt-ridden women brewing in Emily, who would eventually carry on the legacy of suffering under the burden of heteronormative expectations: eventually she might try to be the mother her own mother strives to but fails to be. It is a curious mixture of hilarity and pathos with which Kate is presented: a woman with a soaring career obsessing incessantly about her lack of domestic competence. This somehow articulates the dichotomy that neo-traditionalist postfeminism embodies—however hard you try, you cannot have it all. Kate’s neurotic behaviour extends to the way she relentlessly blames her children’s nanny Paula. It is her nascent jealousy of the role of mother substitute that Paula plays that makes her read all of Paula’s actions as potentially destructive to the wellbeing of her children, or at least intrusive to her space of maternal authority.

Kate’s guilt extends from not being able to spend enough time with her children to not knowing them well. She constantly fears that her profession is robbing her of the experience of mothering – she seems to be unaware of their food habits and intricacies of their daily routine – and ends up marking herself as an “unnatural mother”. Amber E. Kinser writes in the prologue to her book *Motherhood and Feminism* (2010) “feminism taught me I had the right and internal resources to construct a mother role and identity that were of my own design, even if they didn’t follow cultural standards, and I had a right to the external resources that would help me do that. I don’t have to sacrifice what is right for me in order for my family to flourish” (p. ix). This message seems to be entirely lost to the likes of Kate, who finally decides to quit the urban space and corporate life in favour of part-time work and peaceful unhampered mothering. But even Kinser, later in the essay, cannot deny the extra burden of obligations that she has for her family by the virtue of being a mother, something that her male colleagues are blissfully free of. Perhaps these obligations will become massive for neo-traditionalist Kate, and may move her to take refuge in the rural, premodern existence of full-time motherhood.

Kate does not only rue the fact that she cannot take care of her children as much as she would like, but she also laments her mismanaged household, which emerges as the visual reminder of her status as a failed domestic goddess. Adrienne Katz (1992) notes that in post-war Britain the picture of the ideal mother was related to the propriety, order and cleanliness of her household. Katz writes that “[t]he image of a good mother was projected as measurable in terms of how her family looked: keeping up appearances took on a new meaning” (p. 6). Years of social indoctrination makes Kate cry over her status as an unsuccessful mother whenever she spots a dirty dishcloth or a bunch of rotten apples. The perpetual race against time that the chick lit heroine is engaged in – she is usually always late for her office, her date, her doctor



and everything else, and of course she is racing against the biological clock – turns onerous when she becomes a mother and multitasks like never before. These instances highlight the pressure of the double burden of handling both family and work that working mothers must take upon themselves. Now her lists of things-to-be-done multiply and she suffers more crucially from undone tasks.

Through the course of the novel her private life keeps on interfering with her workspace and vice versa, and she tries to excel in both fields while constantly jetting between the two. The novel begins with a Christmas gathering at Kate's in-laws' place, where she becomes busier than she is in her professional space as she tries to play a role to which she is not accustomed. She is the main breadwinner of the house but must abstain from any mention of that fact so as not to hurt the sentiments of her in-laws or her husband's ego. Kate seems to be surrounded by a nexus of women who enthusiastically showcase their happy housewife status, like her sister-in-law Caryl. Despite Kate's obsession about not being the perfect mother, she cannot help but recognize her superiority when it comes to individual worth and financial independence. Therefore, her choice of retreating into apparent domesticity at the end of the novel raises deeper questions on the relative worth that postfeminism places on the two.

The personal tone of the confessional narrative in chick lit novels is often effective in drawing the reader into the protagonist's life, and this tone becomes more efficient when private physical experiences are related, especially those related to mothering. When Marian Keyes published *Watermelon* in 1995, the chick lit market was yet to flourish. The narrative begins with Claire giving birth to a daughter, and the locus of the experience is on how the trial of parenthood is so tellingly different in a man and a woman: the active physical trauma that the mother undergoes in the process of childbirth is juxtaposed to the passive mental stress that the father presumably undertakes. In case of Keyes's novel, the concerns of the body and motherhood are viewed in connection to each other. Besides her new responsibility as a mother, Claire has to deal with an unfaithful husband that abandons her and the infant. The intense neediness that the chick lit heroine is often prone to is intensified in the case of Claire by this abandonment at a crucial transitional stage of her life, and her lack of self-reliance surfaces repeatedly as she has to live alone after a long period of routine intimacy.

The fact that the apparently perfect husband – “a nice man, a bit older than me, with a decent job, good-looking, funny, kind” (Keyes, 1995, p. 4) – abandons her at the most critical stage of her life highlights the fact that all is not rosy in the coupledness and marriage lifestyle that chick lit heroines look forward to. The change of relationship status, from singlehood to coupledness or vice versa, and the emotional changes that accompany the process, are often at the centre of discourse in chick lit novels. At 23, the naïve, bumbling young woman was “rescued” by a well-to-do man by means of marriage, making Claire so accustomed to dependence that she is initially incapable of getting a hold of her life after the break-up.

Claire establishes her postfeminist, neo-traditionalist status clearly at the beginning of the novel: “For all my talk of independence, I was clearly a very romantic person at heart. And for all my talk of rebellion, I was as middle-class as you could get” (Keyes, 1995, p. 9). She adds, “I was perfectly happy to be a homemaker while my husband went out to earn the loot. And if my husband was prepared to share the household chores as well as earn the lion's share of the loot, then so much the better” (Keyes, 1995, p. 129) The flowery language of romantic idealization that Claire employs in retrospection while relating her fairy-tale courtship sounds ironic when contrasted to her present status. At this stage it must be questioned whether chick lit really upholds neo-traditionalism, because Claire certainly grows up when her romanticism

fails her and she has to learn to live alone and be self-sufficient. While coping with the fact she is alone as an individual, Claire also comprehends that she is a single parent with added responsibilities for her child. This revelation might work to make her a more capable mother.

The protagonist's biological family is often absent in chick lit narratives since the chick lit heroine is mostly displaced into an urban space away from her family. Additionally, they are often relegated for their behavioural quirks, which are absurd by the chick lit heroine's own standards. But when Claire comes back to her downtown Dublin home from her accustomed English living space, she is enveloped by a protective family, though the members are quirky in their own way, supporting her with childcare and helping her through her gripping depression and hopeless alcoholism.

The havoc that pregnancy plays with the woman's body has been the source of major feminist debates: the aversion towards the pregnant body or the post-partum changes of the body have been both celebrated as marks of successful womanhood and also decried as an impediment to the construction of female selfhood. Claire tries to justify her decision not to breastfeed her child apologetically, but soon reverses it when her mothering impulse proves stronger than the concern to maintain a perfect body. Significantly, Claire's process of regaining control over her life is aligned with the gradual reclamation of her fitness, though the process is almost involuntary since she cannot drink anything but vodka and juice and exercises to vent out her pent-up anger. The feeling of being a "watermelon" fades away with her inadvertent weight loss, and at the same time she steadily gains control over her encumbered senses, though still harried by the thought of the unfaithful husband.

As in other chick lit narratives, the question of physical attractiveness here too looms large over the consciousness of the protagonist. When Claire meets her husband after their breakup, she intends to look good so that he might comprehend his loss: self-worth is measured according to others' opinion, especially those of the opposite sex. Eventually, Claire becomes attracted to a younger man, Adam, but constantly admonishes herself for not only falling for another man while still married (though her husband had actually breached the contract by having an affair and abandoning her), but also because she thinks that it is socially unacceptable to desire a younger partner.

But mainly, Claire feels that it is selfish to be indulging herself when her child should be the priority. She notes, "My child was growing up without a father, but instead of getting on the phone and trying to work something out, I stood in front of mirror holding my stomach in, checking my profile and finally, as though the years had rolled away and I was still fifteen twisting my head around, trying to see what my butt looked like in the mirror" (Keyes, 1995, p. 163). Claire sees her obsession with the body and love life as an obstructing anomaly to her role as a mother. What in other mom lit novels is the guilt of neglecting the child for professional obligations, for Claire is the guilt of neglecting the child for her emotional needs. Both ways of prioritizing the individual's demands over the role of a mother are judged to be the result of gross selfishness. This socially conditioned guilt consciousness makes Claire stay away from social interactions with Adam for fear of censure and disapproval. Even when Claire decides to go back to her husband James it is because she is thinking of her motherly duties: she wants to secure a better life for her daughter within a regimented family structure, although she ultimately decides otherwise and remains a single mother. The novel closes with a possibility of union with Adam, but only after Claire has learned to live by and for her own self.

## General Considerations

The challenge of being a single parent, female or male, has been the locus of many present-day discourses ranging from academic considerations to popular novels and self-help books. Several of these intend to deliver purposeful instructions on how to be a responsible single mother and still have a fulfilling career and personal life. These are mostly compiled success stories: Caryl Waller Kruegar in her book *Single With Children* (1993) promises “144 ideas for doing it alone” along with autobiographical accounts of divorced, widowed or single parents with adopted children. Terri Apter (1995) perfectly envisions the position of the working woman who struggles to balance work, family and motherhood in the title of her book that asks “Why women still don’t have wives?” referring to the domestic duties which are traditionally associated with the role of being a wife/mother, a role that still sticks to the working woman when she has to go out and earn her own bread. The question underlines the sexual division of labour and its stagnation now that women venture out and deal with glass ceiling and wage gap monsters in their workplaces.

Apter (1995) points out how work has become mandatory for women, it being a way to secure a proper life for themselves and their children, especially for divorced or single mothers. The dichotomy in societal expectations is significant: these involve striving for equality (with measures like curbing of alimony and so on), but at the same time burdening women with majority of parental responsibilities, including financial ones. The emotional baggage attending single status, yoked to the responsibility of being a parent, creates a multifaceted challenge. Jane Porter’s *Odd Mom Out* (2007) has a single mother as the protagonist and the title itself is a clear marker of the status of the single mother in a society where heteronormativity is idolized: she is an outsider, an anomaly and an alien. Ruth Sidel (2006) writes, “single mothers and their children have all too often been seen as a breed apart, a subgroup that requires its own analysis, norms, criticism, and punishment” (p. 184). Again, though it comes with the stigma of unacceptability, single motherhood can mean liberation in a variety of ways, as Jane Juffer (2006) puts it, “freedom from marriage, freedom from the stigma of ‘out of wedlock’ births, freedom to have different sexual partners, freedom to raise children in alternative fashion” (p. 10). Juffer (2006) also points at the recent phenomenon in social media of valorising single working mothers because they are deemed to be more economically stable, with the capacity to spend, unlike the dependent stay at home mother as well as the single mothers depending on state welfare (pp. 46–47). Single parenthood, especially single motherhood, has been the centre of much debate regarding the effect it has on the emotional development and economic well-being of the children. Marta is a single mother by choice who has to deal with an adolescent daughter, which makes her position different from the new mothers of quintessential mom lit. When she sometimes wonders what it would be like to share responsibilities with a partner, Marta appears to be too self-assured to ever qualify as the domestic mother – she struggles but she enjoys her trials.

## Conclusion

Categorising a genre has its drawbacks and the same is true for mom lit. While it was profitable for the publishers to designate the niche and secure the intended readership, the writers were never very happy with the mom lit label. It is a type of pigeonholing that insured that, even though the texts deal with a matter of considerable gravity like mothering, mom lit would be treated as a casual read for nursing stay-at-home mothers or struggling single mothers. Mom lit, like chick lit, declined within a decade of its inception, faltering in a competitive market noted for its ever-shifting demands and easily satiated tastes. Mom lit would not become a

manifesto for the women navigating the rough seas of motherhood in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the new, high-speed and faceless world of the new century, mommy blogs and self-help books would now provide the more personal connections that mothers desired. The emphasis on family heteronormativity that is obvious in mom lit limited its reach (only conventional, middle-class women made it as protagonists). At a time when society was changing around it, it excluded the new class and gender multiplicity of characters whose inclusion might have helped it remain fashionable. But while it was trendy, mom lit celebrated motherhood, with its trappings of trouble and triumph, perhaps delving deeper than it initially intended to. Moreover, while it never found a solution to the issues it raised, its real achievement was that it signaled the urgency for a critical discussion around one of the most significant issues of our changing times.

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## **Becoming a Man: Construction of the Somali Raganimo in *Maps***

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### Abstract

In gender studies, the distinction between biological sex and the social aspect of gender is of pivotal concern, and it needs to be examined not only from a feminist perspective but from masculinity studies as well. Undoubtedly, men have fared better within the patriarchal structure “in terms of the access to and the wielding of power, than have women” (Buchbinder, p. 68), but it is crucial to understand the implications of gender-based expectations on men to possess those privileges. The invisibility concerning masculinity as a gendered category has made it appear natural and coherent. In the context of masculinity as a gendered category, this paper will analyze the configuration of hegemonic masculinity or a *raganimo* in Nuruddin Farah’s (b. 1945) *Maps*. The study will reveal how the dominant masculinity insinuated by culture as natural is, in reality, a make-believe formulated by various discourses. The paper foregrounds that the shaping of masculinity in socially prescribed norms in *Maps* is a discursive practice instrumentalized by patriarchal Somali society to generate, circulate and exert power. The aim of this paper is not to promote the positioning of men as agents of power, but to understand the working of gender and the underpinning of power in masculinity.

*Keywords:* Nuruddin Farah, gender, *Maps*, masculinity, patriarchy, power, Somalia



Issues concerning men and masculinities have proliferated in the contemporary literary scenario. This increase in interest is revealed in the emergence of research on these issues and in the growing debates on men's subjectivity as a gendered category. The genesis of masculinity studies lies in shifting perspectives of understanding masculinity as a marked gender category which has so far remained an "unmarked (and therefore invisible) gender in political, social, and cultural contexts" (Horlacher, 2011, p. 2). The traditional view of masculinity associated the male figure with an "eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man, a thing, a quality that one either has or doesn't have, and in position of a penis" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 25). The superiority of men is further explained by the biological differences as determining factors in the inequality of the sexes. This notion presented in various social, cultural, and historical contexts as natural and preordained.

This type of essentialist patriarchal ideology has been contradicted by R. W. Connell (2005) in her book *Masculinities*, where she writes that "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body" (p. 71). She states that masculinity is not a natural process because men are not born masculine, rather their "gender identity must be constructed through behaviours, confirmed by society, and then internalized by the individual" (Connell, 1982, as cited in Philbrick, 2015, p. 4). Connell argues that masculine identities are formed in relation to femininity or other marginalized masculinities like gay masculinity. She states that, through the dominance and subordination of women and other subordinate groups of men, a socially validated masculinity is formed in step with the standards of the patriarchal system. Connell's concept of masculinity is influenced by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler (1990) in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* argues that gender is not a stable or fixed category; rather it is a performance enacted by an individual within a particular space, time, and cultural framework. She further clarifies that gender identity is not biologically determined, but is a "performative construct" that is made natural by the repetitive stylization of acts. She states that gender "is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (p. 25). According to Butler, this act is essentialized by society through the medium of language, body, and actions.

Connell's theory of masculinity is influenced by Butler's idea of the performative aspect of gender when she writes that the essentialist patriarchal ideology conditions men to believe that their "masculinity is actually biologically inherent, and not ascribed, and therefore has to be continually maintained and enhanced through the externalization of masculine behaviours" (Connell, 2005, as cited in Mahonge, 2016, p. 38). But the very idea that men are expected to prove or demonstrate their masculinity in a culturally defined way indicates the performative and constructed nature of masculinity. As such, if men have to prove their masculinity in a particular way, then masculine ideals cannot be considered as something fixed, universal, or innate. Thus, masculinity can no longer be perceived as a natural monolithic entity, but a complex subject. It is in this regard that R. W. Connell (2005) in her book *Masculinities* defined the concept of hegemonic masculinity to discern the meaning of the constructed nature of masculinity. She defined hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005, p. 77). She believes that a "hegemonic" form of masculine identity sets the male leaders of patriarchal societies apart not only from women but also from men who fail to live up to male ideals (Connell, 2005, p. 77). The concept is, then, that hegemonic masculinity is formed when society validates one kind of masculinity as the dominant form.

### *Raganimo*

In Somali culture, *raganimo*, meaning a “real man”, is considered the dominant kind of masculinity. A Somali man, in order to conform to the Somali normative masculinity of *raganimo*, is expected to embody qualities like “acumen in managing political relationships, alliance-building, negotiation, clan loyalty, fatherhood, defence strategies, conflict, peacemaking, and wisdom, as well as physical strength, mental and physical stamina and courage” (El Bushra and Gardner, 2017, p. 2). Somali society being patriarchal in nature holds men superior to women in all aspects of life. Manhood or *raganimo* in Somali society and the expectations to perform one’s masculinity or *raganimo* play a pivotal role in the life of Somali men. In this regard, *raganimo* can be perceived as hegemonic masculinity because it is constructed and validated by Somali society as the ideal kind of masculinity.

Thus, in the light of the above context, this paper will analyse how in Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* different kinds of hegemonic tools like the male body, nationalism, female archetypes, and exercise of violence over female characters, etc. are employed to construct socially normative masculinity. This paper examines the particular notion of masculinity that is embedded in a heteronormative and patriarchal framework. Following R. W. Connell, Judith Butler, and Todd W. Reeser’s line of thought, this paper analyses the role of *raganimo* in perpetuating the authority of the Somali patriarchal system.

### *Maps*

Published in 1986, *Maps* is the first novel of the cycle of novels in the Blood in the Sun Trilogy. At a micro level, it tells the story of a Somali boy Askar’s quest for an integrated identity amidst the Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia, and at the macro level, it maps Somalia’s quest for a homogenized identity. It showcases the repercussions of the Somali territories’ colonial divisions and their devastating effect on personal identity through Askar’s story, as he struggles to come to terms with issues of Somali identity and Somali cultural nationalism. His father having fallen victim to the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991) and his mother dying on the day of his birth, Askar’s story is centred on his childhood, spent with his foster mother Misra in the town of Kallafo (Qalaafe), a village in the Gode Zone of Ethiopia’s Somali Region. It follows him on his departure to the home of his maternal uncle and aunt Hilaal and Salaado in the Somali capital Mogadiscio at the breaking of the Ogaden War (1977-1978), all the way to his reunion with Misra in Mogadiscio after ten years in a situation where Misra is condemned as a traitor by the Somali Liberation War Front.

Consequently, it depicts Askar’s dilemma of being caught between the bond he shared with his Ethiopian foster mother Misra and his expected allegiance to his ethnic Somali identity. *Maps* is Farah’s most critically acclaimed novel, one that has attracted much critical attention concerning its treatment of a varied range of issues like nation, body, self, dreams, narrative technique, gender, etc., all intertwined with the core theme of identity. However, critical scholarship pertaining to the question of Somali identity in relation to gender has not been paid much attention in the shaping of the protagonist Askar’s masculine identity.

A relevant critical work on *Maps* such as Rhonda Cobham’s (1991) *Boundaries of the Nation, Boundaries of the Self: African Nationalist Fiction and Nuruddin Farah’s Maps*, touches upon the issue of identity, but it limits itself to the narrative mode of the novel with a passing reference to Askar’s unstable gender identity. Similarly, Charles Sugnet (1998) in his essay “Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps*: Deterritorialization and the ‘Postmodern’,” argues that the novel

destabilizes the narrative to manifest the instability in gender and national identities. Sugnet has referred to the instability in Askar's masculine identity, but he does not engage with the nuances of masculinity like the process of Askar's socialization in traditional Somali masculinity and its implication in the gender paradigm. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect that fulfilment of traditional masculine gender norms has on men's psyche, and how it determines the question of gender identity in the novel.

### Body and Image

Various discourses, including biomedical, cultural, family and fashion, ensure that the body performs according to the identity ascribed to it. Not only the female body but the male body is constructed in this manner. The male body becomes the defining element of masculinity. Society constructs men as masculine by shaping their bodies in a set of cultural codes to prove their masculinity (normative). In the novel *Maps*, there is enough evidence to prove the influence of culture in constructing a belief system in Askar's mind, one that corresponds to the masculine ideals ascribed by the Somali society of Kallafo. The Somali society of Kallafo and his paternal lineage constantly remind Askar that he needs to mould himself in a "worldly image" and get rid of his dependence on Misra's body. Askar's paternal uncle, who represents the Somali pastoral society, states that if Askar remains in the company of the women folk throughout the day, he will have "bad influences".

In line with this, Qorrax instructs him to develop rational thoughts, which can be attained only if he acts like a man, when admitting Askar to a Koranic school. He says to Aw-Adan, "I bring him to you nevertheless. For there is no man in the compound in which he lives and one must take boys away from the bad influence of women" (p. 85). Qorrax even permitted Aw-Adan to "discolour his body with bruises or injure it slightly" (p. 89), to train his spirit. This incident depicts how societal construction of masculinity guides correct masculine and feminine behaviour at an early age, while influencing their mind with gender differences. Another instance is when Askar first learns the Arabic gutturals and writes them in his body to memorize them. Askar's writing of the Arabic alphabets in his body implies the shaping of the body in a discourse that is culturally normative because religious scriptures serve as a source of hegemonic discourses that are considered as preordained. Foucault (1980) in *History of Sexuality* notes how the body is used as a space to exercise and produce power when he states that

deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures...the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another...but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion. (pp. 151-2)

Foucault's argument on the connotation of body as a space to demonstrate power resembles Askar's act of writing the alphabets in the body, not only as an impression of how the body is shaped but also how power governs the body.

Furthermore, society initiates certain rituals to enforce manhood. In Islamic culture, one such ritual that has become the marker of a boy's transition into manhood is circumcision. The ritual of circumcision facilitates culture in the swift transformation of the male body "into a kind of body that it may consider masculine (or not masculine, as the case may be)" (Reeser, 2010, p. 95). Todd Reeser (2010) in his book *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* notes how the ritual of circumcising the male body results in such ritualistic practices:

With circumcision, for instance, culture quickly transforms the male body into a kind of body that it may consider masculine (or not masculine, as the case may be). The result of that practice might come to be considered natural as some imagine the circumcised penis as the incarnation of the penis instead of as one possible type of penis, but the practice itself is culturally defined. While an actual circumcision is momentary, the cultural discourse that makes it seem masculine, erotic, or beautiful operates over a long period of time. (p. 95)

Similarly, in Somali culture, a boy is instructed to undergo circumcision so that he can be a man and take the responsibilities expected from a Somali man. In the novel too, Askar is made to perform the ritual of circumcision so that he can be moulded in the masculine ideals of a *raganimo*. Askar undergoes circumcision so that he “can be a man” (89) and be cleansed of all impurities.

Initially, the thought of circumcision plagued his mind, as it will separate him from Misra and make him “live in the territory of pain...and then in the land of loneliness” (89). But the religious and cultural discourse surrounding circumcision is presented in a way that makes it the most honoured way of being a complete man, as it is “characterised by dominance towards other masculinities” (Mshweshwe, 2020, para. 5). Askar’s body had undergone the pain to abide by cultural norms of manhood as he stated, “I was motherless, I was fatherless, I was an orphan and had to give birth to myself. Yes I was to re-create myself in a worldly image” (90). The “worldly image” signifies cultural inscription, and circumcision thus emphasises the construction of Askar’s body in the hegemonic masculine discourse. As such, this statement can be analysed as Askar’s effort to replicate himself as per the expectations of masculinity, consequent to the inscription of such discourses on his body.

Different cultures, through apposite discursive practices, assign meaning to the male body and it is the discourse surrounding the body that influences one’s perception of the it. This has been observed by Reeser when he discusses the discourse surrounding the penis with manhood. According to Reeser (2010), it is our preconceived notions about masculinity that shape our thoughts on the male body and male sex. Reeser notes that it is because culture attributes sexual virility to a man that “we attach great importance to penis” (p. 74). The penis embodies the symbolic power of being a man. He believes that the role of language is vital in our perception of sexual definition because it is “by our virtue of talking about the penis... assigning certain meaning to the penis, that this aspect of sex takes on meaning” (p. 75).

The association of the penis to manhood signifies the influence of the social aspect of masculinity on maleness. The role of language in making penis synonymous to manhood is witnessed in the novel when the narrator, in the second person narrative mode, mentions a conversation between Misra and Askar while the former is admitted to the hospital for her mastectomy. In the conversation, Misra expresses her anxiety to Askar regarding the attendant nurse, inquiring about her connections to Kallafo. Later, it is revealed that the nurse has asked Misra about Kallafo because of the nurse’s relation to a male patient who is admitted to the hospital because of his loss of “manhood” in the Ogaden war. The nurse narrates that the man’s testicles had been blown off by a bomb in the Ogaden war; she emphasizes that his manhood is largely abolished without his testicles by “underlining, in her voice, the words ‘penis’ and ‘testicles’” (p. 219). This incident can be construed as how the significance attached to the penis as a symbol of manhood had been culturally inscribed not only in the mental recesses of men but of women as well. And the nurse’s stress on the word “penis” and “testicles” shows how cultural influence has made “penis” a key aspect of masculinity.

Though the episode is about Misra's fear of her whereabouts being reported, the inclusion of the man's story within it is significant as it provides scope to interpret the cultural discourse on the male body. It also indicates how language is instrumental to socially configure bodies. Furthermore, the reason for men's concern with their social appearance is the panoptic effect of patriarchy that gets deeply entrenched in an individual's mind. The omnipresent power of patriarchy burdens the individual to regulate and monitor their own gender identity. The above discussion on the shaping of the male body by cultural stereotypes reflects the regulatory framework of patriarchy. In the novel, this is also determined through Askar's behaviour as he self-monitors his manhood by a certain culturally identified marker of masculinity. One such instance in the novel is when Askar's mirror serves as an instrument for observing Askar's manhood. Askar notes that the mirror "reflect[s] [his] visage, showing [him] whether or not [he has] grown a beard" (p. 19). The narrator recalls how Askar thinks that his beard is the indicator of his manliness, and he wants to determine whether "Karin's menopausal hair [is] manlier" than his, and if her hair is manlier, "then it is high time to do something about it" (emphasis added, p. 19).

The cultural discourses of different cultures construct certain markers of the body as indicators of one's masculinity or femininity. In many cultures, the beard is validated as a marker of one's masculinity. This marker of masculinity is ingrained in Askar's mind, so he becomes the observer of his manliness and the mirror becomes instrumental in monitoring his masculinity. Thus, in this regard, the imagery of the mirror here is significant as it foregrounds the dynamics of watcher and watched, "as a way of keeping male behaviour in line with the current norms of masculinity and accepted gender standards" (Buchbinder, 2013, p. 81). Thus, the above instance from the novel *Maps* shows how the male body is constructed in adherence to the discourse of dominant masculinity.

### **Nationalism**

Another influential tool used in the construction of masculinity is nationalism. Nationalism becomes a vital forum to accomplish and substantiate a certain kind of masculine identity recognized by society. Several factors like hierarchal gender structure, assignment of decision-making policies to man, division of labour, public and private sphere incline in favour of men. Furthermore, Joanne Nagel (1998) in her essay "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the making of Nations" notes that "terms like honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and to manliness" (p. 252). The significance of nationalism, patriotism, and militarism in the construction of hegemonic masculinity is also witnessed in the novel *Maps*. Somali masculine ideals emphasise the ability to protect the clan and nation as the utmost duty of an ideal Somali man. Somali nationalism and the construction of an integrated Somali identity is one of the core thematic concerns in the novel. The nationalism promoted by Somali society corresponds to how "the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes" (Nagel, 1998, p. 251). In *Maps*, the character of Armadio (Karin's husband), through his patriotism for the Somali nation, corresponds with the attributes of normative manhood. He hastily marries Karin and impregnates her, but soon after disappears mysteriously saying, "I have a job to do" (p. 74). He frequently disappears by mentioning the job he must perform.

One night he tells Karin to sell his house and move to Kallafo, as he will not return for a long period. Years after his departure, it was revealed that he was a "member of a cell of the Somali Youth League which was agitating for the reunification of all the Somali-speaking territories"

(p. 75); he was captured by the Ethiopian armed forces and sent to jail. After his tenure in prison, he returned to Karin. But one morning while performing his prayers he hurt his back and was no more able to stand. When Karin insisted on consulting the doctors, he prevented her by saying “I had no more jobs to do” (emphasis added, p. 76). For Armadio, his only job is to fight for his country’s honour and glory, and nothing else matters. Thus, the character of Armadio, through his selfless patriotism, represents the dominant masculine ideals reinforced by Somali society.

The social discourse surrounding masculinity is intertwined with nationalism and militarism, as it is seen as the most honoured way of proving manhood. According to Bracewell (2000), the theoretical realms on gender and nation “have too often treated men and masculinity as stable, undifferentiated categories, and have posited a straightforward equation between male interest, masculinity, and nationalism” (p. 566). This is witnessed in *Maps* as well, as the novel shows how nationalist discourse is used to construct the hegemonic masculinity that the protagonist Askar is expected to perform. After Askar transitions into manhood through the ritual of circumcision, he starts behaving like a man who is burdened with the responsibilities of the Somali people. He is transformed in such a manner that he can now identify with the Somali community at large. It was during the period of his circumcision that the Ogaden war begins.

To Askar, the Ogaden war became a significant matter as he believed that the war “predicted a future in which he would be provided with ample opportunities to prove that he was a man” (p. 100). He started predicting a future when he would be recruited as a soldier of the Western Somali Liberation Front, or be the flag-bearer of his people. Since Askar’s father died as a member of the Western Somali Liberation Front, he thought that he too could prove his manhood only if he participated in the war effort by joining the Western Somali Liberation the Front. Askar’s patriotism resembles Joanne Nagel’s idea of the interconnection between patriotism and masculinity. Nagel, in his discussion on masculinity and nationalism, mentions how “patriotism is a siren call that few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a political ‘crisis;’ and if they do, they risk the disdain or worse of their communities and famil[ies],” (p. 252). Nagel’s observation on patriotism is reflected in Askar, as he can’t resist the discourse that with the boys’ stepping into manhood they must not refuse the opportunity of fighting for their country. Askar began to imagine Somalia as his mother, and felt that his allegiance and loyalty should be only towards her. This becomes evident when the omniscient narrator states Askar’s views:

What mattered, he told himself, was that now he was, at last, a man, that he was totally detached from his mother-figure Misra, and weaned. In the process of looking for a substitute, he had found another—Somalia, his mother country. It was as though something which began with the pain of a rite had ended in the joy of a greater self-discovery, one in which he held on to the milky breast of a common mother that belonged to him as much as anyone else. A generous mother, a many-breasted mother, a many-nippled mother, a mother who gave plenty of herself and demanded loyalty of one, loyalty to an ideal, allegiance to an idea, the notion of a nationhood—no more, and no less. (p. 100)

This points to the fact that Askar’s mind was impregnated with the idea that he needed to be a strong man to be conscripted in the army, and be ready to kill and die for his country. This is further depicted in the second person narrative voice’s description of how young Askar used to eat voraciously and performed rigorous exercises, like lifting rocks and climbing trees, to

flex his arm and leg muscles. Askar did this to “become a man, a fully grown man, tall, broad-shouldered and perhaps bearded too” (p. 109). In this episode, Askar’s desire to be a strong, valiant, and sturdy man connotes how certain traits are considered masculine and appropriate to the nationalist agenda. Moreover, young Askar, along with a group of young boys, begin thinking of themselves as flag bearers of the Somali people and train themselves as guerrilla warriors to combat the nation’s enemy. Thus, nationalism and patriotism are infused in the mind of the protagonist as the ideal way to prove oneself worthy of being a man.

### **Masculinity**

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), “hegemonic masculinity refers to the normative ideology that to be a man is to be dominant in society and that subordination of women is required to maintain such power” (qtd. in Smith et al. 161). Men are socialized in a discourse that puts them in a superordinate position and women in a subordinate position. The heteronormative and patriarchal nature of society construct distinct gender roles for men and women and expect them not to violate the hegemonic behaviour. Even in Somali society the cultural and structural inequality between men and women is stark. The customary law (*xeer*) that defines the gender demarcation in Somali society expects *raganimo* to offer women “care, respect, value, and influence, yet assumes their minor legal status, dependency on men, limited agency, and no publicly visible participation in decision-making outside the home” (El Bushra and Gardner, 2016, p. 454). Women are simply expected to look after the family and adhere to the laws governing their behaviour. Mothers are expected to educate boys and girls with correct masculine and feminine behaviour so that they don’t violate or pose threat to the power hierarchy. Somali society instructs the male child that to be born as a boy is a privilege in itself. These notions get intensified in the boys during their adolescent period and they believe that they can prove their masculinity by adhering to the hegemonic norms of gender hierarchy.

In the novel *Maps*, Askar undergoes a socialization process as a result of which he starts believing that he should not practice any feminine behaviour that will dishonour his masculinity. One such incident reflecting this notion is when Askar wakes up from his dream and there is blood in his urinary tract, and Misra comments that he has begun menstruating. He gets angry on hearing it and states that “But I am a man. How can I menstruate?” (110). He ponders on how his “body misbehaved”. Askar rejects the prospect of his body performing as a woman’s body, and he says to Misra that he would rather fall sick than be considered a woman. It must be noted that when as a child Askar was under Misra’s care, unexposed to patriarchal principles, he felt Misra’s menstrual pain. He shared with Karin his intention of sharing Misra’s pain as he said, “If I had some of it, then Misra will have less of it...” (p. 51). But with his social conditioning to the male-centric world, the pride of being a man gets so deeply rooted in his psyche that he not only detaches himself from the mother and her maternal sensibilities, but the resemblance to a woman (bleeding from his genitals) makes him feel ashamed. This episode indicates how antifeminine attitudes and norms are internalized in boys because they serve as a crucial indicator that they are upholding their masculine identity.

Another way of subordinating women in the patriarchal framework for the sustainable functioning of male dominance is the institution of motherhood. Different social, cultural, and religious discourses make motherhood the most desired aspect of womanhood. Motherhood in African societies is idealized and considered a source of life. African culture postulates that a woman is complete only when she begets children. Family is the core of African culture, and a mother is revered because of her ability to perpetuate the continuation of family and society. But the problem arises when motherhood is defined through a particular image by

society. As noted by Adrienne Rich (1976) in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, mothering as a personal experience is “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children,” and motherhood is a patriarchal institution “which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under the male control” (p. 13). Patriarchal institutions create certain norms for a woman to meet the standards of being a good mother. According to the institutionalized definition, a mother should be selfless, caring, nurturing, all giving.

These adjectives that describe a good mother are injected into the social ethos through the use of tropes. One such trope that a mother is associated with is Nature. In many cultures, Earth has always been considered female and given the stature of a goddess. In Greek mythology, Gaia is worshipped as the earth goddess and addressed as Mother Earth for her ability to give life to all others. Similarly in Igbo culture, Ani is a female deity who is considered as earth and attributed with characteristics of fertility, creativity, and the productivity of the land. Ifi Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* writes about the sacredness bestowed on motherhood in African culture, and its association with the earth. She states that “maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies” (191). She further elaborates that “the earth’s fertility is traditionally linked to women’s maternal powers. Hence, the centrality of women as producers and providers and the reverence in which they are held” (ibid).

The construction of such tropes serves as hegemonic tools in subordinating women by limiting their role as caregivers and nurturers. *Maps* has also dealt with the irony of using Nature as an archetypal image for women as it homogenizes women’s identity and, as resources amenable to masculinity’s demands, reduces them to objects of male exploitation. In *Maps*, Askar associates Misra with earth because like Mother Earth, who is seen as a nurturer, caregiver, all-giving, Misra too is portrayed as an all-giving human mother that “always remained maternal, just like the cosmos, giving and giving” (6). One such episode in which Askar associates Misra with Mother Earth is when she teaches him the first Somali gutturals, and on asking him about the location of the earth, he would point his finger toward her: “‘Where is the sky?’ she would ask him. He would point at it. ‘And the earth, where is the earth?’ And he would point at her” (p.56). Her association with Mother Earth’s trope objectifies her as a particular image and dismisses the dynamism of her character.

For Askar, Misra should cater only to his needs, and he feels agitated if Misra drifts her attention from him to Aw-Adan. This is witnessed when the second person narrative voice accuses Askar of trying to control Misra: “Aw-Adan and you didn’t take to each other right from your first encounter. You didn’t like the way he out-stared you, nor did you like him when Misra paid him all her attention, leaving you more or less to yourself” (p. 11). The narrator further states that the reason behind Askar’s dislike is because “[he] determined what Misra’s life would be like the moment [he] took it over” (p. 8). The narrator states that the moment Askar took control of Misra’s life “her personality underwent a considerable change” (p. 8), and she was confined only to the role of a mother. Moreover, Misra’s identity as a mother in the novel is narrated by Askar, and his narration of Misra’s figure at times reflects his attempt to portray his superiority over her. This is evident in the episode when Askar narrates the story in which Uncle Qorrax instructs Misra to dress Askar for his formal introduction to his uncle. It is here that Askar states that, “Misra, until then, was not a *bona fide* member of the compound. It appears she became one, especially when I chose her—chose her in preference to all other women who had been tried on me, ...” (p. 28).



It becomes evident from Askar's statement that he attempts to establish his ownership over Misra by indicating that she received social validation only through him. The way Askar speaks about reviving Misra from her peripheral existence is influenced by his underlying attitude that the male is the decision-maker in any relationship. A dominant masculine identity is developed through a process of "self and the other" relation where "other" connotes women, Nature, body, etc. The superiority of the masculine identity relies on the systematic and pervasive construction and depiction of the dualised "other" as inferior. As such, Askar's construction of Misra in the figure of Earth shows his inclination toward the ideals of motherhood institutionalized by patriarchy. The novel's stereotyping of women in particular tropes or symbols shows the detrimental effects of such tropes on women's subjectivity. This analysis of the novel corresponds to Byron Caminero-Santangelo's view on the objectification of women. In his book *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology*, he claims that "women's objectification is legitimated through their association with nature, while nature by being feminized, is positioned as in need of male mastery".

In this context, Askar's association of Misra to Mother Earth objectified her into a particular image which in turn helps him claim his mastery over her. Hence, by stating that Misra got a subjective presence in his society only because he acknowledged her as his mother demonstrates his construction of a dominant masculine identity, one where men are considered superior to women. Thus, these episodes in the novel show that the exertion of power by men in the gender order depends on the subordination of women through gender stereotype roles. This has also been observed by Connell, when she emphasizes the inherently relational characteristic of masculinity "which does not exist without its contrast femininity" (p. 68). The relational characteristic is structured in a way that only in the subservient position of women can a dominant ideational version of masculinity function. As witnessed in *Maps*, Askar attempts throughout the novel to create his masculine identity through his narration of Misra's story.

Another component of the system of domination is violence. According to Connell (2005), violence is used by men to sustain their power. She states that: "Most men do not attack or harass women, but those who do are unlikely to think themselves deviant. On the contrary, they usually feel they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right. They are authorized by an ideology of supremacy" (p. 83). Violence helps men to assert their masculinity. There is an interconnection between violence and masculinity because violence is "embedded in a network of physicality, experience and male culture such that it is more easily used and more readily available as a resource" (Dobash and Dobash, 1998, p. 162). According to them, men act violently not just to attain masculine identity, but its significance lies in the reassertion of their predominance over women (p. 162). Among the different forms of violent behaviour, rape is "the most extreme form of violence that men use to control women" (Alden and Tremaine, 1999, p. 134). It is an "unlawful 'invasion' of the body, mind and spirit [...] a violation of a person's humanity" (Deer, 2009, p. 137).

Throughout history, women's bodies have been used by men as convenient sites to glorify their masculine prowess or humiliating the honour of enemies during armed conflicts, etc. Similarly, in *Maps*, Misra becomes a victim of rape in the name of the Somali nation. The Somali community assumed her to be the traitor who led to the death of six hundred Somali people. This "Tragic Weekend" ignited a fury among the Somali youth and to avenge the death of their people they started assaulting her first by burning her hut. Then they deceived her by misinforming her that Askar's uncle was looking for her and took her to a hut, and, as she

described it, “several strong men sprang on me out of the dark and they raped me” (p. 194). Later those men spread the rumour that she “had been raped by baboons” (p. 195). Those men justified her rape as a punishment given by the baboons as “they smelt her traitor’s identity underneath the human skin and went for it again and again” (p. 195). However, it cannot be determined that Misra’s Amharic descent made her a victim of the Somali youths’ vindictiveness because Aw-Adan also shared a non-Somali identity, but no one questioned *his* loyalty. It is because she is a woman that she becomes an easy victim of men in a show of authority. The incident also reflects the social conditioning of men, where sexual and gender-based violence are normalised in the name of nation and clan.

Farah’s representation of male and female characters in the novel *Maps*, from the Blood in the Sun Trilogy, brings to light the influence of society in constructing a dominant form of masculinity that is in agreement with patriarchal codes of conduct. According to Foucault (1980), power is “employed and exercised through a net-like organisation” (p. 98) where individuals act as both agent as well as recipients of power. He further discusses that power is reinforced in society through numerous social and institutional discourses. Taking into consideration Foucault’s observations on power, it can be argued that the entire construction of masculinity in hegemonic ideologies is rooted in the production and generation of power according to the patriarchal paradigm. The construction of masculinity in Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* corresponds to Foucault’s concept of power. Through the analysis of the shaping of Somali masculinity in the novel, it is revealed that gender-based expectations are induced in the mind of young boys at an early age, whereby society acts as a constant reminder for correct masculine and feminine behaviour. It is the desire for power that is at the core of the formulation of hegemonic masculinity, or *raganimo* in the Somali context. Patriarchy normalizes their exercise of power by inventing certain elements as “anti-norm” that, as antitheses, help to erect a particular kind of masculinity or femininity as the norm.

### Conclusion

Men have so far considered themselves as “genderless masters” because of the appropriation of masculinity as natural. However, the escalating discussion on men as a gendered subject has “opened a discursive space around men’s identities, roles, and power” (Ashe, 2007, p. 2). This study has highlighted Askar’s attempt to assert his gender identity as a man by conforming to the socially accepted markers of a “true” man, but he has to naturalize it through repetition of the performance of normative masculinity. Ironically, the configuration of a dominant masculinity through enactment of culturally validated gender attributes signifies that masculinity is not a stable concept, but shaped through discourse.

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**Reimagining Witches in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Study of  
“Bulbul” and “Roohi”**

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### Abstract

Witch-hunting, an age-old practice in India, survives in a myriad of avatars in rural and urban areas. These avatars of witch-hunting have often been trapped in the binary of Indian modernity and Indian traditions, with the latter often embracing unchallenged superstitious beliefs. Herein we study the way the binary is handled in two recent telefilms, namely *Bulbbul* and *Roohi*, as they aim to revolutionise the portrayal of witches in Hindi cinema. The paper looks at how the films in question subvert the genesis of witches and witch-hunts, and how in the process of undermining superstitious belief, they situate witches as embodiment of an emancipatory discourse that resists the silencing of women, a practise still serves the patriarchal standards of a heteronormative, bourgeois society. In so doing, our reading of the films engages with questions such as: How have witches been defined in Indian culture? How are these witches being imagined in the films in question? What implications do these redefinitions have in terms of the feminist movement in India, or in terms of the larger portrayal of Indian women in Hindi cinema?

*Keywords:* *Bulbbul*, Hindi cinema, *Roohi*, witch hunting, witches

The practice of witch-hunting has long existed in India, and yet it can be said with some certainty that it features little in academic debates. Though modern thought tends to relegate the practise of witch-hunting to the dark corners of the past, data from the National Crime Records Bureau suggests that it is still widespread. The NCRB states that around 2500 people have been hunted and killed between 2000-2016 (most of them women), though the number maybe higher as some states do not register witch-hunting as a descriptive category for murder. Though some states have passed laws declaring witch-hunting as illegal, because of the lack respect for the law and the lax enforcement (Islam and Ahmed 2017), the crime continues unabated. In such a scenario the role of popular cinema in changing people's perception cannot be ignored. The portrayal of witches has come a long way in contemporary Indian cinema, from the age-old formulaic representation to a revolutionary depiction that could play a major role in transforming people's perception of witches.

Witch-hunts have often been the result of the association of witches with diabolical abilities; the amalgam of these skills is called witchcraft. Witchcraft is a compound word stemming from "wicce" meaning witch, and "craft" meaning ability (Dilts 2015). Alam and Raj (2018, n.p.) define it as "the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities which are believed to influence the mind, body, or property – of others in a malicious manner". The "intent" becomes significant in the branding of witches, where their abilities (craft) and their intentions does not induce anything positive, rather is associated with a desire for evil-doing, a diabolical intent. These witches are blamed for various problems befalling the society, from bad crops, erratic rains, unexplained diseases to even unexplainable deaths. The evil influence of the impersonal spirits gives the society some sense of control by having someone to blame for their misfortunes. "The witches were feared as mysterious creatures imbued with phenomenal powers...The witches, adivasis held, not only 'ate' persons and induced illness such as cholera, smallpox, and so forth, but were also responsible for destroying crops, killing cattle and the like" (Sinha, 2007, p. 1673).

Among all the domains of witch-studies, what remains particularly controversial is the relation of witch-discourse with gender (Carstairs 1983; Kapur 1983; Bailey 1997; Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Nathan et al. 1998; Mishra 2003; MacDonald 2004; Sinha 2006). Bever (2002) argues that the advocates of witches often attributed the fragile, feminine sex...feeble in both body and mind to the reason of their being prone to witchcraft. However, it was often found that these women's social relations and economic conditions often were a foremost reason for their being branded as witches. These women would be too independent in some cases, while in others they would be the owners of some properties that some money-minded villagers would be eager to capture. The hapless women would fall victims to these conspiracies, get labelled as witches, and lead a harrowing life after that, often losing their property as well as their life in the bargain.

On other occasions it was the structure of the patriarchal society that was at stake because of the increasing number of spinsters and widows, and so to establish a stable society (patriarchal families have been historically upheld as the bedrock of a stable society), the only way out was to eliminate the threats or these outlier women, upholding the dictum that "domesticity and docility gets rewarded, anything else is punished" (McCoy, 2014, para. 7). Often men resisted their social and moral duty to help the spinsters and widows, something that they were not inclined to do once the women were labelled witches. So these women were trialed, paraded naked, raped, murdered or often burnt at stake, a symbolic patriarchal seizure of power and a return to the stable societal structure. Stuart Clark (2013) has gone so far as to suggest that witch-hunting was nothing other than women-hunting. He has further applied a functionalist

analysis to witch studies, saying that the binary division inherent in the systematisation of language caused women to be inferior and secondary, and thus easier for men (the perpetrators) to place malicious intent on their shoulders. As women are not part of the forces devising the system, it can be used to victimise them.

### **Witchcraft, Society and Literature**

Sinha (2007) locates the presence of witchcraft in the Adivasi region of India, specifically in Chhotanagpur. The significance/strength of the belief among the Adivasi people can be gauged in Sinha's linking the causality of the mutiny of 1857 to the banning of witchcraft in the Adivasi region by British colonial forces. Sinha also underlines the fact that for the Adivasis, witchcraft was genuine, so much so that many of the victims who stood trials for the crimes often accepted their sentences without putting up a fight. Many groups also did not consider the killing of women on the grounds of witchcraft to be illegal, resulting in their taking up arms against the colonial forces that banned killing people by branding them as witches. Mallick (2008) challenges the idea that witchcraft received universal support within the Adivasi community. According to Mallick, there were sections within the Adivasi community, a substantial majority, who opposed this practice, and wanted to save their wives and daughters from being labelled as witches and subsequently killed. Mallick states that these people resorted to help from the British administration to fight the ills of witch-hunting, rebuffing Sinha's claim that the entire Adivasi community was fighting the British administration for having rendered witch-hunting illegal. Both these studies strongly underline the fact that women were often the ones who had to bear the brunt of society's disasters, natural or man-made.

The gendered perspective in witchcraft is something that Nathan et al. also draw attention to. They argue that "we can conclude that the phenomena of women being denounced as witches or otherwise as keepers of evil spirits and the accompanying violence were large-scale in nature" (1998, p. 58). In all such cases, there was an able demonstration of "the power of one section of society (men) to declare individuals of another section of society (women) as witches...a great power that was used to change the old order and establish a new one" (p. 59).

This gender-biased portrayal of witches has been memorialised by classical and popular literature. The archetype of the witches in literature has generally been of a woman with wild eyes, hair streaming loose, dancing around some cauldron and evoking the evil spirits. The witch archetype is often drawn from the image of the Medusa, the sorceress with snakes for hair who can turn people to stone. Such archetypes appear in *Macbeth*, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Christabel", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Crucible*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Songs of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. To pinpoint one specific area from where witches or witch-like characters started appearing in literature is difficult. The OED, however, notes that the term *wicce* was being deployed in literature from as early as 890 AD. The present study refrains from any claims of unearthing the genesis of the occurrence of witch-like figures in literature, and following Diana Perkiss' claim that "When we say witch...we can hardly help thinking of *Macbeth*'s witches" (p. 180) we'll begin locating witches in literature from *Macbeth* on. The "weird" sisters of *Macbeth* are portrayed as the three powerful and dangerous women, who through their prophecies and hidden evil intent set off a course of events that leads to a fight for the crown, the death of *Macbeth* and of a host of other characters. These weird witches of *Macbeth* have had an important influence over the representation of witches in English Literature. Anna Taylor, in her highly influential study *Magic in English Romanticism* (1979), brings to the fore textual influences like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and in the case of second-generation Romantic writers



the influence is found in poems like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Christabel” or “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. In most of these poems women characters are represented possessing magical powers through which they charm and elude people.

Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, besides being a historical novel, has elements of the preternatural and is also inspired by the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693) of the colonial United States. Wentersdorf (1972) emphasises this relationship to the novel on “The people’s belief in witchcraft, the superstitious interpretation of natural phenomena, the gossip about Chillingworth’s necromancy” (p. 133) and the character of Mistress Hibbins, the old woman who appeared witch-like and who verbally exhibited witch-like characteristics. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller was also based on the Salem Witch Trials, even though it tried to use the event as an allegory to address a similar paranoia that the United States government felt towards the communists.

The literary representations of the witches change significantly in the twentieth century, with the age-old representation of the witches undergoing a herculean change, from the vassal of evil forces to healers and often portrayed as the victims of an orthodox society’s fear and stigma of the liberated woman. *The Witches of Eastwick* by John Updike is one such novel that pitches the idea of sexuality as a hallmark of witches in an ironic assertion and mockery of the patriarchal society’s fear of the liberated woman, single or divorced. The three characters, Alexandra, Sukie and Jane have hilariously derived their witch power of sexuality from their divorces, which came through in their sexual prime, and these powers scare the conservative society in which they live. *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* too are rife with supernatural elements. In the latter, Morrison uses Circe, a witch of Greek mythology, who has the ability to turn people into wolves, lions and swine. However, Morrison subverts the image of Circe, and shows her as somebody who uses her powers to help Milkman. These witches solve the problems of identities and spiritual crises faced by Milkman. Morrison upends the entire image of the witches, who instead of being the fearsome embodiments of evil are full of compassion and possess a desire to help out human beings.

In Indian literature, the earliest mention of witchcraft can be found in the Atharva Veda. H.W. Magoun (1889) locates witchcraft in the Veda, stating, “The ritual literature of the Atharva-Veda, like that of the other Vedas, has attached to itself certain *paricistas*, or supplements. Of these, the thirty-fifth...is the Asuri-Kalpa, an *abhic ra*, or witchcraft practice, containing rites to be used in connection with the asuri-plant” (p. 165), though some Vedic scholars have pointed out that Asuri-Kalpa is not equivalent to witchcraft. The Indian novels in English have rarely touched upon this issue, though regional literatures have rendered the practice of witchcraft in rural India visible. Munshi Premchand was one such writer whose progressive attitude, socialist bent, and a feminist attitude made it imperative for him to champion the cause of the marginalised, extending to even the social evil of witchcraft. More recently, Sukanya Venkataraghavan’s edited book *Magical Women* (2019) contains stories of witches, rakshasas, and critiques the patriarchal system that is fearful of strong, liberated women. The system then attempts to control and monitor these independent women through witch-hunting.

### Witches in Indian Cinema

In the more popular medium of Indian movies—and speaking to the limited scope of the paper we refer to only the Hindi movies, popularly known as the Bollywood movies—there have been infrequent references to witches. The movies, however, have been given the shape of horror thrillers largely meant to entertain. Hindi horror mainstream movies began with the Ramsay

family production house in the latter half of the last century. Ramsay films lacked the appeal of horror, which subsequent films tried to compensate for by broadening their scope and including features that made them more appealing to the public. This meant incorporating some characteristics that stuck on because of commercial success, often negating and discouraging nuanced treatment of the subject. The most common trope employed in the horror movies, as we will see, is often that of women protagonists being possessed by some evil spirit/witch (*chudail*), often resulting in their wreaking havoc and devastation, and the film reaches its denouement with the possessed women being normalised again by getting the evil spirit to set her free. This trope follows the common patriarchal belief that women, being more weak and fragile, are strongly susceptible to evil forces.

These representations of women in horror movies are an extension of the formulaic “damsel in distress” Hindi movies where the love story of the hero and heroine is set on a rescue-the-heroine-from-evil-goons plane. Only that the distress of the damsel here is blown out of proportion by making them victims of witches who possess them, and thus require a strong masculine energy to free the damsel from evil. *Raaz* Series (2002-2016), *Bhoot* (2003), *Krishna Cottage* (2004) *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007), *Ek thi Dayan* (2013), and many more feature-films conform to the set stereotypes of projecting women as witches, ghosts, snakes and much more which goes on to normalise sexist depictions of women on screen. Interestingly, in many cases not only the possessed, but even the possessor is a woman. The latter is somebody with unbalanced emotions that lead them to seek vengeance. These deranged possessors often range from an overprotective friend to a spurned lover out for a vengeance. These women are also promiscuous and their emotional base is also licentious, making it necessary to absolve society of these evil forces. In portraying these debauched women, the films also uphold and tacitly conform to the gender matrix, where morally loose women are labelled as evil. In depicting the women as a receptacle of evil forces, in representing the witches as sexually immoral, the narrative of these films then abides by the age-old rules for demarcating and labelling witches, as documented by sundry sociological and anthropological studies.

Films like *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007) have tried to explore the problem in a different light by amalgamating the superstitious belief of witchcraft with scientific pseudo-analysis. The protagonist of the movie, Avni, apparently suffering from schizophrenia, is subjected to witchcraft combined with a scientific experimentation to get her rid of the possessed spirit/mental illness. What could have been a thoughtful narrative of a woman with mental illness, instead introduced an unsatiated evil force taking hold of Avni’s body, all of it immersed in a comic narrative. The film did not do enough to bring the problems of mental illness to the forefront, rather focusing exceedingly on the story of possession and upholding the set formula for horror movies in general. *Bhoot* (2003) took the horror narrative till now limited to the rural/semi-urban areas to the urban areas, where ghosts did not always reside in sprawling homes of sparse occupancy, and with this movie reached the high-rise apartment buildings of one of the biggest cities of the country, Mumbai. However, the plot conforms to the sexist tropes of the horror movies in terms of portraying both the possessed and the possessor as women, and in playing by the trope of the patriarch (here the husband) as the brave knight who saves the damsel (the possessed wife) from the evil force.

These set formulas began to witness a change with the motion picture *Makdee* (2002), which had reached the screen before most of the other movies that are mentioned here. Starring Shabana Azmi as a *chudail* (witch), the movie depicts how the superstitious beliefs of sorcery and witchcraft can be employed by rogues to carry out criminal acts with ease. Though the movie begins on a note of horror witnessed through the eyes of children, yet towards the end

it bursts the horror balloon by uncovering the heinous criminal activities being carried out by outlaws exploiting people's belief in witchcraft practices. It will be another twelve years before another movie comes on the scene that challenges the tropes and popular perception of ghosts and witches. *Stree* (2018) takes a fresh approach to the horror movies and tries to restore some dignity to the ever-vilified witches by portraying two important changes. The first change that it brings is that the witch was not always some crazy spurned lover looking for love, and second, that a man was not required to salvage the situation. A humorous and well-made film, *Stree*, appears almost like a parody of horror movies, critiquing the role of the patriarchal society as self-appointed saviours, while spinning webs of lies and illusion around witches/witchcraft. It also subverts the traditional formula where women would be kept safe inside the homes, and men would fight the ghost, by depicting how men were locked up inside the homes and were dependent on their wives and mothers for safety. The movie, however, ends on an ambivalent note by revealing at the end that the woman who salvaged the situation was herself a witch/sorceress, stopping short of really liberating the witch narrative from the grasp of patriarchy.

A stark change was brought in the year 2020 with *Bulbbul*, a Netflix original movie, which challenged the formulaic depiction of witches in Hindi movies. Set in pre-Renaissance Bengal, *Bulbbul* has references to social practices like child marriage, and brings out the second-class citizenship status of women in nineteenth century Bengali society. Above all, the story is a haunting reminder of how patriarchal powers punish a young girl, whose zeal to right the wrongs meted out to women in an unjust society earns her the title of witch.

*Bulbbul* has a poignant beginning. The opening shot has a young girl sitting on the branch of a tree, dangling her legs, seemingly enjoying herself. The scene draws up an image of an innocent girl enjoying her foray in the trees, at the same time highlighting one of the most important aspects of a witch: somebody who lives in the tree. The scene impresses on the mind of the audience an eeriness, as if trying to remind the reader of the feet of the witch (*chudail ke pair*), and also draws a contrast between the feet of the innocent young girl and that of a *chudail*. The camera focuses on the world below her, a goddess surveying the world, when the chariot of a marriage procession draws up.

The scene thereafter introduces us to the three men, Indranil, the *Bado Thakur* (Elder Lord), Mahendra, Indranil's insane twin brother, and Satya, Indranil's youngest brother; these are the three patriarchs who are about to shape her life. The young girl, enjoying herself on the tree, is the eponymous protagonist of the movie, Bulbbul is the bride getting married to the *bado thakur*, following a practice of *gouridaan* prevalent in eighteenth-century Bengal. Bulbbul's homecoming after marriage is interspersed with the tale of a witch told to her by Satya, a witch waiting for her chance to possess the princess. A parallel is struck between Bulbbul and the princess in Satya's story. As viewers we are horrified at the prospect of this story coming true. Conditioned by our consumption of patriarchal discourses, we feel the evil spirit lurking about somewhere, ready to take hold of the soul of the innocent, young, and immature princess, a fit object for the evil spirit. But this evil spirit that would possess the princess has no physical existence; it is the avatar for the patriarchal forces that ravage her life. The scene after her homecoming in the grand Zamindar family palace establishes some of the major tensions that would shape the life of Bulbbul: the relationship of Bulbbul with her brother-in-law, Satya, the mixed emotions that Mahendra has towards Satya, and the young Bulbbul's inability to recognise Indranil as her husband. All three situations lead to the film's denouement.

The story jumps forward twenty years. It is time for Satya's homecoming, ironically like Bulbul's, accompanied by a tale of a chudail who lives in the forest that surrounds their village. The eerie night is flooded with red light, and Satya has the feeling that there is an unseen presence lurking. The next scene portrays Satya meeting his sister-in-law, Bulbul, where the viewers are provided with a peek into how drastically their lives had changed – the eldest thakur has left the family home, his twin brother, Mahendra had passed away, and Mahendra's wife, Binodini had been shunted to an outhouse meant for widows. The lively atmosphere of the Zamindari house has been replaced by an atmosphere of uncanny silence and brooding. However, what had not changed in twenty years was the status of women in the Bengali society. Women were still the second-class citizens in this Bengal: the widow is forced to give up all comforts in life; the man can take any number of wives, even if the wives don't agree to the arrangement; the master Dinkar can subject his wife to domestic abuse, and yet she'll refuse to speak out against him; or the woman that can't be the head of a household. All of this is amply demonstrated by Satya's reaction when he sees Bulbul resolving a dispute regarding a man taking two wives: "*thakur, thakur, khel rahe hai boudi?*" (Are you play-acting as a thakur [boss], sister-in-law?). Later, when he sees Bulbul on friendly terms with the doctor, Sudip, he recriminates her (as he is the only patriarch at home): "Purdah bhi nahi kara apne!" (You didn't cover your face in a veil!)

In the next important segment of the movie, Satya is out on a hunt, only that this hunt does not target animals, unlike the other royal hunts of colonial India: it is the hunt for a witch. The educated, savvy young thakur (boss) does not believe in the existence of witches, but he is out there on the noble task of proving to the villagers that witchcraft is mere superstition. But his attempt is foiled when an invisible entity (supposedly the witch) kills one member of the hunting party, Master Dinkar, the wife beater. Shaken, yet not submitting himself to the superstition, the young thakur believes it to be the work of a man, and the presence of the doctor, an outsider to the village, makes him conveniently guilty in the eyes of Satya. The viewer is, however, made privy to the doctor's confusion regarding the murder, undermining the theory of a witch having killed the innocent victim. At the same time Satya takes over the role of the family patriarch and brings Binodini from the outhouse into the family home to keep a control over Bulbul, leading to the active preservation of the strict patriarchal family structure.

Binodini, Mahendra's wife, has an illicit sexual relationship with Indranil, the scion of the Zamindar family, and is also responsible, out of jealousy of Indranil and Bulbul's marriage, for planting a seed of doubt in Indranil's mind about the relationship between Satya and Bulbul. Thereafter Indranil rushes to send Satya to London for further studies, and Satya, unmindful of his sister-in-law's affection towards him, quickly acquiesces. The broken, despairing Bulbul tries to destroy a story that she and Satya had been writing, but an already irked Indranil discovers it. The patriarch in Indranil can't let his (immoral) wife go unpunished (ironically his immoral act of sleeping with his younger brother's sister is absolved in his own eyes), and he barges into the privacy of Bulbul's bath, drags her out of the water, and strikes upon her feet with a hot iron rod.

However, her woes do not end there. While she is bandaged and is trying to recover she is raped by her mentally deranged brother-in-law, Mahendra. These heinous acts strip Bulbul of the innocence that characterises her in the first section of the movie, and forces her in the subsequent section to acquire an air of nonchalance and studied indifference which symbolises her transformation into a strong woman. The transformation is marked by the change in the colour of the moon during the night in which she was violated by Mahendra. The red colour of

the new moon is emblematic of Bulbbul's loss of timidity and innocence, and in its place she creates a cool, poised exterior to hide the turmoil inside her. This turmoil is channelised by Bulbbul to correct the wrongs of the patriarchal forces of society, and she is there to avenge all the injustices being heaped by the men on the women in her society. She is a saviour who is out there to challenge these patriarchs who treat their wives, daughters, and other women as objects, devoid of any feelings, and punish them accordingly.

The film showcases how Bulbbul uses her strengths and weaknesses to harness all powers in her command to put up a fight for the wronged women in her social environment. The film focuses on Bulbbul's childhood adeptness in climbing trees, on her dangling feet, and then on her maimed feet, which had been turned inside out after being physically tortured by her husband. Thus the film narrative attempts to give a sarcastic rendition of the image that has been traditionally associated with witches, a person who lives in trees and whose feet are inside out. In doing this there occurs a humanisation of the image of the witch, now somebody who has been battered by patriarchy and is out there to save the other women from its evils. She is labelled a witch because patriarchy will not countenance forces that tend to disrupt or challenge the primacy that this structure lends to men. This movie takes exception to the damsel-in-distress formula by portraying a woman who can fight her own battle, and also stand up for the inequalities faced by other women. She does not need any man to fight her battles, to set right the wrongs; she is a complete force in herself. Even her friend, Doctor Sudip, who had treated and healed her, does not know of this avatar of hers. Her childhood aide and confidante, Satya also remains blissfully unaware of this reality, suspecting Sudip to have committed all the heinous murders in the village. He is transporting Sudip to Kolkata to give him up to the law, while on the way his wagoner is killed by Bulbbul, for having driven his wife to suicide by his mistreatment.

Satya immediately realises that the murders are not being carried out by the doctor, and that there is another force committing these murders. He shoots at the mysterious figure in the trees, and Bulbbul chooses the moment to reveal herself to Sudip. Sudip, in order to save Bulbbul, tries to stop Satya from causing further harm, but there ensues a struggle between them, when accidentally due to some stray flames a wildfire begins in the forest. Bulbbul tries to save herself from the fire, but symbolically, she is engulfed by the flames. Satya realises his mistake a bit too late, the mistake that he is getting moulded into the groove of muscular patriarchy. He gives up the family home and leaves. The unrepentant Indranil returns after a long gap only to be accosted by Bulbbul's ghost emerging from the flames, apparently there to take her revenge against the cruel *thakur*.

The narrative ends on an ambivalent note; what could have been a realistic tale of a wronged woman out to avenge cruelties against women in general, is ultimately turned into a horror at the end. The unfolding fails to keep up the intelligent message of social perversity that forced a woman to seek justice for herself and her community. The film also fails on another count whereby it moves from the projection of Bulbbul from a witch to a goddess. Sudip emphatically claims to Satya, "*Chudail nahi, Devi hai woh*"! (She is not a witch, she is a goddess!). The dialogue signifies how difficult it is for society and for the movie makers to accept their women with their failings as ordinary human beings. She is either a devil or a goddess. Nevertheless, such a novel plot takes a quantum leap in shifting the landscape of conventional representation of women and their projection as witches within the general patriarchal discourse of women as evil in popular cinema.

Another film which is of very recent vintage and which can be considered a landmark in women's representation in the horror genre is *Roohi*. Released in April 2021 on the OTT platform Netflix, it is set in contemporary India, in Baagadpur, a quaint enclave in the industrial city of Mujirabad. We witness the town through the camera of an English news channel celebrating the old-worldish construction of the town and the unconventional people inhabiting it. It is again through the news channel camera that we are introduced to the male protagonists, Bhawra Pandey, who works as a crime reporter in the local newspaper, Mujirabadi Zalzalaa, and Katanni, who writes the horoscope column in the same newspaper. They are being interviewed by the English channel, where they are asked to shed some light on the quaintness of their town. Pandey, calling the town "*antshant*" (non-sense), though trying to mean "ancient", talks about an ancient and illegal method of marriage, *Pakdai Shaadi* or bride kidnapping. Pandey very boldly asserts, "*jab yahan ke laundon ko kisi se pyaar ho jata hai, woh ussey utha lete h, Pakdai Shaadi!*" (here when a boy falls in love with a girl, they get her kidnapped, that is the concept of bride kidnapping!).

And then the viewer is taken to witness a bride kidnapping that has transformed into a more professional affair, with people taking contracts for the kidnapping of a bride-to-be. Both Bhawra Pandey and Katanni are employed in the job of bride-kidnapping, carried out by the print journal company where they are employed. While they kidnap the girl, none come to her rescue as they believe that even though the practice has been rendered illegal, cultural practices and traditions cannot be overruled by law. After experiencing all this the reporter very fittingly mentions, "It is said India lives in several centuries at once". And in that sense the century that Baagadpur lived in was no different from the nineteenth century Bengal of Bulbul.

The fate of the kidnapped girl is significant. She is weighed down by gold and expensive clothes, and in return asked to forget the fact that her volition in any of this was never requested. A relative commenting on the unchallenged ancient ritual states, "*hamari bhi aisi huyi thi*" (We had also been married in this manner), portraying how the town has remained cocooned, untouched by the changes in law and the modernisation of the country and the world at large.

The next shot shows the girl and her family accepting the groom; and amidst the din, the celebration and the show of gaiety, the cruel suppression of the selfhood and very existence of women is forgotten. Society, mired in ill-cultural practices, remains cruelly ignorant and indifferent to the wishes of a woman. What if she too had loved someone? What if she wanted to continue her education further and marry later? But a society steeped in received patriarchal notions could neither accommodate the wishes of its women nor give her enough space to flourish.

The first time that a witch was ever mentioned in the movie was in relation to a marriage where a wise old woman cautions that on the night of the marriage the groom is not allowed to sleep, else a witch hovering nearby would possess the bride. And with that the bugle of the arrival of the witch in the movie is sounded. Superstition abounds in Baagadpur, and the presence of a witch in such a superstitious place and among those people is not all that implausible. This is a world where witches can roam about unhindered, looking to possess young brides. And this ancientness of Baagadpur is further highlighted when Kattani casually talks to Pandey about "Alam Mask" (Elon Musk) sending Tesla (Tesla) to space. These people are frozen in time, and they are striving hard to break free and move ahead.

The next task that Pandey and Katanni are assigned is the kidnapping of another bride which sets into motion the incidents that lead to the climax of the movie. While the kidnapping is

taking place, a slogan on the wall by the Government reads “*Beti bachayenge tabhi bahu layenge*” (Save the daughter; only then will you bring the daughter-in-law), which goes on to show the deplorable status of the women in their society, where a girl child is unwanted and must fight for the most basic of things: survival. However, the kidnapping did not serve its purpose, as the sudden death of the groom’s family member caused the marriage to be postponed. The girl now had to be housed in a wood factory in a place called Ambiyapur until the marriage could take place.

Once there, Pandey realises that the girl (Roohi) is possessed by a witch, but before Katanni could see this, the witch has left her body, and she is back to a normal girl. Her pale face, full of timidity and innocence, strikes Pandey, and in a formulaic pattern of Hindi movies he is immediately in love with her. For the sake of clarity for the audience, Roohi’s father, while reporting her case to the cops, states how her body had been possessed by a soul on the day of her marriage, and the situation remains the same since then. In his clandestine offering of love, Pandey, who for the first time thought that he was hallucinating, again sees the witch possessing her body, and his love notwithstanding, he is scared of the witch. He springs into action and tries to report it to their boss, who rebuffs and threatens them to comply with his orders.

While Roohi is in the forest guarded by Katanni, a reference to her marriage by Katanni agitates the witch in her, and Pandey heroically salvages the situation by saving Katanni and carrying the unconscious Roohi back to the factory. The horrific condition that Roohi was in arouses Pandey’s pity, who brings an exorcist to rid her body of the witch. The exorcist discovers the witch to be powerful beyond his control and escapes from the scene. Meanwhile the police start questioning the boss on suspicion of the kidnapping of Roohi, and the boss asks Pandey to drop the girl in an unconscious state in some isolated area of Mujirabad. Pandey refuses saying he will marry her and restore the respect that the kidnapping had taken away from her. It is interesting to note how women are still objects in this universe dominated by males, whose honour is frail and can be broken in a moment by a scandal. This honour can be saved from collapsing by marriage alone, and Pandey, like a knight in shining armour, decides to marry Roohi to save the distressed damsel. However, this means that he has to throw the witch out of her body, and hence he embarks on a journey to find a solution by which this problem can be fixed.

But the viewer is not allowed to simply enjoy the thrill of the horror. The horror is punctuated with possible patriarchal diatribes against women that has led to the birth of the label of a witch. So while the exorcist is explaining the powers of the witch possessing Roohi’s body, Katanni, weirdly enamoured by the witch, humorously renders an explanation which strangely sounds true and upholds all patriarchal notions of a witch; he says, “*bhai, same to same. Mere papa, tere mama, Zubair ke abbu, Fekil bhai, sab yahi bolte h apne Mrs. ke bare mein*”, (Bro, exactly same! My father, your uncle, Zubair’s father, Fekil bhai all say such things about their wives) explaining how men with their received patriarchal superiority use this term to vilify and demean women. Any woman who is beyond their power of control is labelled a witch.

The movie at other times attempts to provide more scientific explanations to counter the witch-discourse, as when Pandey confesses to Roohi, his love for her. She ventures to provide an explanation of her behaviour by mentioning that some people consider it a split personality disorder. These scientific and social explanations of her situation prevent the viewer from just sitting back and enjoying the movie; he is forced to think. The strong woman image that Katanni spoke about as being despised by the society is again harped upon in the movie when the boss’ men come to take back Roohi and beat up or possibly kill Katanni, but the witch in

her gives her enormous strength to beat up the goons and save herself and Katanni. The witch, calling herself Afza, proves herself a hero by saving Katanni and Roohi from the goons, and the movie upends the patriarchal social order where a man is supposed to save the girl from the goons. The damsel here is a macho who can save the knight and challenge the formulaic depiction of powerless women who need the intervention and support of men to save themselves in horror movies.

Meanwhile, Pandey is up to his quirky ways trying to find a way to get the possessed soul out of Roohi's body. He takes her to a place, Chimmatipur, where he involves himself in rituals to get Roohi free of the witch, while a scared Roohi, unwilling to participate in the rituals forced upon her, causes the witch in her to publicly manifest itself and create a chaos in Chimmatipur. The witch in her gives her the strength to express her volition that we see missing in almost all the women characters in the movie. She is strong-willed and dangerous enough to ward off all those who force her to commit acts against her will. However, a timid Roohi, unable to bear the soul possessing her body, tries to commit suicide, but the witch prevents her and says, "*takat hoon teri, jo tujh mein kabhi na thi...ye takat teri har kamzori, har dukh ka nibaran karegi*" (I am the source of your strength, something which you never had...this strength will fight against all your weaknesses and misery).

The witch, however, has to marry that night itself or else she will die, so she hastily agrees to an offer of marriage made by Pandey's boss. The witch gives her consent and marries of her own will, something that no woman has ever done in Baagadpur. While the marriage ceremonies are underway, the groom, on discovering that Roohi's body is possessed by a witch, flees the scene. And the witch proceeds to marry Katanni. However, due to some ritualistic confusion she gives up Katanni and proceeds to marry Pandey, but Roohi intercedes and declines Pandey's favour. She exhorts with her new found strength, "*Kab tak doosron ke haaton sambhalte rahe?*" (Till when should I rely on others?) and she marries the witch herself. She addresses the witch Afza and declares, "*Sath jiye, hum sath marenge; takat diya hai tumne, milke iski hifazat karenge; kisi aur se kyun, Roohi aur Afza aaj khud se shaadi karenge*". (We will live and die together; You have given me strength, we will safeguard this strength together; Why marry anybody else, Roohi and Afza will marry each other today). With this she accepts the wedding vows with the witch. The timid Roohi rises to the occasion, becomes her own master and saviour, and happily accepting the witch within her as the source of her strength she goes away. The scene is a strong departure from the slavish adherence to patriarchy in horror movies, and champions the cause of women. The film celebrates the power of women and celebrates the cause of individualism. Roohi would now require no male support to fight against the odds, and the film's depiction exonerates the genre of horror from the clutches of patriarchal discourse that has till now burdened it.

### Conclusion

The films under consideration are set in two different periods. One in nineteenth century Bengal, and the other in a fictional contemporary town. Though the difference in the time period is stark, yet the spirit that the movies embody does not present much of a difference. The old world of Baagadpur could very well have been the nineteenth century Bengal. The women in both the movies are disempowered individuals who are treated as appendages to men. These women exist only to fulfil the fancy and desires of men. Their own wishes, fancies and desires have no place in this society. The witches in the movie, however, are the revolutionary forces that set right the wrongs of society and establish the equality of women in it; in doing so they upset the traditional understanding of witches and their activities. Witches



have historically been portrayed as villainous characters, whose motive is to destroy the existing order and harmony of (patriarchal) society. Their existence was seen as a threat to the heteronormative patriarchal families. And their chosen vessel for wreaking this havoc had largely been women, timid and fragile.

Men, the saviours of society, were the force that could defeat or get rid of these witches and restore the balance in the patriarchal system. *Roohi* and *Bulbbul* upset that set structure and force the audience to question their fixed belief in that structure. Both the movies portray the witches or witch-like form not as a vile character, but as a force challenging the rigid patriarchal norms of the society, which is also the reason that they are labelled as witches. They are the harbingers of change in the lives of the women in the movie, showcasing a transformation of meek docile women to macho women. The protagonists of both of the eponymous movies, *Roohi* and *Bulbbul*, undergo a massive change, and they become symbolic forces of a dramatic alteration, a force that as viewers we hope will sweep society. Through such a depiction, both the movies question and force the viewers to revisit the popular notions of witches, often coloured by patriarchal discourse, in cinema as well as in life.

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**Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World***

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### **Abstract**

The present study analyses the gendered impact of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. If conflict has a certain bearing on men, so on women. It offers an insight into the experiences of women during the conflict and beyond, the loss of dignity and independence and how they grapple with all these issues. The study explores the ways Palestinian women are shaped by perpetual patriarchy and political power struggles. It tries to capture their struggle with identity and exile and how they anchor the Palestinian narrative by highlighting the changing roles of women and their engagement in community activism.

*Keywords:* conflict, displacement, exile, gender, identity, settler-colonialism

Women carry society in many ways particularly in situations of conflict, violence and deprivation. They are exposed to heightened risks of violations of their human rights in situations of unrest and instability with fewer resources for protection and survival. Women assume social burden in a profound way by, for example, having the responsibility of providing for their family often at the cost of selling their honour. They are victims not just of the patriarchal capitalist society that exploits and harms women but also of world politics that tends to marginalize them.

The continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine has profound bearings on the social fabric of Palestinian society. It has left Palestinian society fragmented and disintegrated. This reality has an unquantifiable impact on Palestinians. However, the effects of this ongoing occupation cannot be fully comprehended without bearing in mind the impact it has had on the lives of women, as they get the short end of the stick compared to men. There is also the need to consider the fact that the cumulative impact of conflict is compounded by societal norms and perceptions. The proposed research seeks to delineate the gendered impact of the ongoing problem by highlighting the way Palestinian women and their lives have been affected by the conflict in the region.

The conflict's gender dynamics has drawn the attention of both feminist and non-feminist scholars alike, who analysed the matter by employing a wide range of theories, methodologies and genres. Thinking of the seriousness and urgency of the issue, political and human rights activists too have shown their concern. The insights and inputs offered by these stakeholders into the gendered dynamics of the conflict afford an unparalleled view into the lives of Palestinian women under occupation and beyond.

Amal Kawar's *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement* (1996) traces the history of women's involvement in the Palestinian National Movement spanning across many generations and geographical borders. The other related issues discussed by Kawar are women's involvement in politics, their liaison with the male leadership, the impact of crisis and the rise of the Islamist movement. *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories* (1996) by Michael Gorkin and Rafiq Othman is a collection of stories about the daily lives and struggles of Palestinian women who have lived and still live through turbulent times. The book is an exceptional account of the authentic and varied voices of women who, historically, have been inadequately portrayed. Gorkin and Othman try to capture the profound changes that have occurred in the lives of these women as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (1995) is another important work on the gendered dynamics of Arab-Israeli conflict authored by Simona Sharoni. The book explores the connection between sexism and militarism. Sharoni's work is important in the sense that it provides an important perspective on global politics and gender equality. *Women, Reconciliation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2014) by Giulia Daniele provides an important perspective on the political engagement of Palestinian and Israeli women activists and the prospects for reconciliation and resolution. The Norwegian Council's report *Gaza: The Impact of Conflict on Women* (2015) offers insights into the experiences of women during the conflict, and beyond. Besides, documenting their challenges the report also makes suggestions as how to meet these challenges.

Another apposite text is *Palestinian Women under Prolonged Israeli Occupation: The Gendered Impact of Occupation Violence* (2018), a joint submission by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling

(WCLAC), Community Action Centre (CAC), and The Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA). It is a report assessing human rights abuses and violations against Palestinian women and girls. *Gender and Wars in Gaza Untangled: What Past Wars Have Taught Us?* (2021) is an analysis conducted by UNWOMEN to map out the gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities of the confrontation between Israel and Palestine. The analysis emphasizes on the need to prioritise gender specific needs and recognize women's agency and leadership. *The Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women*, by Katie Keith (2022), deliberates upon the multitude of effects Palestinian women have suffered as a consequence of this crisis. Keith identifies a number of problems—physical, mental, educational, economic—faced by Palestinian women who find themselves in the midst of the conflict.

The works produced by these authors and agencies do not simply inform readers of the lives and struggles of Palestinian women but also give them visibility by placing them at the centre of the political arena, which traditionally has tended to render women and gender issues as ordinary or inconsequential. The present study foregrounds the significance of gender to understanding the conflict. It emphasizes the need for multiplicity of voices and perspectives to engage with this intractable problem and the prospects of its resolution. The proposed research will engage the following questions:

- What are the significant challenges faced by Palestinian women during the conflict and beyond?
- How do they grapple with issues of identity and exile?
- How do social norms and perceptions degrade women's status and roles in better understanding the conflict and undermine the prospects of its resolution?
- Why engaging women in community activism is so important?
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The Israeli occupation of Palestine has a gruelling impact on Palestinians. The hostile relationship between the two has cost many lives and has inflicted unimaginable human suffering. The extraordinary circumstances created by the conflict in which Palestinians are engaged is sad and disconcerting. While true that the cruelties of occupation are borne by all Palestinians, women are disproportionately affected by this crisis. They are victims not just of the internal patriarchal structure but also of the continued political violence that has exacerbated existing gender inequalities. The idea of gender equality and gender justice in the Palestinian context cannot be fully realized by simply focusing on individual and social gender empowerment, since women's struggle for equal rights is closely linked to their political empowerment.

### **Discussion**

Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020) looks at the Israel-Palestine conflict through a gendered lens, exploring the questions of occupation, oppression and exile along with with the search for identity and belonging and the issues of cultural preservation and political resistance. The characters in focus are women who are shaped in many ways by perpetual patriarchy and political power struggles. The books speak about the Palestinian experience and struggles under Israeli occupation, told from the women's perspective.

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a multigenerational family saga set primarily in Gaza, but also in the United States. The book centres on the traumatic experiences of the Barak family, who are forced to leave their village of Beit Daras after the Israeli invasion. The story covers moving and important topics such as, war, hatred, love, loss, death and rape. Abulhawa writes



about the quotidian sexual abuse and how that trauma saturates the lives of a multitudes of characters. The story begins in the early 1940s before the establishment of the State of Israel and follows this family through the Nakba (the catastrophe), when the family is forced by the newly formed State of Israel to leave their ancestral home in Beit Daras and go into a refugee camp in Gaza. The novel goes through successive generations in that single family against the backdrop of historical events. Following the invasion, the family flees to Gaza but only Nazmiyeh (the oldest daughter) and her brother survive the long journey. Amidst the violence and fragility of the refugee camp, Nazmiyeh builds a family, navigates crises, and nurtures what remains of Beit Daras's community. While her brother continues his exile's journey to America, where, upon his death, his granddaughter Nur grows up alone, experiencing a different kind of exile. Nur's longing for family and roots eventually beckons her to Gaza, where she unites with Nazmiyeh.

This is primarily a woman's story. The principal characters are women of the same family. Nazmiyeh is a matriarchal voice and her niece Nur is a woman who gets lost in the United States, but eventually finds her way back to Gaza. These women navigate their lives through war, through dispossession, love, loss, sexuality, and motherhood. They go through many of the key issues that are so disturbing for people to witness in Palestine and Gaza. Most of these women had ordinary lives, but life made them extraordinary. They face staggering heartbreak, yet they somehow manage to perceive joy and magic in life. Theirs is a life of perpetual loss and grieving, but also of never-ending hope.

Abulhawa explores the legacy of Palestinian dispossession across continents and generations with a devastatingly clear-eyed vision of its political and personal trauma. *The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a story of separation and heartache, endurance and renewal. No Palestinian life is untouched by the ills of occupation. It is deeply felt even by those who live in exile. They feel profoundly touched, affected and violated by the Israeli occupation. This is very much evident in Khaled's description of Nur. "She came with all that American do-gooder enthusiasm that thinks it can fix broken people like me and heal wounded places like Gaza. But she was more shattered than any of us" (Abulhawa, 2016, p. 2).

This brokenness is important because we witness several instances of people suffering from severe mental disorder (Locked-In-Syndrome, Schizophrenia) as a result of trauma. These illnesses are direct results of the occupation and its unspeakable horrors. Abulhawa, in a very remarkable way, interweaves the political, cultural and psychological dimensions of exile that touch all of her characters. Feeling exiled from one's own culture, one's own language and one's own self is recurrent across all of her novels. This reality of exile, displacement and erasure is the stage upon which all Palestinian life is played out.

The book tells us what the loss of connection to family and home does to people. Living in exile is itself a form of violence. Being told that you are not human enough, no worthy enough to inherit your own heritage, to inherit your own homeland, to be able to live in a place where you have a family history and to be told that your white-American Jewish neighbour is more worthy of that history than you are, is deeply hurtful, deeply humiliating. It is a collective wound that all Palestinians live with. But at the same time, it is also the source of their identity, struggle and power. There is exile, famine, loss, violence against women, death as well as pushback. Abulhawa places a magnifier against the occupation by the state of Israel that has led to a massive humanitarian crisis.

While the book depicts the tragic reality of occupation that is lived by the Palestinians, it also captures their firm resilience in the face of utter catastrophe. By portraying the dark crevices of life Abulhawa brings to the forefront the shocking treatment of Palestinians that has thus far been hidden from view. She brings to life the blatant social, cultural and economic pilfering suffered by the Palestinians by describing the Israel-Palestinian conflict in a different light. Through the multi-generational saga of Baraka family, we learn about the contemporary history of Gaza, displaced Palestinians, the continued colonialist aggression of Israel against Palestinians, about hope, sisterhood, love, and the indefatigable Palestinian resistance. “In the abandon of that solitude, we could see how tiny we were, how small and defenceless our earth. And from that terrible dignity, we heard the susurrus of a long-ago old woman’s words: this land will rise again” (Abulhawa, 2016, p. 275).

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a story that emphasizes the spiritual and emotional dynamics among women in a country submerged in war and destruction. Abulhawa’s work of is a compelling depiction of female friendship, bravery and resistance. These women live through all sorts of tragedy and heartbreak but keep going on for the sake of their family. They are a resilient, feisty and strong lot who through their grit and determination continue to inspire in times of crisis and difficulty. They provide strength to families and friends, extend support and solidarity to those experiencing war and displacement and give hope in a country submerged in war and destruction. They protect and restore what has been stolen and appropriated and fix what is broken. They break stereotypes, defy gender biases and, in the process, become women with agency.

*Against the Loveless World* tells the story of young a Palestinian woman called Nahr, who recounts the events of her life from solitary confinement. Navigating the world as a woman refusing to be bound by society’s expectations, Nahr documents her life experiences from the Cube, an Israeli high-tech prison cell. Her journey maps across Kuwait, Jordan and Palestine as she is repeatedly displaced by conflict. Resistance and reclamation become central elements of her character with each of her given names – Nahr, Yaqoot and Almas, representing a different dimension of her experience. Abulhawa lays bare the violence of Israeli occupation as well as the resilience of the Palestinian people.

When we first meet young Nahr, she is living in Kuwait, the only home she has ever known. Born to Palestinian immigrants, she learned early and painfully what it means to be a refugee, to be abandoned and detached from your heritage. She grasps that to be a refugee in this world is to find refuge nowhere. “But I know now that going from place to place is just something exiles have to do. Whatever the reason, the earth is never steady beneath our feet” (Abulhawa 2020, 27). It is to live a life at the edge of uncertainties, being pawned in a larger political game in which people have no stake yet they pay the price of never belonging anywhere. The narrative builds around her grief, loss and displacement. The military conflicts, Jewish occupation in Palestine and US invasion in the Middle East marginalize Nahr socially and politically. As she says:

We are not all blessed to receive a good education and inherit what it takes to live with some dignity. To exist on your land, in the bosom of your family and your history. To know where you belong in the world and what you are fighting for. To have some goddamn value. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 183)

Living with her mother, grandmother and brother, Nahr dreams of living a normal life as, for instance, marrying a man who loves her, having children, and possibly starting her own

business. Her reality is far from what she imagined. She finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage. The man she thinks she loves walks out on her leaving her socially disgraced because she, an abandoned woman, is part of a society that is suspicious about a woman who cannot keep her man. Her family teeters on the brink of poverty. Burdened by the finances of her family she is forced to prostitute herself. She becomes a call girl for wealthy men and uses the money to support her family, thus sacrificing herself for the happiness of those she loves the most. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, her family escapes to Jordan, and after passing through another temporary home in Jordan, Nahr lands in Palestine, the land she could barely remember or feel any connection to. However, Palestine turns out to be the land that restores her to herself. Here, through friendship, love and sisterhood, Nahr reconciles with her many identities, finally finding a sense of home and belonging in a country that she never imagined could provide such spiritual comfort. It is in Palestine that she finds true love, a renewed sense of purpose and a cause to fight for. "I was overcome with relief and something akin to belonging when I emerged on the other side of the crossing terminal. Here [Palestine] is where we began. Where our songs were born, our ancestors buried" (Abulhawa 2020, 152).

By the end of the story, we see Nahr as a completely transformed girl. She is part of the resistance and a full-on revolutionary. Abulhawa beautifully weaves together the events of Nahr's life that led to her slow, but complete, transformation. Nahr is a strong-willed, determined individual who carries the weight of providing for her family and the burgeoning drive to fight for her country and her people. *Against the Loveless World* is a coming-of-age story of survival, resilience, belonging and love (for one's culture and for one's family). Nahr, strives for the right to live and love like all of us as she treks as a refugee throughout the Middle East. She takes us on her journey, as a sex worker in a society that shuns "improper or sinful" women living outside the confines imposed by Islam. Her story touches upon many delicate issues like, settler-colonialism, exile, identity, prostitution, marriage, family obligation, abuse of patriarchy, sexual violence, queerness, class, racism, oppression, corrupt prisons, cultural preservation and political resistance. Through Nahr's character, Abulhawa reveals the dark and festering inner layers of Israeli colonial violence and how it impacts everyday people. It is a story just not about Nahr, but of everyone who is forced to leave their country due to political reasons, those who fight for what they believe. It speaks about the Palestinian experience and struggle under Israeli occupation told from the perspective of a woman.

Abulhawa explores what it means to belong, and the emotions felt when individuals are stripped of the place where they have a sense of belonging. And she does it in a way that is heart-breaking and thought-provoking. She poignantly portrays the life and plight of the Palestinians under Israeli colonialism, opening our eyes to the evils of occupation as Palestinians are made stateless, dispossessed and dehumanized. She chronicles the struggles refugees go through when they are deprived of the safety of their community and home. In their lives uncertainty looms large, uncertainty of belonging, uncertainty of incarceration, never knowing if and when you will see your loved ones. This is a tale of tenacity in one woman's journey through what most of the world only understands as headlines; a tale of feminist defiance and universal dignity.

### Conclusion

With *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World* Abulhawa gives an undaunted voice to the Palestinian diaspora, focusing on generations-long pain and suffering. She teaches us the critical importance of belonging, as the characters carry their home in their hearts, as home is a place they know they will never return to. At the forefront is the

Palestinians' experiences and history of oppression, violence, displacement, and generational trauma, as well as their history of resistance, tenacity and hope. The stories are also important in the sense that they educate us and expand our understanding about the conflict, demonstrating the emotional, physical and psychological repercussions it can have on entire generations of women. She makes an earnest effort to humanize the Palestinian condition, to empathize with them and campaign against the inhuman atrocities and injustices that they have experienced for generations. She uses fiction as a decolonial praxis to be harnessed in the struggle against Israeli occupation.

These two books relate the story of occupation, dispossession and dehumanization. They are an unapologetic literary depiction of the issues that surround Palestine. They are the story of Palestine told from the vantage point of its exiles. They are stories of a family struggling to rebuild their lives, their world, after experiencing destruction and dispossession. Both the books centre around female characters who suffer patriarchy and disregard of the world's political players, who tend to exploit their situation at a time of Palestine's inordinate vulnerability. Yet, they are extremely courageous women who refuse to be the victims of colonial patriarchal structures. Using the experiences of female protagonists, the novelist defies the cultural and colonialist expectations that keep women in a subordinate position. Women are critical participants the indigenous resistance, but they've never received credit. They are also the unacknowledged custodians of culture and history. In the above discussed novels women come through loud and clear. The narratives follow the trajectory of the life of Nahr and Nur, and the discovery of their true selves foreshadows their discovery of Palestine. Abulhawa documents their struggle against exploitative socio-political forces for the right to live a dignified life, wherein they will have agency over their own being.

She also sheds light on issues often ignored in Palestinian culture such as, misogyny, homophobia, sexism and sexual exploitation. She interrogates both the patriarchal capitalist society that exploits and harms women as well as the factors that uphold it. The above discussed novels emphasize the dynamics between women in a country ravaged by war. They are intimate portrayal of relationships, of sisterhood, of feminist resistance to patriarchy as well as they are stories of survival from trauma, from abandonment, from rape, from abuse. Abulhawa uses fiction as a way of processing the individual and collective trauma Palestinians have been subjected to. Through her novels she gives words to the unspoken side of Palestinian history, making the history of Palestinian displacement become a deliberation on the best and worst of the human condition.

Exile is the generative background for all of Abulhawa's works, against which ordinary and extraordinary stories of loss, of love, of reconstruction come alive. She uses these stories to humanize Palestinians and to give power back to the voices who have traditionally been silenced. These stories give the characters agency, visibility and space. Abulhawa uses fiction to acknowledge the Palestinians' humanity, to affirm the reality of their existence and to tell the world that they are not cartoons, terrorists or pitiable victims. They are human beings with dignity and honour, two elements of their identity that must be protected at all costs. Writing fiction helps her become a part of the indigenous resistance to Israeli colonization and to mend what is broken.

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**Dangerous Femininity: Looking into the Portrayal of Daphne Monet as a  
Femme Fatale in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress***

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### Abstract

The phrase “femme fatale” is a well-known figure in the literary and cultural representations of women. Associated with evil temptation, the femme fatale is an iconic figure that has been appropriated into folklore, literature, and mythology. In the twentieth century, the figure finds space in literary and cinematic endeavours, particularly in crime fiction and noir thrillers. The progenitors of the hard-boiled genre of detective fiction popularised the figure of a sexually seductive and promiscuous woman who betrays men for material gain. Walter Mosley, an African American detective fiction writer, adapted the hard-boiled formula popularised by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, but altered it to address socio-political issues concerning the condition of African Americans in the post-World War II era. Mosley followed Chandler’s lead in weaving a quest narrative around femme fatale Daphne Monet in his first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). The purpose of this paper is to look at Mosley’s treatment of the femme fatale figure in this novel. The methodology employed is a close analysis of the text, as well as an analysis of the figure of the femme fatale in its function as catalyst for men’s behaviour. The purpose of this study is to examine how the femme fatale was created, specifically what elements contributed to Daphne Monet’s transformation into a femme fatale.

*Keywords:* crime, femme fatale, racial identity, sexuality, transgression



A femme fatale is the epitome of feminine power and sexuality, often disdained and disrespected for using her sexual charm and embracing her primordial sexuality, which she uses for personal gain. She has the capacity to attract and enamour men with her charm, hypnotising and seducing them and leading them astray with her enticing physique. The figure has always been part of Western mythology; moreover, it has been frequently reinvented to fit changing historical and cultural mores and keep admonishing men against unbridled forms of feminine sexuality. It has featured prominently in the Western cultural tradition at least since Biblical times, starting with Eve, who is popularly regarded the first seductress. Eve is also a foundational figure in the rise of the temptress myth in Christian and Jewish tradition and culture. According to *Genesis*, when God created Adam and Eve, He warned them against eating the Forbidden Fruit from the tree of knowledge. Satan, in the guise of a serpent, lures Eve into tasting the Forbidden Fruit, after which she entices Adam to do the same, causing their expulsion from Paradise.

In the Middle Ages, women who broke cultural conventions were labelled as witches and succubi who took the form of attractive women to seduce men and drain their strength. During the Romantic era, the sensual capabilities of the femme fatale were equated with the death of the male. Geraldine, Coleridge's poem "Christabel", is one of the best-known femme fatales in Romantic literature. Geraldine is a serpentine woman embodying the darker side of human nature, who seduces Lionel, Christabel's father. The femme fatale found prominent representation in hard-boiled crime literature in the twentieth century, where they were depicted as possessing a highly seductive visual appearance, crossing discursive barriers, and appearing at the crossroads of Western racial and gender anxieties.

### **“Cherchez La Femme”: Femme Fatale in Crime Fiction**

Since its inception, the crime fiction genre has been dominated by men. Despite the presence of women authors, they, too, have operated within standard masculine norms. The portrayal of women has been similarly stereotyped—they were helpless victims or dangerously seductive femme fatales, who act as catalysts for men's behaviour. Women, moreover, often threaten men with identity erasure, causing outcomes that often lead to their downfall. As an archetype for the transgressing woman, the character appears in folklore and literary traditions across cultures. She is portrayed as sexually irresistible, a temptress, a prostitute and a murderer who preys on men, threatening them with humiliation and death.

The figure of the femme fatale is a stock component in the hard-boiled tradition, a sub-genre of detective fiction initiated by Dashiell Hammett. In hard-boiled novels, the detective's masculinity is put in jeopardy by the femme fatale. Hammett's narratives express the underlying tension between the detective's masculinity and the dangerous femininity of the femme fatale, represented by women such as Dinah Brand, the "gold digger" of his first novel *Red Harvest* (1929). Raymond Chandler, who followed Hammett's example, began publishing almost a decade after Hammett, but unlike Hammett's detective, who is betrayed by corrupt officials, Chandler's betrayals are always personal and originate in a woman. While Hammett depicts the health issues of his femme fatale—the morphine addicted Gabrielle in *The Dain Curse* (1928) and the psychopathically criminal Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) – Chandler was in the habit of consistently depicting clear-headed, lethal women who stand as a foil to his detective Phillip Marlowe and attempt to destabilize his heroism.

For his part, Walter Mosley followed the hard-boiled tradition, but he also gave expression to the complexities of African American history, including the socio-political and economic

realities that confronted African American communities. By creating a counter-discursive Black detective persona, he incorporated elements from traditional Black culture. Mosley's novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), introduces the protagonist Ezekial (Easy) Rawlins, a military veteran who emigrates to California during the post-World War II era looking for work. He is approached by a white man, DeWitt Albright, a morally suspect lawyer who has been hired by the wealthy Todd Carter to locate Carter's elusive fiancé Daphne Monet. Albright must enlist Easy's help in ascertaining Monet's whereabouts because he cannot enter places she is known to frequent in the Black neighbourhood, places such as Black jazz clubs. The novel presents Daphne Monet in classic femme fatale character, a transgressing figure negotiating the racial divide and flaunting accepted social norms in pursuit of personal gain.

### **Dangerous Femininity: Stereotyping the Femme Fatale**

In recent years the feminist movement has questioned gender roles and caused an increased demand for political rights for women and for an expansion of their engagement in the economy. Women's increased participation in the WWII wartime economy led to the formulation of a repressive ideology towards women. This is reflected in the post-war portrayals of the underlying concerns and anxieties in the figure of the femme fatale figure, depicted as a symbol of unbridled female power and lawless agent of female desire. Feminist literary criticism is concerned with this prejudiced portrayal of the femme fatale, focusing its attention on how cultural artefacts like literary texts and movies uphold this prejudiced patriarchal view and maintain the binary between the "virtuous" and "dangerous" woman. Feminist criticism argues that the femme fatale figure was constructed as a result of male apprehensions regarding women obtaining power and freedom and removing themselves from the domestic sphere. The femme fatale is an articulation of the male ego's fears surrounding the loss of self-stability because of women's desire to embrace newfound freedoms. This led to women being villainized and discriminated against for not adhering to men's wishes and control.

Scholarship on the construction of the femme fatale follows two trends. The first is concerned with the historical construction and representation of the femme fatale figure, while the second focuses on the figure's cinematic depiction, looking into how the figure is positioned as a spectacle for the male gaze and fantasy. We can find diverse studies that are based on the historical representation of the femme fatale across various epochs, but Mary Ann Doane points out that the nineteenth century proved to be an important era for the increase in the representation of the character in literature and the fin-de-siècle era due to the "confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography and cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution" (Doane, 1991, p. 9). The formulation of Laura Mulvey's theorization of the "male gaze" in 1975 in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" turned the focus of the critics towards the sexual objectification of women in media, and it proved to be a crucial aspect of the research on the femme fatale character.

Mulvey claims that women are bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning, implying that women are cast in their roles by men so that a male audience can see them as passive objects of desire, robbing the woman of her sense of self-identity. One trend among studies of cinematic representation of femmes fatales is the feminist critique of the long-held view of the misogynistic portrayal of the character as the projection of post-war male desire and anxieties. In recent years, we also observe a new trend among feminist scholarship on the femme fatale, which interprets the character as an archetype representing a mysterious power of women.

Maysaa Husam Jaber's work, *Criminal Femmes Fatales in American Hard-boiled Fiction* (2016), focuses on how women are portrayed as criminals; it also describes the medical and legal criteria that bolster this classification. The woman is always considered the "other", and the condition of being a woman always implies a certain level of insanity. This misogynistic construction is rooted in a long sociocultural and intellectual tradition, "History and literature provide numerous examples of "madwomen" who have been locked up in asylums, mistreated, and classified as "dangerous" (Jaber, 2016, p. 26). While terms like "witch" and "witchcraft" were formerly used to justify the mistreatment and control of women, the diagnosis of madness has become even more common today, which reflects the anxiety and fear that women are capable of committing dangerous crimes and resist white patriarchal order and masculine hegemony.

### Methodology

This paper aims to undertake a close reading of the text while examining the portrayal of Daphne Monet as a femme fatale, a transgressive figure who leaves many dead in the wake of her greed for material gain and power over men. This paper also aims to analyse how the figure of the femme fatale was exploited and manipulated, even as it was offered as an embodiment of male fantasy. The paper also aims to examine how Daphne came to embrace the femme fatale role, and what factors contributed to her becoming one.

### Discussion

The figure of the femme fatale has circulated in folklore, mythology and in literature, referring to sexually alluring and ravenous women, who threaten to bring ruination upon the all-powerful male and the male-centric societal order. They successfully mobilise their skills in a male-centric social environment, often causing men to do their bidding. In her book *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991), Mary Ann Doanne argues that the figure of the femme fatale can be regarded as the articulation of anxieties about the male ego's loss of control, because the woman leverages her sexual appeal to exercise control over it and fulfil her ambitions.

Thanks to studies in Freudian psychoanalysis and the introduction of new technologies such as film and photography, the nineteenth century saw an increase in the femme fatale's portrayal in literature. In the twentieth century, proponents of the hard-boiled crime fiction tradition portrayed criminal femmes as transgressors of the law. Hammett initiated the tradition starting with his first novel *Red Harvest*, where he portrayed the voracious femme fatale, Dinah Brand as, "money-mad, all right, but somehow you don't mind it. She's so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy, that there's nothing disagreeable about it. You'll understand what I mean when you know her" (Hammett, 1989, p. 21). She is part of the anarchic world of Personville and promises trouble for men who come her way:

Then, without being able to say how or when it happened, you'll find you've forgotten your disappointment, and the first thing you know you'll be telling her your life's history, and all your troubles and hopes.

He laughed with boyish shyness. "And then you're caught, absolutely caught". (Hammett, 1989, p. 21)

Mosley, who emulated the hard-boiled predecessors in formulating his detective fiction, focuses on the themes of black male heroism, black domesticity and black masculinity, at a time of increased Black male incarceration and Black-on-Black crime. His first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), is a search for a missing woman where the object of the quest is Daphne Monet, who initially appears in the book as a mysterious white woman with a French accent. Like Hammett's femme Brigid O'Shaunessey in *The Maltese Falcon*, whose physical appearance is described often in the book, Mosley, too, puts great emphasis on Daphne's physical attractiveness. Protagonist Ezekial (Easy) Rawlins describes her when they meet for the first time, giving the reader a glimpse into the depiction of women through the gaze of men:

Her face was beautiful. More beautiful than the photograph. Wavy hair so light brown that you might have called it blond from a distance, and eyes that were either green or blue depending on how she held her head. Her cheekbones were high but her face was full enough that it didn't make her seem severe. Her eyes were just a little closer than most women's eyes; it made her seem vulnerable, made me feel that I wanted to put my arms around her—to protect her. (Mosley, 1990, p. 98)

Daphne is said to stray periodically from the white world and enter the ghetto for the forbidden pleasures of jazz clubs, Black food, and “dark meat”. As Easy accepts Dewitt Albright's offer of locating Daphne for the sole purpose of keeping his house, he is well aware that he is meddling in the corrupt business of elite forces—including the government and the Los Angeles Police Department—in his quest for locating the evasive Daphne Monet. Easy goes about inquiring about her whereabouts, visiting the clubs she is known to frequent and learning that she associates with a violent black gangster called Frank Green, who hijacks liquor trucks and cigarette shipments in Nevada and California.

Easy learns that Daphne has stolen thirty thousand dollars from her lover Todd Carter, the city's mayoral candidate, and has gone into hiding in the ghetto leaving a trail of dead bodies in her wake, including that of Frank Green, that of the corrupt white businessman Albright, and Joppy's, the bar owner who introduced Albright to Easy. Easy becomes entangled in the chaos surrounding Daphne when his friend Coretta, who is also an acquaintance of Daphne and the girlfriend of Dupree, an emigrant from Houston, is found dead and Easy is suspected of the murder. He is held by the police and is worked over by two LAPD policemen, Mason and Miller:

“That's hard to say.” I sat down again. “I was out drinking and then I helped carry a drunk friend home. I could'a been on my way home or maybe I was already in bed. I didn't look at a clock.”

“What friend is that?”

“Pete. My friend Pete.”

“Pete, huh?” Mason chuckled. He wandered over to my left and before I could turn toward him I felt the hard knot of his fist explode against the side of my head. (Mosley, 1990, p. 77)

When Easy and Daphne eventually meet, she starts a passionate affair with him. He is so infatuated with her that when he learns about the money that she stole from Carter, he makes no efforts to report the crime because he seems to enjoy the notion of physically possessing her. As an apparently white woman, her appeal rests upon the fact that she is a dangerous,

forbidden fruit that he must obtain. His yearning for her, to be associated with her, also stems from her association with the upper echelons of society. As Easy falls in love with Daphne, he describes her as someone he desires to own, even willing to risk his life for her. She uses this to her advantage, manipulating him as she portrays herself as a damsel in distress, imploring him to help her, “But I need ’elp.” She looked down at the knot of hands and said.... I am afraid” (Mosley, 1990, p. 99).

Daphne figures as a temptress, having enchanted numerous men to fall in love with her, manipulating them, imploring them to do her bidding, “When she looked up at me I had the feeling that she wanted to reach out to me, not out of love or passion but to implore me” (Mosley, 1990, p. 215). Easy is pulled to her on an emotional level. He is enamoured with her beauty, failing to recognise the difference between his sentiment and his work, thereby exposing himself emotionally. She thus acts as a catalyst for his problems, causing chaos and putting him under police suspicion. She throws his life into disarray and threatens to wreck it: “If she wanted me to hurt, I loved to hurt, and if she wanted me to bleed, I would have been happy to open a vein. Daphne was like a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of a sudden flung open and let me in. My heart and chest opened for that woman” (Mosley, 1990, p. 230).

When Easy unearths her true identity, that in reality Daphne is a mulatto, feigning to be an upper class white woman, he confronts her and she confesses the truth:

“I am not Daphne. My given name is Ruby Hanks and I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I’m different than you because I’m two people. I’m here and I’m me. I never went to that zoo, she did. She was there and that’s where she lost her father. I had a different father. He came home and fell in my bed about as many times as he fell in my mother’s. He did that until one night Frank killed him.” (Mosley, 1990, p. 215)

She reveals to Easy her history of sexual abuse at the hands of her own father, that he molested her as a child. This results in her developing two distinct personas as a coping mechanism, which she switches between depending on the situation. The Daphne persona still loved her father, but the other persona Ruby Hanks detested him. Daphne says that her father abandoned the family, but Ruby tells Easy that her half-brother, Frank Green, murdered him. She dispassionately reveals to Easy that Ruby, her alter ego, is responsible for the death of Matthew Teran:

I pulled the trigger, he died. But he killed himself really. I went to him, to ask him to leave me alone. I offered him all my money but he just laughed. He had his hands in that little boy’s drawers and he laughed.... And so I killed him. (Mosley, 1990, p. 214)

Teran is a local politician who uses Daphne to intimidate her lover Todd Carter, Teran’s political rival. Teran is a paedophile and Daphne witnessed him buying a young Mexican boy from Richard McGee. She tells Easy that she killed Teran for what he had done to the young boy. Her loathing towards sexual predators originates from her own history of sexual harassment. Maysaa Husam Jaber says that the criminal femme fatale’s behaviour is linked to her diagnosis as a medicalized woman, implying that her criminal deeds are tied to a psychological condition or mental illness. The “bad-mad” woman dichotomy has been used in medical discourse to pathologize criminal women, labelling them as neither rational beings nor active agents, based on the general assumption that when men commit crimes, they are “bad” but “normal,” but when women do the same, they are “mad” and “abnormal.” Daphne’s

pathologization as a person suffering from dual personas and the trauma from her history of sexual abuse, calls into question her agency and her ability to be held accountable for her acts.

Through the portrayal of Daphne's inner contradictions and paradoxes, Mosley highlights the arbitrariness of the racial barrier and the colour line. Owing to her mixed ethnicity, Daphne is the product of a transgressive relationship. She expresses apprehension about racial identification because she is of mixed heritage. The city's racial dichotomy does not allow Daphne the freedom to live with Carter, her white lover, Although Daphne and Ruby Hanks are biologically the same person, the racial markers of post-war Los Angeles prevent her from living simultaneously as both persons. The racial dichotomy pervading the city does not allow Daphne to live as a white woman, as she will be haunted by her black heritage, and she can never live as Ruby Hanks because she physically resembles a white woman.

Daphne's paradoxical existence reflects Easy's own perceptions and ambiguities. When it is revealed that Daphne is not white at all, but a mulatto pretending to be a white woman, it alters Easy's understanding of the nature of his quest and modifies his relationship with Daphne, as his yearning for her diminishes: "I had only been in an earthquake once but the feeling was the same: The ground under me seemed to shift. I looked at her to see the truth. But it wasn't there. Her nose, cheeks, her skin colour—they were white. Daphne was a white woman" (Mosley, 1990, p. 213).

Her identity is ambiguous since she is both Ruby, her mulatto self, and Daphne, the beautiful white lady who is both powerful and fragile. She embodies a state of flux, as her identity shifts in response to changes in her circumstances: "Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man" (Mosley, 1990, p.194). This becomes evident as Mouse, Easy's partner, explains to him how Daphne can never escape the racial barriers:

She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin' her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can't have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is." (Mosley, 1990, p. 217)

Mouse further explains to Easy that he too cannot escape the dominant culture's notion of racial identity and cannot transgress their given role:

She's just like you, Easy. You learn stuff and you be thinkin' like white men be thinkin'. You be thinkin' that what's right fo' them is right fo' you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don't know that you both poor niggers. And a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is." (Mosley, 1990, p. 217)

Both Daphne and Easy yearn for upward mobility in a racially segregated cityscape dominated by white culture, but they will never be able to totally escape their past or their desire to be equal with whites. However, Easy must realise that in order to progress in life, he must make peace with his past and acknowledge his roots. Daphne's paradoxical existence highlights and mirrors Easy's own ambiguities and the impracticality of aspiring to achieve high a status in society. For him, she represents the consequences of the wish to transcend the steadfast racial dichotomy and of opposing the current social order by transgressing boundaries.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that Mosley follows Chandler's hard-boiled paradigm in constructing a femme fatale character in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), his portrayal of the femme fatale differs greatly from Chandler's. Unlike Chandler and Hammett's heroines, who adopt a double identity to escape being tied to the criminal underworld, Mosley's femme fatale adopts a mask to obtain a position of influence in white society, as she develops dual personas as a coping mechanism for the sexual abuse she faced at the hands of her own father. She does not allow herself to be caught or to be controlled by men. Easy is enamoured with Daphne's light-tanned complexion, but it is her unattainability that draws him in, as he is enamoured with the elusiveness that surrounds her. In the end, Easy is glad that Daphne leaves him for good, commenting that "I didn't really want her to stay. Daphne Monet was death herself" (Mosley, 1990, p. 216). Her presence is a challenge to Easy in two ways: she has the potential to undermine his masculinity, and she represents a part of Easy's past that he wishes to forget: his time in Houston with Mouse.

When Easy hears Daphne's confession about her horrible history, he does not see her as a victim but is disgusted with her, even calling her "death herself" because she continued to play the part of a timid, weak woman in need of rescuing, imploring and using Easy to the point that he is willing to risk his life for her. When he learns that she is from the same social class as him, his desire to conquer her fades. He thinks Daphne's coping strategy of adopting multiple personalities depending on the scenario is evil. He considers her desire for upward mobility through manipulation of powerful men in the prevailing culture to be wicked. She represents contested territory as a tragic mulatto figure, since she is pursued by numerous men for various reasons. Rather than seeing her as a symbol of female agency in a patriarchal culture, he believes she resembles death, even comparing her to the Devil, which is befitting connotation for a femme fatale.

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**Can the “Mutelated” Subaltern be Free? Reading Friday’s Subversion in  
J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe***

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### Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* tells the story of Susan Barton, who has boarded a ship bound for Lisbon in her search for her kidnapped daughter. After a mutiny on the ship she is set adrift, washing ashore on the island inhabited by "Cruso" and Friday and intruding into their ongoing adventure. Her account is then inserted into the original *Robinson Crusoe* story line, which is redrawn following Susan Barton's perspective. The original text's recontextualization illustrates the effort by Coetzee to render the story in categories that are relevant to a contemporary cultural context. Like *Robinson Crusoe*, it is a frame story, developed while Barton is in England attempting to convince writer Daniel Foe to help transform her tale into popular fiction. Friday is a character whose marginality – as it first appears in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – is carried forward in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, as this new version of Friday is that of a more disempowered and dysfunctional subject, one doubly mutilated – orally and sexually. This paper aims to study Friday's subversive subalternity in Coetzee's work by using postcolonial methodology with a view to uncover his unique, rebellious behaviour and his capacity to define his own modes of freedom.

*Keywords:* freedom, imperial, master-slave dialectic, mutilation, subaltern, subjectivity

In Coetzee's *Foe*, Friday is doubly mutilated – both orally and sexually. Instead of taking responsibility, Friday's imperial masters – Cruso, Susan Barton and Foe – mock, victimize, judge and essentialize him. Susan and Foe go a few steps further and attempt to interpret his actions, map his story of mutilation, represent and educate him. Yet, despite being corporeally maimed and physically subjected to his masters, Friday defies being psychologically subjected to essentialism and an imperial education. He practises modes of freedom—music, dance, disguise, writing and drawing—that subvert imperial codes and transport him away from England and victimhood.

Additionally, his silence may be seen as a site of resistance to imperial logocentrism and read as a mode of performing defiance and freedom. The critic Kyoung-sook (2009) interprets Friday's silence as “a form of articulation” (p. 113). He argues that although Friday's “tongue is mutilated” and he is muted or “mutelated” [emphasis added] against his will, “[his] silence should not be read as his inability to communicate but as his unique way of communication or his voluntary rejection of it” (2009, p. 113). In this reworking of “the Robinsonnade” (Maher, 1991, p. 34), Coetzee introduces Susan Barton as a new character and a female subaltern who is subjected to both Cruso and Foe. However, Friday occupies a fourth tier in the ladder of authority, as he is subjected to Susan as well as to Cruso and Foe. This paper analyses the subversive subalternity of Friday in an attempt to hear and understand his silences and his non-verbal modes of performing freedom.

The paper begins by providing a theoretical background of the key concepts used, including imperialism, the master-slave dialectic, subjectivity, subalternity and essentialism. A detailed thematic analysis follows. It comprises five sub-sections: cannibalism; freedom and responsibility; music, dance and disguise; writing and drawing; and silence and Coetzee's unknown narrator. The first sub-section sheds light on how Friday has been bestialised and described as a cannibal, attempting to understand the biased practice of “labelling” by questioning who the real cannibals are. The second sub-section questions the possibilities of physical and psychological freedom available to Friday. It indicates the futile ways in which Susan interprets Friday's desires and attempts to offer him freedom. It also inquires who embodies the role of master and slave in the dialectic Susan and Friday share. The latter three sub-sections highlight the manner in which Friday practises freedom despite being subjected to imperial masters – initially Cruso, later Susan and finally Foe. It delineates the different modes in which Friday subverts imperial codes and performs his freedom through his music, dance, disguise, writing, drawing and silence.

## **Theoretical Background**

Theoretical concepts like imperial, master, slave, subject, subaltern and essentialism have been used repetitively in this paper.

### **Imperialism**

In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod (2012) discusses the conceptual difference between colonialism and imperialism. He explains that “imperialism is an ideological project which upholds the legitimacy of the economic and military control of one nation by another... colonialism [however] is [just] one historically specific experience of how imperialism can work through the act of settlement” (pp. 7–8). Broadly, Cruso, Susan and Foe function as imperial masters to the African slave Friday. Specifically, however, Cruso's enterprise on the

island can be defined as colonization, while Susan and Foe's mindset and ways of essentializing Friday can be seen as belonging to the broader rubric of imperialism.

### **The Master-Slave Dialectic**

Hegel envisions the master-slave dialectic not only as an “intersubjective process, motivated by a desire for recognition by the other, but also an essentially conflictual one... each consciousness strives to assert its self-certainty through the exclusion and elimination of all that is other” (Teixeira, 2018, p. 108). In *Foe*, Susan continually longs to communicate with Friday and understand his predicament. At the same time, she expects him to recognize her as master and adhere to her expectations: she wants to give him a British imperial education to make him not just a corporeal but also a psychological subject. However, Friday's indifference to and defiance of such an education frustrate her. She experiences “a Hegelian reversal of power” (Marais, 1998, p. 55). Here, it is important to note that within the Hegelian dialectic, the slave “has power over the master by refusing him autonomy and forcing him into psychological dependence. Paradoxically, then, the slave has a greater awareness of freedom, whereas the master is only conscious of his need for control and mastery” (Smith, 2004, p. 216). Hence, Friday's indifference disputes the legitimacy of Susan's imperial domination and makes her feel subjected and subservient to him.

### **Subjectivity**

In their book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2007) indicate how the concept of subjectivity is linked to postcolonialism, identity-formation and resistance. They state that “[t]he question of the subject and subjectivity directly affects colonized peoples' perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the conditions of their domination, their ‘subjection’” (pp. 201–202). In Enlightenment philosophy, Descartes' dictum “I think, therefore I am” (as cited in Ashcroft, et al., 2007, p. 202) strengthened the belief that the human individual was autonomous and human consciousness was the source of action and meaning rather than their product. Thus, the Cartesian notion of autonomous subjectivity disregarded the role of social relations or language in the formation of subjectivity. This Enlightenment notion changed with the arguments put forth by the twentieth-century thinkers Marx and Freud. Their arguments paved the way for the notion that the human subject is not an autonomous entity but constructed through ideology, discourse or language.

### **Subalternity and Essentialism**

“Subaltern, meaning ‘of inferior rank’, is a term adopted by [the Marxist critic] Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes... [like] peasants, workers and other groups” (Ashcroft, et al., 2007, p. 215). Subsequently, the Subaltern Studies group of historians—formed by Ranajit Guha—adapted this term to Postcolonial Studies. They “aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies” (Ashcroft, et al., 2007, p. 216) and went on to define subaltern groups as opposed to elite groups. In her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak (1988/2013) criticizes the Subaltern Studies group of historians' uncritical, essentialist definition of subaltern identity. She argued that by doing so these scholars were returning to the unproblematic, Cartesian notion of autonomous subjectivity.

Essentialism is “the view... that there is an essential human nature, or set of defining human features, which are innate, universal, and independent of historical and cultural differences”

(Abrams, 2009, pp. 130-131). Poststructuralists and anti-humanists assert that humanist norms and values are based on the fallacy of essentialism. Spivak criticized the Subaltern Studies group because she believed that they were falling prey to essentialism in their Marxist attempt “to define who or what may constitute the subaltern group” (Louai, 2012, p. 7). She asserted that the “task of an intellectual is” not to define, but “to pave the way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves” (Louai, 2012, p. 7).

## Thematic Analysis

### Cannibalism

In Coetzee’s *Foe*, Friday is a character whose presence echoes throughout the narrative. He is the subaltern whose narrative punctures a hole in Susan’s story and whose portrayal resonates within the readers long after turning the last page of the novel. In the beginning itself, Coetzee portrays Friday as a kind of hero. When Susan landed on Cruso’s island “[a] dark shadow fell upon [her]... of a man with a dazzling halo about him” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 5). This man was Friday and his presence serves to overshadow and subvert Susan’s narrative throughout. On the other hand, Susan attempts to perpetually essentialize Friday. Her imperial and racist Western mindset condenses Friday’s character down to his race and slave subjectivity. She considers him a cannibal and dog long before Cruso discusses his cannibalism or mutilation. Right from the first glance she perceives his African features and the spear at his side, and her subconscious—“over which [she] had no mastery”—suspects Friday for a cannibal” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 106). The Western imperial education she received triggers this stereotypical response.

Likewise, Cruso declares Friday to be a cannibal during bouts of fever. *Foe*, unlike them, *consciously* insists on Friday’s cannibalism. This is expected of him as he is the curator of the Western imperial fiction that has eroticised the orient. Thus, the question arises: was Friday a cannibal? If he was one, wouldn’t he kill Susan and devour her flesh at the beginning, instead of carrying and leading her to Cruso to quench her thirst for water? Wouldn’t he attempt to kill Susan, Cruso or *Foe* whenever he got the opportunity? Friday does not do any of this. Instead, he is the only character who was mutilated and maimed. So, who are the real cannibals? Coetzee’s narrative subverts the assumptions of Friday’s cannibalism by throwing light on the cannibalism demonstrated by his imperial masters.

When Cruso narrates Friday’s mutilation, he consciously justifies the act and revels in the idea. He enjoys morbid pleasure in imagining the act and its cause, almost as though he had done it himself. Cruso “brought [Friday’s] face close to [Susan’s]” by violently “[g]ripping Friday by the hair” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 22) so she could see his mutilated tongue. He blames this cruel act on the slaveholders of Africa and smiles while narrating that they could have done it for four reasons: (1) they held “the tongue to be a delicacy”; (2) “they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief”; (3) “they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story”; or perhaps because (4) “they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 23).

An analysis of these theories raises several questions. First, how could Cruso conceive of so many reasons if he hadn’t done the mutilation himself? Secondly, if the mutilator ate Friday’s tongue as a delicacy, wasn’t *he* the cannibal? If one accepts Cruso’s tale as the truth, then the African slaveholders were cannibals. If not, then it is more likely that Cruso himself was a cannibal and he performed the mutilation for all the above reasons. He wanted to devour

Friday's tongue to enjoy it as a delicacy and save himself from any further consequences of having performed this cannibalistic act – physically impairing Friday so that he could not grieve, he could not tell his story of violence and had to bear the punishment of his master's crime. In this context, Friday's alleged cannibalism comes across as a means to conceal Western imperialism's cultural and economic cannibalism, practised on the social body of the colonised masses. But Susan and Foe can also be understood as cannibals of a different kind. They prey on each other's narratives as well as Friday's. They essentialize Friday, attempt to represent him and argue about who holds the better claim. It is crucial to analyse Susan and Foe's interpretations of Friday to learn how Coetzee and Friday subvert them.

### **Freedom and Responsibility**

Unlike Cruso, Susan always wanted to understand the thought processes behind Friday's actions. She assumes that she knows what Friday desires. She claims that he “desires to be liberated” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 148). But does he really want freedom? While living with Susan in Foe's house, there are times when Friday begins moping. “[H]e mopes about the passageways or stands at the door, longing to escape, afraid to venture out” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 78). He mopes on Cruso's island as well. He longs to escape but fears it at the same time. Hence, he was never physically successful in escaping. The fear of unforeseen situations fixed him within the master-slave dialectic where either Cruso, Susan or Foe take on the role of the master and he is left with the only option of slavehood. Nevertheless, was it possible for a mutilated African slave to escape servitude on his own?

The reason Susan offers for Friday's inability to achieve freedom is his incapacity to define or understand the meaning of it. She believed that to him freedom was “less than a word” and just a “noise” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 100). She even contemplates why Friday submitted to Cruso and she blamed it on “the condition of slavehood that invades the heart and makes a slave a slave for life” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 85). Susan's explanation, here, is similar to Mannoni's argument about the “dependency complex” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 73) from which he believed the colonized suffered. Fanon (1952/2008) criticises Mannoni's explanation as a means of shirking responsibility “for colonial racism” by blaming the victims instead of acknowledging the coercion of the colonizers (p. 66). In this context, Susan's tendency to blame Friday for his slavehood because he possessed a so-called “dependency complex” is nothing but a means of denying responsibility and disregarding the violence and racism inherent in imperialism.

O' Connell states that “Susan is bound to Friday by her compassion, and her feeling of responsibility” (1989, p. 50). While she might have felt sympathy for Friday at times, it never translated into taking genuine responsibility for him. In England, Susan claims that she could not find a job for him. But, if she knew that Friday desired his freedom, was it entirely impossible for her to find a way of freeing him? When she tries to send him to Africa, she suspects the captain's intentions. What she fails to suspect and question, however, are her own intentions. There were jobs where she could send Friday. Foe suggests that she could send him to stay with the “Negroes in London” and he could “play for pennies in a street band” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 128).

However, Susan could not live without Friday. He was a “shadow” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 115) she could not let go of. She was accustomed to his presence, while he could have managed alone on the island or anywhere. Instead of freeing Friday, Susan grows dependent on him and the need to essentialize him. In contrast, while Friday could not physically escape from Susan's side, he is certainly able to escape and defy her attempts to essentialize him.

## Music, Dance and Disguise

Despite being subjected to the other characters' imperialistic gaze, Friday comes to live a self-absorbed, independent life on the island. Susan claims that Friday "is the child of his silence". She assumes that Friday "is to the world what [she makes] of him" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 122). Yet there are moments when Friday is heard, to Susan's dismay. When Cruso falls ill, Friday shuns the hut and takes up the flute. Did he do so to soothe Cruso? That hardly seems likely because the monotonous tune gives even Susan a headache. Instead, his insistence on playing the flute was like a musical announcement that his freedom is imminent. He had never considered murdering or maiming his masters, but the thought of living an independent life after Cruso died may have certainly flitted through his mind.

That thought may be the reason why he was able to play the flute and sleep soundly during the stormy night when Cruso was experiencing fever bouts. To him, the storm represented the end of Cruso's reign and if not the beginning of his reign, at least the onset of his days of freedom. No wonder, he is crestfallen when he is nearly "harm[ed]" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 38) and escorted away from the island. To him, the island was the space closest to his sense of home. Hence, he continues to recount memories of the island in England by transporting himself through music and dance.

In Foe's house, Susan hears Friday playing music simultaneously on his old flute and on Foe's newly retrieved soprano record player. He played the same six notes he had played on the island. He had also disguised himself by wearing Foe's guild-master robes and wig while he played the music. In addition, he danced by spinning around. In these moments, he never heeded Susan. She found him "spinning slowly around with the flute to his lips and his eyes shut; he paid no heed to [her]" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 95). Frustrated, Susan feels the need to label Friday's music and dance negatively. She analyses his tune in consonance with the imperial discourses she had internalized, reducing it to a savage practise by exclaiming, "How like a savage to master a strange instrument—to the extent that he is able without a tongue—and then be content forever to play one tune upon it! It is a form of incuriosity... a form of sloth" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 95). Susan feels the need to mark Friday's musical creation as inefficient. But why does she feel so? Perhaps his creative abilities frustrate her and remind her of her own inability to produce a successful narrative about her island experience. Somehow, his ability to quickly master a new musical instrument in Foe's house despite his mutilation aggravates her.

To be more specific, Friday's ability to perform creatively and freely within the authorial space of an imperial master—Foe—and in the physical presence of Susan—another female imperialist—threatens their legitimacy of power and mastery over him. Friday's dance unsettles Susan and makes her "shiver" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 94). Hence, she feels the need to label his music as savage and fears the recurrence of his cannibalism. "It is in desperation that she substitutes words for" Friday's non-verbal communication in order to label his modes of practising freedom derogatively (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 16). She felt that his success at playing music and dancing was a symbolic manifestation of his previously free selfhood—which, for her, meant his cannibalistic selfhood that existed before he had been enslaved. Her British imperialistic mindset could only imagine Friday living a cannibalistic life in Africa before slavery "cured" him of it. When Friday had played the flute on the island, Susan felt so upset that she snatched his instrument away. While this act of authority and anger perplexed Friday, it never threatened him. He continued to play the flute on the island and later in Foe's house. Frustrated by his

careless disregard for her, Susan attempts to play the tune herself as a means of communicating with him. However, Friday defies Susan's efforts.

Moreover, "Susan experiences difficulty in harmonising with Friday" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 18). "The music [they] made was not pleasing: there was a subtle discord all the time, though [they] seemed to be playing the same notes" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 96). One reason for this was Friday's indifference towards her. Another reason was Susan's insistence on playing a variation of tone which he did not intend to replicate. She initially perceives the music and dance of the "[t]ongueless, mute Friday" to be "tuneless flute songs and monotonous, repetitive dances" (Maher, 1991, p. 38). Later, however, she learns—to an extent—the meaning of this performance. She realizes that he performed dance and music to transport himself "or his spirit, [away] from... England, from [her]" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 104). Nevertheless, Foxcroft (2015) argues that Susan is "[u]nequipped to relate the wider, colonial context" (p. 15) of Friday. "[T]he key to decoding [Friday's] identity is hidden in the very gestures and movements which depict the story of his suffering" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 16). The "continuous cadences and supersonic gyrations" which "shamanically" transport him to "another world" are "reminiscent of Brazilian dances rooted in African slavery... they provide a means of reclaiming identity through cultural and historical heritage, enabling Friday to be fully at ease with himself" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 17).

Friday's dance also startles Susan for another reason. It reveals his second mutilation (of his phallus) to her. As Friday danced spinning around himself, the disguised robes fly and whirl around his shoulders to reveal this second, "more hideous" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 119) phallic mutilation. In this way, Friday "facilitates his spiritual self-transcendence" by "[r]esorting to elements of male sexual exhibitionism" through his dance. It allows him "a cathartic escape from his repressed existence" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 18). Susan, however, could not even describe what she saw to Foe without the aid of figurative, "sexualised" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 18) and racist language. She did not know "how these matters [could] be written of in a book unless they [were] covered up again in figures" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 120). She only states that the mutilation was "atrocious" and it "unmanned" (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 119) Friday. Thus, since Susan was a subject of imperial discourses herself, she was unable to plainly articulate the heinous consequences of imperialism and racism.

Instead of acknowledging the role of imperialism in maiming Friday, Susan makes every effort to define Friday based on her imperialist mindset. However, "Friday's detachment causes the hole in Susan's narrative and is the primary cause of [her] uncertain narrative voice" (Kehinde, 2006, p. 112). She longs to communicate with Friday, but his indifference frustrates her. Friday's silence, which she compares to "black smoke", chokes and stifles her (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 118). "Friday destabilizes the dominion of language... by revealing his truth via the various media of writing, music and dance" (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 19). But Susan fails to realise that because she uses imperial codes to comprehend him, she will never be able to understand him. She uses language "to control [Friday] by gaining access to him through communication on her terms" (Jolly, 1996, p. 11). She reads British narratives to him and assumes it will educate him somehow. She wanted to imprint a British imperial consciousness within him. Friday's defiance of this is seen through his subversive form of writing.

### **Writing and Drawing**

After Susan, it is Foe's turn to civilise and educate Friday. He does so by putting an emphasis on teaching Friday to write. Like Crusoe, he prioritises the need to teach Friday only the relevant



words. Despite his focused vision, Foe is unable to teach Friday the alphabet. All he writes is—what Susan and Foe comprehend as—a series of the letter “o” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 152). While Foe assumes this is the beginning of Friday’s imperial education, his writing comes across as a negation of imperial authorship. By installing himself at Foe’s desk and wearing his robes, Friday assumes empowerment and “the position of authorship” (Kehinde, 2006, p. 113). Spivak suggests that the “o” Friday writes “could conceivably be omega, the end” since the narrative ends at this point “with the promise of a continued writing lesson that never happens” (1990, p. 15). However, the “o” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 152) could also be misconstrued by Susan and Foe for the numeral 0 (zero). In this context, Friday’s writing was an effort at nullifying—or what Kehinde describes as “cancel[ling]” (2006, p. 112)—their imperial discourse so as to allow room for inclusivity and multiculturalism.

A more significant defiance is seen when Friday begins to draw several feet and eyes on his slate while Susan and Foe were distracted and talking to each other. He “filled his slate with open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes: walking eyes” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 147). Susan commanded him to “[g]ive [her] the slate” but “instead of obeying [her]” he “rubbed the slate clean” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 147). Susan was upset with what he had drawn and wanted to complain and show it to Foe. But Friday notices her anger and erases the sketch before she could show it. His sketch is a kind of articulation of his subalternity and slavehood and demonstrates his acknowledgement of his subjectivity. By erasing the sketch, he displays a sense of ownership to his subalternity.

When Friday withholds the slate from Susan, Spivak interprets his act as that of one guarding the marginal space against Western imperialists. She argues that Friday “is not only a victim... [but] also an agent... the curious guardian at the margin” (1990, p. 16). His defiance against showing the sketch to Foe is the disavowal and subversion of any interpretation or judgement that would follow. He never wanted Susan or Foe to reprimand him or disapprove of the sketch. He felt they did not have the right to essentialize his art or punish him for his interpretation of his own subjecthood. It could also mean that he did not want to be enslaved by Susan or Foe as he had been enslaved to Cruso. Foxcroft interprets Friday’s drawing to be his version of a “coloniser” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 16). Perhaps, that is why Susan gets upset and Friday “intentionally evades [her] censorship” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 16). In fact, Susan gets so upset when he withholds the slate that she feels she has been enslaved by Friday. Thus, his act of withholding mocks her and reverses the master-slave dialectic.

### **Silence and Coetzee’s Unknown Narrator**

Instead of regretting his “mutilated” (Kyoung-sook, 2009, p. 113) subalternity, Friday uses his silence to perform his freedom. Marais interprets Friday’s silence as “neither a sign of submission nor merely a strategy of passive resistance, but a counter-strategy through which... [he] preserves, even asserts, [his] alterior status and in doing so interrogates the fixity of dominant power structures and positions” (1996, pp. 74-75). Friday rejects learning the imperial script and disregards every effort made by Susan and Foe to communicate with him. In this way, he bars them from psychologically subjecting him to imperialism. Susan realized that what kept Friday averse to communicating with her was not his dullness or mutilation, but “a disdain for intercourse with [her]” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 98). Hence, she remains “oblivious to the reality of his silence”, which he appropriates as an “acquired mother tongue” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 15). Coetzee assists him in performing his silence by introducing the perspective of an unbiased, unknown narrator in the final segments of the novel.

“The last scene of the novel in which the unnamed narrator enters Friday through his mouth in order to listen for his story instead of remaining outside and speaking for him suggests a possibility to listen for the subaltern [without] penetrating or interrupting their space” (Kyoungsook, 2009, p. 113). Hence, the unnamed narrator performs what Spivak (1988/2013) describes as the task of a postcolonial intellectual in allowing the subaltern’s (Friday’s) voice to be heard. When the unknown narrator opens Friday’s mouth, a stream issues from it. This is a form of a “baptismal wave” (Maher, 1991, p. 40) which flows across the narrator’s eyelids and facial skin. The specific mention of “eyelids” and “skin of [his/her] face” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 157) hints at the symbolic inference that the stream or narrative issuing from the subaltern’s (Friday’s) mouth is meant to cleanse the imperial perception and racial stereotypes of the narrator who presumably represents the Western subject. In other words, it hints at the need for the Western imperial subject to cleanse his/her mind to allow room for inclusivity and equality.

Friday’s “soundless stream” of “powerful silence” (Attridge, 2004, p. 67) is “truly intense, ubiquitous, and relentless...” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 19). It is also a material representation of the long-suppressed voices of the subaltern which are unleashed and communicated with full force. According to Kehinde (2006), “[t]he concluding image... is Coetzee’s articulation of a strong desire for reciprocal speech from the victims of colonization—a cross-cultural dialogue” (p. 115) and Friday symbolizes “the black world... as the site of a shimmering, indeterminate potency that has the power to engulf and cancel Susan’s narrative” (p. 112).

### Conclusion

As Susan tries to narrate and narrow down Friday’s story based on her understanding, she acts like the archetypal Western intellectual who attempts to represent the subaltern biasedly. Yet, in spite of her multiple attempts to understand him and varied claims of having understood him, Susan is unable to comprehend, represent or essentialize him. The “stairway” to comprehend Friday turns to “smoke” (Coetzee, 1986/2010, p. 118) with her every attempt. There is always a jarring tune, an obstacle, an incomprehensible silence that blurs the route to navigate Friday. Coetzee continually punctures her navigation and Friday offers her his unapologetic indifference; these serve to finally frustrate her. Friday’s body, attitude, habits, behaviour and physical reactions speak for themselves, subverting, in sundry ways, the harm to which his Western master(s) subjected him by mutilating him. Friday is physically silenced by his master(s). However, he does not fill these gaps of silence with nonverbal cues of communication and cooperation. Instead, he uses “the dynamically liberating influence of music-making and dance” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 16) as modes of practising freedom and “self-transcendence” (Foxcroft, 2015, p. 18). Friday’s music, dance, disguise, writing, drawing and silence subvert imperial codes and transport him to a space of self-absorption and freedom that his imperial masters cannot access. Thus, he demonstrates indifference and defies communication which serves to empower him and puncture the imperial masters’ attempts to interpret and represent him. In addition, Coetzee disallows any misrepresentation by inserting an unknown, unbiased narrator in the final sections of his novel to subvert all imperial representations of Friday. This narrator shows how Friday’s body and corporeal presence speak for him, instead of anyone else.

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## **Literary Writing and Personal Identity in Borges and Pessoa**

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### Abstract

In a famous passage in “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes describes the writing process as embodying the disintegration of the author’s personal identity: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142).<sup>1</sup> This postmodern position is deeply rooted in classical Greek thought, in particular Plato’s harsh critique of poetic inspiration, conceived as “holy madness.” Is this equation valid, however? Does writing necessarily serve as the ultimate act of self-negation? This essay seeks to elucidate Jorge Luis Borges’ and Fernando Pessoa’s alternative views of authorial subjectivity. Borges and Pessoa – arguably two of the greatest writers of the twentieth century – conceive the interplay between writing and self-identity in rather complex fashion. Pessoa’s term “heteronym” relates to the way in which an author’s subjectivity abruptly gives way to an idiosyncratic identity who composes the poem. This recalls the Kabbalistic idea of God’s contraction (*tzimzum*), the creator preserving his or her passive self-identity while giving birth to other beings from his or her inner void. Discussing Shakespeare and Whitman, Borges proposes that the act of writing is a form of self-creation in which the writer begets a unique narrative identity out of himself or herself that, transfigured, is simultaneously both the same and the other.

*Keywords:* Jorge Luis Borges, comparative literature, heteronym, literary theory, personal identity, Fernando Pessoa, self-creation

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Barthes’ treatise and its reception, see Seymour, 2017.

## Subjectivity and Personal Identity in Borges

In his essay “On the Nothingness of Personality” (1922), Borges appears to take an uncompromisingly nihilistic attitude towards this issue in his reading of Buddhist works, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, and David Hume. He announces his intention right from the outset: “I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without a metaphysical foundation of visceral reality” (*SNF*, p. 3). It comes as no surprise that in “A New Refutation of Time” (1947) he starts off by rebutting the I in Hume’s philosophy – to which he adds the possibility of refuting linear time. He concludes his discussion, however, with the baffling statement:

*And yet, and yet ... Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny ... is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.*<sup>2</sup>

Rather than categorically denying identity à la Hume or adopting the Buddhist metaphysical concept of the non-self,<sup>3</sup> Borges worries at the question of subjectivity throughout his works, giving time a central place in every treatment of it, as reflected in this passage. While not propounding a systematic theory of time and subjectivity, his writings reveal much regarding his fascination with these issues. Thus, in his essay “Time” (1978) he recalls one of his favorite *SNF*:

We are always like Heraclitus watching himself reflected in the river and thinking that the river is not the same because its water flow and that he is not the same Heraclitus because he had been so many people since he saw himself in the river the last time. The meaning of this is that we are something that changes and something permanent. We are essentially something mysterious ... This is a problem we have never been able to solve: the problem of identity subject to changes. Perhaps the word “change” is sufficient. Because if we speak of a change in something, we are not saying that it has been replaced by something else ... The intention is that this is the idea of the permanent within the transient. (*OC*, 3:205)<sup>4</sup>

The tension of time-bound subjectivity thus lies in the dialectic of permanence and transience. As is his wont, Borges treats these irresolvable philosophical conundrums via the spinning of fantastical stories – in a type of *Gedankenexperiment*.

Thus, for instance, in “The Other” (1975) Borges addresses the issue of the continuous identity of the self by adducing a fantastical encounter engendered by the intersection of past and present – the “wrinkle in time.” In February 1969, the protagonist – called “Borges” – sits on a bench by the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, MA. The flowing water inevitably

<sup>2</sup> <http://heavysideindustries.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/borges-a-new-refutation-of-time.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception” (Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.6.3). For a phenomenological analysis of the anātman or anatta, see Rāhula, 1974, pp. 51–67.

<sup>4</sup> All English translations from *Obras Completas* are mine.

prompts him to think of “time ... Heraclitus’ ancient image” (*OC*, 3:11). A young stranger sits down on the bench next to him, whose voice, when they strike up a conversation, Borges uncannily recognizes as his own. Learning that he is living at his old address in Geneva, he declares: “In that case, your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges. We are in 1969, in the city of Cambridge.” The younger man demurs: “‘No,’ he answered in my own, slightly distant, voice, ‘I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône.’ Then, after a moment, he went on: ‘It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair’” (*OC*, 2:12).

The disturbing question arising from this meeting is whether or not the old man is identical to his young self. Borges answers dialectically and ambivalently – both yes and no. In the afterward to the story he thus observes that “My duty was to ensure that the interlocutors were different enough from each other to be two, yet similar enough to each other to be one” (*CF*, p. 484).

Borges primarily approaches the enigma of personal identity, however, in the context of what he calls “literary fate,” investigating the delicate balance between creative writing and the author’s subjective personality – as might be expected from a man who has devoted his entire life to reading and writing. After all, as he attests in his “Autobiographical Essay” (1987), when he was young the whole family tacitly assumed that he would become a writer, the “central event of his childhood” being his self-quarantining in his father’s extensive library. Here, identity-formation is seamlessly interwoven with literature, writing, and authorship – a link that recurs throughout his fictional and poetic *oeuvre*.<sup>5</sup>

In order to explore the fundamental features of Borges’ perception and treatment of the tangled writing/personal identity link, I shall compare below his attitude with that of the person who, perhaps more than any other in the modern era, is identified with this issue: the twentieth century preeminent Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, responsible for introducing the term “heteronym” into modern vocabulary.

### Created Figures

The central difficulty in interpreting Fernando Pessoa’s poetry derives not only from the fact that he is a very prolific and multifaceted author who employs diverse literary styles and fine Portuguese nuances (“My one, true homeland”), but, above all, from his peculiar tendency to create other poets and writers – an entire literary universe – whom he uncannily regards as the real authors of most of his texts. Frequently, the created figures clash with one another, arguing and reconciling; in a particularly odd case, one composes a moving elegy for another upon his death. Most significantly, each possesses his own artistic preferences and idiosyncratic literary styles that differ, so Pessoa insists, from his own – namely, from the few texts he published under his own name.

Pessoa thus deliberately transformed himself into what he calls a *drama em gente* – drama of people – in an ironical interpretation of his name, which derives from the Latin *persona*. This was a mask worn by an actor through which he projected his voice on the stage: *per-sonare*. Hereby, Pessoa stressed what he liked to call the “alterity” of these figures – namely, their

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed and illuminating study of the function and nature of subjectivity in Borges’ writings, see Nahson, 2000, Chap. 3.



essential difference from his own personality. As he wrote in the introduction to one of the books he published under his own name:

The human author of these books has no personality of his own. Whenever he feels a personality well up inside, he quickly realizes that this new being, though similar, is distinct from him – an intellectual son, perhaps, with inherited characteristics, but also with differences that make him someone else. (Zenith, 2021, p. 2)

This passage is complex – clearly not adducing a one-dimensional process of the erasure of subjectivity when entering language, à la Ronald Barthes’ “Death of the Author” (1967). In a certain sense, it signifies the precise opposite. At the point of departure – the putting of pen to paper – the author has no self-identity. Following Pessoa’s own lead, we may refer to this as “depersonalization” (though not, of course, in the sense this term carries in the psychoanalytic context). While this phenomenon must still be investigated, we may observe at this stage that, while writing, Pessoa experiences a vivid *presence* of a personality that somehow rises up and emerges from within him.

Pessoa identifies this peculiar presence as someone essentially other than himself, an entity that differs from his own subjectivity – thus transpiring to possess a separate individual sense of subjective self. The identification of this entity as “other” and “separate” indicates, both logically and psychologically, that Pessoa necessarily retains some awareness of his own personal identity, the latter serving as a point of reference for establishing the otherness of the heteronym. In other words, no one can identify another being as other than oneself unless one harbors a certain amount of awareness of his or her own personal subjectivity.

Referring to these as his “intellectual sons,” these images thus embody the tension between identity and alterity within the narrator’s subjectivity. Although the “son” exemplifies the attributes he inherits from his “father” – Pessoa himself – he is, at the same time, someone entirely different. Pessoa refers to this identity-separation tension that appears during the act of writing as an emergence of the “heteronym.” Of the dozens of heteronyms he created, three are of note due to their prominence in his universe: Alberto Caeiro – a naturalist and spiritual teacher who guides, among other disciples, Pessoa himself; the marine engineer Álvaro de Campos; and the latent pagan, Dr Ricardo Reis.

Pessoa’s work has inspired and intrigued generations of scholars, and special critical attention was given to the phenomenon of the heteronym.<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, the study of the heteronyms centers around the fundamental question of personal identity. Two interlocking themes are most dominant here: the interplay between creator (Pessoa) and literary creations (heteronyms), and the implications of these interactions on the boundaries of personal identity

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<sup>6</sup> To name a few, Jacinto do Prado Coelho has published a pioneering study on the poet’s oeuvre, *Diversidade e Unidade em Fernando Pessoa*, back in 1949. Years later, with the cooperation of Georg Rudolf Lind, he went on to publish a collection of Pessoa’s personal papers, *Páginas de estética e de teoria e crítica literárias*, in 1966. João Gaspar Simões publishes the first biography of the poet, *Vida e obra de Fernando Pessoa: História de uma geração*, in 1951. Jorge de Sena published a noteworthy study regarding the Pessoa heteronyms, *Fernando Pessoa & C<sup>a</sup> Heterónima*, in 1982. Among the studies assisting in divulging Pessoa’s work beyond the borders of Portugal stand out Angel Crespo’s Spanish translation of *The Book of Disquiet* in 1984 and his following critiques on the poet’s life and work. Also notable is Richard Zenith’s contribution to the scholarly literature of Pessoa’s work. His work has exposed the poet and his heteronyms to generations of English-speaking readers, both through various English translations (the most prominent of which is *The Book of Disquiet*) and through his erudite literary studies, led by Pessoa’s most recent and in-depth biography published in 2021.

and authorship. A secondary focus of study developed around Pessoa's best known literary work, *The Book of Disquiet*, attributed to the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares.

As Pessoa explains, the term "heteronym" is comprised of the Greek nouns *hetero* (other) and *onoma* (name). It thus highlights the strange alterity of heteronymic identity. With regard to its theoretical significance, however, the heteronym appears to constitute a Pessoaan variation on the term "pseudonym" – literally a "false name." A short comparison of these terms will be useful for our investigation. Writers from antiquity through to the present have employed pseudonyms to conceal their identity for several reasons.<sup>7</sup> The pseudonym is not a simple pseudo epigraphical phenomenon, however. In precisely the same way as the theatre actor's identity behind the mask is known, so the reader is usually well aware of the person who stands behind the author's pseudonym. The split between the writer and his or her pseudonym serves pedagogic or hermeneutical goals, the pseudonym forming part of a discrete system of allusions which signs the writer sends to the reader.

With heteronyms, however, the drama plays out between the writer and himself, between his or her self-identity and other, alien identities emerging from the depth of it. What essential relationship do they possess with the writer's own subjectivity? This is a key question in our discussion. Pessoa remarks that they bear a relationship similar to that between father and son; However, we still need to clarify how exactly he perceives this unique interaction between the author and his heteronymous figure. In fact, he spreads some remarks and explanations regarding this author/heteronym relationship in various texts that have come out under his hand. However, there is a particular Pessoaan text which is of special importance to us, as it stands out in its most comprehensive treatment of the subject. This text will now stand in our spotlight.

In a well-known letter he sent at the end of his life to the young poet Adolfo Monteiro, Pessoa rarely refers to the intimate mechanism of creating the most prominent figures of his heteronyms – namely, Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reiss, and Álvaro de Campos (Zenith, 2021, pp. 251–261). Here we may find a key to the obscure heteronymical riddle. He initially adopts a seemingly psychiatric approach, asserting that "My heteronyms have their origin in a deep-seated form of hysteria ... [a] relentless organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation" (p. 254).

Fortunately, he continues, he has internalized this tendency mentally, the hysterical symptoms thus only erupting inside him. Hysteria primarily affecting the inner psyche in men, "it all ends in silence and poetry" (Zenith, 2021, p. 254). He then proceeds to describe how, like many other children, he had imaginary friends who accompanied him through his lonely childhood. Experiencing these with an inexplicable intensity, as though they truly existed in reality, he wittily remarks: "I can't be sure, of course, if they really existed, or if it's me who doesn't exist. In this matter, as in any other, we shouldn't be dogmatic" (Zenith, 2021, p. 254).

Although his tone is quite ironic here, an ontological hesitation relating to the question of the reality of identity seems to underlie this statement. On the one hand, he experienced imaginary figures in lucid clarity, as reality itself; on the other, he remains uncertain as to which are really real – his own self or the heteronyms. This dialectical tension increases when he addresses the heart of the matter – the heteronyms' abrupt emergence during the act of writing. Ricardo Reis,

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<sup>7</sup> A subtle philosophical usage of this pseudonymical strategy appears, for instance, in some of Kierkegaard's writings, each of which published under different name that alludes to its inner meaning (as in the case of Johannes de silentio, "author" of Fear and Trembling).

for example, assumed form in him as a “hazy, shadowy portrait of the person who wrote those verses”: “Unbeknownst to me, Ricardo Reis had been born” (p. 256).

While Reis’ appearance is vague and nebulous, Alvaro de Campos – the most striking and intriguing of all the Pessoa heteronyms, responsible for the *Keeper of the Sheep* poetic cycle and the “person” Pessoa calls *meu mestre* (“my master”) – emanates in a quite different form:

A year and a half or two years later, it one day occurred to me to play a joke on Sá-Carneiro—to invent a rather complicated bucolic poet whom I would present in some guise of reality that I’ve since forgotten. I spent a few days trying in vain to envision this poet. One day when I’d finally given up—it was March 8th, 1914—I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at once, in a kind of ecstasy I’m unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, “The Keeper of Sheep”. This was followed by the appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me. That was what I immediately felt, and so strong was the feeling that, as soon as those thirty-odd poems were written, I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote, again all at once, the six poems that constitute “Slanting Rain,” by Fernando Pessoa. All at once and with total concentration ... It was the return of Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro. Once Alberto Caeiro had appeared, I instinctively and subconsciously tried to find disciples for him. (Zenith, 2021, p. 256)

As a matter of fact, the heteronyms always manifest themselves during the act of writing – what Pessoa perceives as the “ecstasy” of literary creation. This fact is essential for their formation as part of the creation of the text, author and artefact materializing simultaneously. Hereby occurs the dramatic “appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro”: the other persona emerges from the depth of subjectivity and takes form as a strange but rather solid ontological entity. As an observer, Pessoa immediately gives it a name. The strangeness and paradoxical strength of the dialectic is clearly expressed in the following baffling statement: “my master had appeared in me.” This can be understood in logical terms as an example of Hofstadter’s “strange loop” (2007) – a linear logical move that transpires to be circular, the created entity lying both within and without that which created it, the creator similarly being both its producer and its outcome.

The appearance of this heteronym immediately prompts Pessoa to take another sheet of paper and write his own song cycle. What is the significance of this response? Pessoa tells us that “it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro.” Here, the dialectical tension that erupts between the identities reaches its climax, each fighting for its own existence – one rising as the other fades, one withdrawing when the other appears, as in Jacob’s struggle with Esau.<sup>8</sup>

The heteronyms thus embody a circumstance in which one identity creates another within it, separate yet closely and fiercely interacting. In a certain sense, the two identities constitute a form of circular ontological dialectic in which existence and non-existence, activity and

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<sup>8</sup> “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other” (Gen 25:23).

passivity, exterior and interior, blend and merge, comprising one another à la the Chinese concept of yin-yang. Unlike Barthes' absolute effacement of one-dimensional subjectivity and radical proclamation of "the death of the author," Pessoa – creating as a separate persona – does not expunge himself altogether.

In the continuation of the letter, he sums up his subtle attitude towards his "cosmos" of heteronyms:

And so I created a nonexistent coterie, placing it all in a framework of reality. I ascertained the influences at work and the friendships between them, I listened in myself to their discussions and divergent points of view, and in all of this it seems that I, who created them all, was the one who was least there. It seems that it all went on without me. And thus it seems to go on still.

Pessoa signifies himself here as an empty space, a sort of cosmic zone, peopled with figures and characters. Although he appears to take an active part in this creative event, he then immediately assumes the role of pure observer (what Schopenhauer calls "a clear mirror" or "will-less pure subject" [1909, 1.1.34]), everything happening within him without being initiated by him. Herein, the biblical omnipotence of the "Creator of all" retreats into a passive space within which things seem to "happen by themselves."

I suggest that this theologically-oriented Pessoaan depiction, seen from an interdisciplinary perspective, is reminiscent of Lurianic Kabbalistic ideas regarding the creation of the world. According to this view, in order to make room for the chain of worlds, God had to "contract" into Himself (*tzimtzum*), creating a sort of an empty "womb" for the birth of a separate universe (Scholem, 1971, pp. 37–48). This revolutionary idea of Lurianic Kabbalah assumes that the dialectical movement of creation and evacuation, activity and passivity, was the only way in which the world could have emerged as an "Other" – not part of God but nevertheless created within and out of Him. And so it is dramatically depicted in Rabbi Chaim Vital's *Etz Chaim*:

Prior to Creation, there was only the Infinite Divine Light (*Or Ein Sof*) filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated [...] He contracted (*tzimtzum*) Himself in the point at the center, in the very center of His light. He restricted that light, distancing it to the sides surrounding the central point, so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point [...] After this contraction [...] He drew down from the Infinite Divine Light a single straight line [of light] from His light surrounding [the void] from above to below [into the void], and it chained down descending into that void. [...] In the space of that void He emanated, created, formed and made all the worlds.<sup>9</sup>

Pessoa, who refers to himself as a "rationalist mystic" and was acquainted with Kabbalistic ideas, presents us with a similar mechanism of narrative contraction, subjective identity withdrawing in order to create a space in which the heteronyms could create themselves within and produce their own artefacts– giving birth to the Pessoaan universe.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Etz Chaim, Heichal A"K, anaf 2.

([https://web.archive.org/web/20050124202729/http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/Ari\\_Basics\\_2\\_1st\\_Constriction.asp](https://web.archive.org/web/20050124202729/http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/Ari_Basics_2_1st_Constriction.asp)).

<sup>10</sup> Pessoa's desire to decipher the mysteries of the universe has aroused his deep interest in esotericism, which played an essential role in the poet's thought and work. His study of occultism (Pessoa appeared to have studied and practiced astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism, and theosophy) also led him to the gates of Jewish mysticism,

Summarizing the theoretical aspects of the Pessoaan heteronyms, we may say that the “other” signifies for him first and foremost the alterity of the separate figure who forms himself within the author’s subjective personality, as the latter engages in the act of writing. In Heideggerian terms (2008), this might be formulated as an act of writing that enables the development of an open space (*Lichtung*) in the depths of the writing subject’s personality, whence burst forth – representing themselves in their individual presence – particular entities that actually write the text. This sharply diverges from the Barthesian notion of the “death of the author” because, in contrast to the author’s absolute effacement and annihilation of subjectivity when he or she enters language and writes, it relates to the birth of alternative identities whose alterity derives from their intricate, dialectical relation to the still-existing personal identity of the writer.

The heteronym also differs from the pseudonym, whose firm subjective identity is merely hidden behind a mask – the latter becoming the negative mirror-image of the creator in the case of ironic writing. The mask being directed towards the reader and the free space of interpretation, the reader identifies the personality lying behind it as well as the gap between them. Hereby, the essential element of the construction of the text’s meaning emerges. In contrast, the heteronym acts in the introversive space between the creator and his creation, opening up a sort of liminal space between them, thus allowing for a dizzying plethora of other personas rather than a single mask covering (and intensifying to a certain degree) his or her own face.

The heteronym is thus informed by the logical paradox of the “strange loop” in which the creator and the created stand in a paradoxical circular relationship. Subjective identity functions here as a vacuum that recedes into itself during a kabbalistic-like act of *tzimtzum*, the other identities bursting forth out of it and forming independent entities, the temporary emptiness of subjectivity making room for the emergence of other, self-sustaining entities. In terms of ontological presence, this forms a dynamically and perpetually-created dialectic tension between generative subjective identity and the life-assuming heteronyms. While the writing subject is the prerequisite for this creative process, the withdrawal and evacuation of self-identity allows the heteronyms to appear and create their own works.

The emptying-out of self-identity and voiding of subjectivity can thus be understood as a form of “creative effacement” that resembles the Kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*, Romantic theories of inspiration, and Zen Buddhist notion of subjectivity. Rather than the complete deconstruction of subjectivity – the death of the author in his entirety – it is a *temporary and functional* creative withdrawal of personality into itself as the precondition for the creation of separate identities. In a certain sense, the subject who begets the heteronym – or more accurately, lets it be formed within him or herself – plays the role of passive space, out of which his or her “narrative sons” are born and proceed to produce their own artwork.

This Kabbalistic-like stance is clearly reflected in one of the most eloquent poems in *The Keeper of Sheep*:

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focusing on the Kabbalah. Due to his quite limited knowledge of the Kabbalah, Kabbalistic doctrines appear in his writings circumstantially, usually linked to Freemasonry theories. This affinity led him to declare himself in 1935, the year of his death, loyal to the “secret tradition of Christianity, which has intimate ties with the secret tradition of Israel (holy Kabbalah) and with the hidden essence of Freemasons.”

I write verses in the paper only in my mind,  
 I feel a staff in my hands  
 And see an outline of myself  
 High on a hill,  
 Looking down at my flock and seeing my ideas,  
 Or looking at my ideas and seeing my flock,  
 And vaguely smiling, not understanding what is said,  
 Just pretending to understand ...<sup>11</sup>

### Subjectivity

Our present interest here, however, lies less with the heteronym per se, than the subjectivity that generates it from the depths of its void in the act of writing. Borges embodies this issue in the enigmatic figure of William Shakespeare, the riddle of whose creativity is bound up, in his view, with the bard's ability to breathe life into each one of his characters (Mualem, 2012). In his essay "The Enigma of Shakespeare," he appeals to this competence in order to refute the well-known claim that "Shakespeare" was in fact none other than Christopher Marlowe. While only the protagonists are real in Marlowe's writing, all of Shakespeare's characters come to life. This is true even of those who only make a fleeting appearance – such as Yorick, whose sole existence lies in the brief words spoken by Hamlet as he holds the dead jester's skull.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare thus being the example *par excellence* of infinite creative fecundity, Borges confesses that he tends to think of him "not as a man but as a multitude."

Borges develops this notion in "From Someone to No One" (1950) in light of the Romantic perception of Shakespeare – Hazlitt claiming the bard to be "nothing in himself, and yet he was all that others were, or that could become" and Victor Hugo comparing him to the ocean, "the seedbed of all possible forms" (*SNF*, p. 342). Coleridge went furthest in depicting Shakespeare as embodying the force Spinoza attributed to the divine – the *natura naturans* that creates all creatures and objects.

These ideas all remain within Pessoa's basic structure, in which the author's subjectivity constitutes the formless ontological zero point out of which an endless array of figures emerges. Borges correctly compares them with the negative theologies propounded by such thinkers as John Scotus Erigena, in whose mystical thought *creatio ex nihilo* signifies God as the "nihilistic" source of all creation. Borges refines the view that the author's nihilism produces an infinity – mathematically speaking, an eternal produced by the zero – by asserting: "To be one thing is inexorably not to be all other things; the confused intuition of this truth has induced man to imagine that not to be is more than to be something, and that, in some way, is to be everything" (*SNF*, p. 342).

In both the Borgesian Shakespeare and the Pessoaan heteronyms creative subjectivity is thus nullified in the act of writing, this void giving rise to endless forms. Being in and of itself a formless or a fixed entity, the narrator's subjectivity is ontologically void. The plethora of

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.umfernandopessoa.com/uploads/1/6/1/3/16136746/gr\\_eng.pdf](http://www.umfernandopessoa.com/uploads/1/6/1/3/16136746/gr_eng.pdf) (accessed 30.3.17).

<sup>12</sup> "Let me see. (*takes the skull*) Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen?" (*Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1, page 8).

forms cast out from it as a projection forwards can take shape in the act of writing – in the dizzying multitude of Shakespearean figures and the strange alterity of the Pessoa heteronyms.

Borges's Shakespeare and Pessoa's heteronyms differ strikingly in at least one aspect, however. While Shakespeare's vacuity and depersonalization are permanent states, his self-identity being essentially and perpetually voided, Pessoa's heteronyms are formed by the temporary, functional contraction of personality into itself in order to allow separate entities to take shape and spring forth during the act of writing. In the case of Shakespeare, the disparity is one between absolute ontological effacement; in Pessoa's writing, a functional, dynamic withdrawal of self occurs at the climax of the creative process.<sup>13</sup>

But how does Borges himself relate to the status of the subjective self during the creative process? In a statement made in a lecture given at Texas University, he draws an illuminating link between authorial subjectivity and writing:

Every writer undertakes two quite different works at the same time. One is the particular line he is writing, the particular story he is telling, the particular fable that came to him in a dream, and the other is the image he creates of himself. Perhaps the second task that goes on throughout life is the most important. (Barnstone, 1982, p. 143)

Unlike Shakespeare, this circumstance adduces neither a uni- nor a bi-directional relationship between the writer and his characters – nor even the flourishing of heteronyms from blank subjectivity, as with Pessoa. Here, the move is more encompassing and bold, the author creating a *self-image* via his writing over the course of his life. In other words, his self-image stems from his whole oeuvre. The Archimedean point here is thus not the relationship between the writer and his alien characters; the drama rather unfolds within the author's own subjectivity during the act of writing.

What, then, is the writer's relationship to this weird "image he creates of himself" as he writes? Borges associates this issue above all with the literary experiment of Walt Whitman, whom he regarded as the ideal poetic archetype in his youth.<sup>14</sup> In his early essay "A Note on Walt Whitman" (1932), Borges already hints at the nature of this "experiment" in alluding to the "two Whitmans" – "the amiable, eloquent wild writer, and the poor man of letters" (*OC*, 1:206). One is a hard-up wretch, a barren subject devoted to the writings of Hegel and Emerson, the other the symbol of nascent American democracy. The two antithetical personalities are nonetheless indivisibly connected to one another via the same "great literary experiment." In a lecture delivered at Indiana University, Borges explained that

The central character would be called after the author, Walt Whitman, but he was, firstly, Walt Whitman, the human being, the very unhappy man who wrote *Leaves of Grass*. Then a *magnification, or transmogrification* of that Walt Whitman, who was not the real Walt Whitman at all, or at least not the Whitman his contemporaries knew, but a divine vagabond. (Barnstone, 1982, p. 136 [original italics])

<sup>13</sup> Here we find in fact two distinct theological orientations. As we have noted, Pessoa's heteronyms recall Lurianic Kabbalistic thought, specifically the notion of God's constriction onto himself [tzimtzum]), while Shakespeare's vacuity resembles John Scotus Erigena's nihilistic mystical idea of God as nothing(ness).

<sup>14</sup> As he puts it in his "Autobiographical Essay": "I thought of Whitman not as a great poet, but as the *only* poet. I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman" (1987, p. 30).

Whitman the down-and-out human becomes Whitman the divine roamer. The uncertainty in which the meaning of the split into the two personalities is shrouded is not coincidental. While “magnification” extols the subject in the service of subjectivity in the framework of the self-identical, “transmogrification” embodies an essential metamorphosis – the alterity within subjectivity.

This dialectic forms the key to the palace, as it were. Only here do we find an essential alterity that exists in the drama of the split identity within the depths of subjectivity – the drama of “the other that is the same.” According to Borges’ interpretation of Whitman, during his literary creation an *identity* gradually forms that is simultaneously both his self-glorification and something entirely different.

We are thus faced here with three unprecedented principles. Firstly, identity splits into two, so that the author’s image – or shall we say, his or her narrative personality – stands in a dynamic relationship to his or her subjectivity, which actually creates it. Secondly, the created image is *at once* identical and Other in its relation to the author’s subjectivity. Thirdly, the ongoing act of writing is the force that drives the process as a whole.

Borges’ boldness is epitomized in the idea that this dialectic of birth and alterity exists within subjectivity in an introversive move, in which the other emerges from within in the act of writing. Significantly, rather than diverging categorically from the subjectivity that creates it, the identity generated complements, augments, and reorganizes the original: the other also being the self. Here, the dialectical tension appears to reach its zenith. Rather than the ontological annihilation of self-identity à la Shakespeare or the circular motion of two entities appearing and withdrawing à la Pessoaan heteronyms, the relationship here is between one who gives birth and another who, while being totally other, is *also* him or herself – a dual movement of alterity and self-creation taking place simultaneously.

### Authorial Subjectivity

Barthes describes the writing process as representing the disintegration of the author: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142). Contrarily, herein I have sought to elucidate Borges and Pessoa’s views of authorial subjectivity – or, we might say, the way in which they fight for their lives as subjects destined to be writers. Taking a Heraclitean perspective in which identity runs like a river – dialectic, dynamic, and fluid – we have arrived at a complex, fuzzy perception of the status of self-identity in the writing process. While Pessoa creates new heteronyms separate from the writer’s subjectivity during the act of writing, Borges presents a more dialectical phenomenon in which the self is also the other.

For Pessoa, the drama is a byproduct of the act of writing, the author’s subjectivity self-gathering itself within itself and turning itself into an empty scope that allows the heteronym to emerge, in similar fashion to the Kabbalistic doctrine of contraction (*tzimzum*). Rather than eradicating subjectivity, however, the writer merely withdraws to the passive position of an observer, organizer, and implementer. Borges similarly asserts that the act of writing creates a “split personality” à la “great Whitmanian literary experiment.” As he or she writes, the author creates what we may call a “narrative self,” a figure of this self-arising from his or her oeuvre. This narrative self is simultaneously the same and the other vis-à-vis the authors’ “actual” personal self-identity, the relationship between the two being dramatic, stormy, synergistic, symbiotic, and ambivalent all at once.



The narrative self is thus an augmentation or transformation of the writer's self-identity, the act of writing in its entirety transpiring to be an intimate act of self-creation and self-destruction alike. Here, subjectivity itself takes center stage: while for Pessoa it withdraws in order to let the heteronyms emerge, in Borges the narrative-self reshapes the essence of it, perpetually fashioning it in a subtle yet fiery dialectic between destruction and creation, identity and alterity. Opposing postmodern flat notion of the total annihilation of the author, Borges and Pessoa thus offer more subtle and complex structures regarding the extreme dynamic interplay between writing and self-identity.

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**The Incompetent Antagonism of Wit: A Study of *Hamlet* and *Catch-22***

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### Abstract

Unique among other rhetorical devices, wit can appear complex and banal simultaneously. The clever language can express thought equal to the weight of lengthy discourse in a few words, often with amusing effect. However, despite the complexity of the device, wit only offers a momentary chuckle or clarification of events, easily forgotten in a larger context. This dichotomy of wit operates the plot and theme in many literary texts. Intelligent protagonists employ the device to remedy their problems, believing that the complexity of the response ensures its effectiveness. However, because wit consists of only words, the device falls short of enacting change that action or direct discourse could more appropriately handle. This paper examines the role of wit in *Hamlet* and *Catch-22* to determine how characters rely on wit to affront their problems but succeed only in amplifying them.

*Keywords:* *Catch-22*, comic, *Hamlet*, humour, narrative, wit

As one of the more slippery words in English, wit can easily coalesce with similar terms such as humour and the comic. Moreover, the word possesses several meanings that have exchanged primary use throughout history. For the noun wit, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers thirty-four entries, one of which mainly clarifies the word's sense in literature:

That quality of speech or writing consists of the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness [...]; later always concerning the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way. (Oxford University Press, n.d., paras. 3-4)

For a more detailed distinction between wit and similar terms, we should look to literary studies, in which language forms a more prominent base for discussion. Drawing on amusing language in several literary texts, especially the famous lines of Shakespeare's recurring character Falstaff, A. Haire Foster argues that wit stands apart as active language from related devices of absurd: "the difference between wit and comic is easy: wit is made, the comic is found. Wit is the arrow, the comic is the target" (1956, p. 3). Falstaff exhibits traits that subscribe to Forster's definitions of all three terms. The character ridicules Bardolph with witty quips for his large nose in *Henry IV Part I* and assumes a passive, comic role to the witty designs of others in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Forster posits in his discussion on the three terms that the comic and humour have no difference in their contemporary meanings. In wit, however, Forster (1956) recognises several unique attributes among the other notions of amusement, offering the active device more prestige: "However, wit is a weapon and a toy; it is a weapon of unlimited range. What is the lowest can assail the highest; despotism can always be tempered with epigrams. It can be an effective weapon against injustice and incompetence in high places" (p. 7).

Forster's perception of wit as a weapon recalls the negative qualities of the device found in other definitions. Here, however, the subversive power of the language appears much more effective, limiting the power of tyrants and rectifying injustices. The celebratory language of the passage demonstrates considerable faith in wit, suggesting that the device can surmount any obstacle. Forster offers an aggrandising description of wit but, more importantly, distinguishes the device's effect from those of the comic and humour.

William Hazlitt similarly perceived wit as a device that projects humour and comedy on objects external to a speaker. Hazlitt, however, maintains that wit does not merely ascribe humour to otherwise unentertaining objects but reveals the hidden absurdity within them: "Humour describes the ludicrous as in itself; wit exposes it by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy" (1903, p. 15).

The intellectual quality of wit becomes especially manifest in Hazlitt's description, indicating that the device reveals humour in objects that otherwise may go unnoticed. According to Hazlitt, we may only judge a remark as witty if someone consciously and creatively demonstrates the amusing qualities of an object. A too-obvious fancy belongs under the inferior classification of humorous. Hazlitt's requirement for wit to expose concealed amusement lends significant esteem to the device as an intellectual pursuit.

However, Hazlitt also qualifies his belief in wit's power with an addendum to his definition, noting that the device's effectiveness has a finite range. He claims that although wit has the unusual property of concealed absurdity, the device fails to offer greater insight into matters of

seriousness. Once wit crosses the boundaries of examining frivolity, the language either loses its classification as wit or falls short of unearthing hidden truths. He asserts that wit hovers among the insignificant, a verb choice that suggests indirect and unstable movement, demonstrating the mere playfulness that he perceives in the device. The limitation wit to matters of fancy distinctly contrasts with Forster's faith in the device as an instrument capable of political or social change. In Hazlitt's eyes, only the foolish would apply wit to dire situations that demand more meaningful discourse or action.

In *Literary Wit*, Bruce Michelson (2000) discusses various pieces of scholarship to determine the effect of wit in literature, explicitly inquiring not just into wit but literary wit, which he believes offers greater insight and stronger appeal than its colloquial namesake. He argues that literary wit contributes to the intensity of a literary work despite its apparent frivolity. Michelson's perception of wit as a transcendent force that can find multiple layers of meaning in any context opposes Hazlitt's device restriction. Examining the variety of authors renowned for flippant languages, such as Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, Michelson argues that the economy and resonance of literary wit, especially in epigram, undermines the value of lengthy discourse, providing claims that are difficult to refute.

In *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud (1916) provides an extensive analysis of the social functions of wit and how the device reveals subconscious desires, maintaining that wit allows for the expression of inhibited desires to defy social rules, which in turn results in a pleasurable sensation. If one wishes harm on another, the rules of society forbid the person to act physically on this desire, forcing him to seek a more acceptable means of attack. "Violent hostility, no longer tolerated by law, has been replaced by verbal invectives," says Freud (1916, p. 149). The economic and linguistic qualities of wit establish the immediate accessibility of the device as a means to act against society's rules. Freud argues: "From the beginning, its [wit's] object is to remove inner inhibitions and thereby breaking the social norm still hinder wit, but if one can experience enough pleasure in merely conceiving the language, the potential for more pleasure will surmount the fear of disapprobation, prompting enough courage to speak the words" (1916, p. 164). Once uttered, wit psychologically satisfies the egocentric desire to act against the social norm as much as it is a physical act of defiance.

While Freud's differentiation of wit from humour and comic contributes to our understanding of the concept, his analysis most strikingly presents a less than laudatory portrayal of the device. Unlike Forster or Michelson, who imbue wit with a nearly infinite potential linguistic power, Freud depicts the device as a choice secondary to the action. Wit, according to Freud, serves as compensation for those who cannot speak in genuine discourse or cannot act to correct a problem.

This paper analyses two works of literature that explicitly demonstrate the inability of wit to alleviate dire circumstances: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. In these texts, each of the protagonists erroneously believes that wit will improve difficult situations when it exacerbates them. In *Hamlet*, the Wittenberg-educated prince attempts to revenge his father's murder not with sharp metal but with a less effective sharp tongue, not realising that his cleverness will initiate his tragedy. In *Catch-22*, the text that offers the most complex relationship between a character and wit, the protagonist Yossarian draws on the narrator's language in his inefficacious search for asylum from the war. At the same time, the machine of modernity continues its distortion of society. Characters in each of these texts demonstrate a faulty reliance on wit, amplifying the problems that they intend to mitigate.



## Hamlet and Revenge in Wit

In a study of wit in literary texts, one would have difficulty consulting Shakespeare, whose plays offer considerable wit in their portrayal of humanity, shaping modes of elevated consciousness in many characters. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice and Benedick vilify their past love affair in exchanges of witty insults, ironically revealing their fate as each other's true love. In *Measure for Measure*, Francisca reminds Isabella of her ascetic duties as a nun in witty, circular language, exemplifying Shakespeare's perception of the Catholic clergy's absurdity for participating in inane self-denial. Wit features just as prominently in Shakespeare's tragedies as in his comic plays. The fool in *King Lear* offers humorous commentary on his master's senility with Iago's quips in Othello flavour the villain's diabolical plotting.

Scholars have crafted numerous theories to explain the purpose of witty exchanges and interludes in Shakespeare's dark plays. Some speculate that wit provides temporary relief from the tension of tragedy or that passage of wit grants more credibility to horrific scenes that follow. These theories work if the play breaks away from the main plot to engage in witty discourse but fails to lend a greater understanding of *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare depends on wit almost constantly to drive the plot and enhance the characters.

The wit in *Hamlet* features so prominently that it contributes to the development of the tragedy. To understand how the device operates in the text, we must consider how the protagonist relates to the oppositional qualities of the language. As a Wittenberg-educated scholar, Hamlet highly regards the ingenuity necessary for wit, either failing to understand the limits of mere language or perceiving more vital forces that prevent him from the real action. The prince first expresses his indignation for his mother's hasty remarriage in only a few lines of hushed wit, feeling obligated to keep the peace, but later tries to avenge his father's death through the unhindered strength of his language. However, Hamlet's method of vengeance succeeds only in altering Claudius into the prince as a possible threat. The witty antagonism with which Hamlet addresses the ills of Denmark's royal family poses several characters against him, initiating his tragedy. The prince only recognises a more appropriate response when he sees the determination with which Fortinbras' army marches to Poland, but when Hamlet assumes a similar resolve, his belated change cannot stop the development of the play's disastrous end.

Thus, we can divide Hamlet's response into three distinct phases: the beginning of the play, when Hamlet uses sparse and quiet wit to criticise the alacrity with which the court discontinued mourning his father; the scenes after Hamlet returns from England, when he abandons wit for a more fitting heroic response. This part of the paper will analyse some of these sections to determine the role of wit in fashioning the tragedy of the melancholic Dane.

Before Hamlet encounters his father's ghost, the prince feels frustrated from his mother's sexual relations with his uncle and the general lack of mourning in Denmark, but remains silent because he feels compelled to maintain order within the family and the Kingdom. "It is not, nor it cannot come to good/ But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," he says (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.158-9). Hamlet's wit, therefore, appears sporadically and then only blunted. Shakespeare introduces Hamlet with a line that characterises his cleverness but qualifies the prince's wit to show his restraint. When Claudius refers to Hamlet in court as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son—" the prince responds "a little more than kin, and less than kind", demonstrating his resentment towards his new family structure (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.64-5). Although Hamlet offers his wit as an aside to the audience, attacking Claudius

indirectly, the line predicts that Hamlet will respond with similar wit throughout the play. Hamlet's skill with words becomes more pronounced shortly afterwards when Claudius asks his nephew why the clouds of mourning still hang over him. "Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun", puns Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.6-7). Although Hamlet says this line directly to Claudius, he qualifies it with the differential address of "my lord". At this point in the play, Hamlet resents the forgotten memory of his father but restrains his comical inclination to maintain peace in the family.

However, after the ghost informs Hamlet of his uncle's crime, the prince unleashes the full force of his verbal assault. The prince's scholastic background encourages his value of wit, but determining why the prince forsakes enforcing his words with action remains challenging to understand. A variety of theories could explain Hamlet's aversion to bloody vengeance. Stephen Greenblatt (1983) argues that since the ghost represents a craving to alleviate the pain of fellow men in the afterlife, the prince satisfies his duty to Old Hamlet by merely remembering him. In both its speaking scenes, the ghost frequently utters the imperative "remember me", as if its suffering derives not from its horrible death but the fear of being forgotten. While the influence of the ghost seems to fade as the play progresses, just as memories of our departed loved ones fade, Hamlet absorbs the memory of his father into himself. Phrases at the end of the play, such as "I am Dead", liken Hamlet to his spectral father and his final words, "the rest is Silence", suggest the amelioration of pain (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.2.315-340). In the context of the play, the reiterated expression, 'I am dead' has an odd resonance: "these are the most appropriately spoken words by a ghost. It is as if the spirit of Hamlet's father has not disappeared; his son has incorporated it", asserts Greenblatt (1983, p. 229). Hamlet restrains himself from enacting absolute vengeance because neither he nor the ghost indeed demands it. Therefore, in Greenblatt's argument, the prince employs wit to rectify Denmark's problems because he feels no obligation for bloody action.

Hamlet demonstrates his witty assault on Claudius's legitimacy when he speaks to the King after murdering Polonius. In a tangential and convoluted explanation of how a dead king's remains can find their way into a beggar's stomach, Hamlet ridicules Claudius's authority through an implicit comparison between his uncle and the hypothetical King who must serve a vagabond. In addition to using verbal wit to attack Claudius, Hamlet also contrives witty schemes to bring the King to justice. These plans have such prominence in the play yet seemingly have so little justification that T. S. Eliot famously argues that they derive from Shakespeare's failure to establish events that correlate with the general mood (1919/1975, p. 48). Hamlet relies heavily on wit to attack Claudius throughout the play, and actors often interpret dialogue as not inherently witty.

Hamlet also uses nonsensical wit when he speaks with his fellow friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The prince engages in parleys with them in many passages of the play but extends the acidity of his wit to threaten his schoolmates in the scene following the murder of Polonius:

Hamlet: To be demanded of a sponge, what replication should be made by the son of a king?

Rosencrantz: Take you me for a sponge, my lord.

Hamlet: Ay, Sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers for the King best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape an apple, in the corner of his jaw, first mouth'd, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have glean'd, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

Rosencrantz: I understand you not, my lord.

Hamlet: I am glad of it, a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.  
 Rosencrantz: My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King.  
 Hamlet: The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—  
 Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?  
 Hamlet: Of nothing, brings em to him (Shakespeare,1599/1992, 4.2.12-29)

Hamlet speaks to his schoolmates in seemingly senseless wit to negate his guilt for killing Polonius and prevent them from knowing his actual plan, but in the end, the prince's wit here provides no more means to vengeance than similar language in other passages.

Hamlet's witty dialogue with male characters has no consistent theme other than intricately convoluted language, but when Hamlet addresses the female agents of Claudius, his wit specifically ridicules their chastity. Disgusted with his mother's betrayal of his father's memory, Hamlet attacks all women for failing to resist sexual impulses. Within the intricacies of his wit, Hamlet makes subtle sexual advances toward his love, Ophelia, just before the play within a play:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?  
 Ophelia: No, my Lord.  
 Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?  
 Ophelia: Ay, my lord.  
 Hamlet: Do you think I mean country matters?  
 Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.  
 Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs.  
 Ophelia: What is, my lord?  
 Hamlet: Nothing. (Shakespeare,1599/1992, 3.2.105-14)

Hamlet suggests sexual solicitation, implying that Ophelia would readily accept, punning on the Elizabethan euphemism "nothing" to mean a women's genitals. However, faithful to her subservient position, Ophelia responds to Hamlet's caustic wit with demure naivete.

Some of the play's most famous witty passages occur in the final act, enhanced by the generally dark atmosphere. For instance, although Hamlet certainly demonstrates his bloody approach to vengeance during his duel with Laertes, the prince teases the attendant Osric with witty banter just before the match:

Osric: I know you are not ignorant—  
 Hamlet: I would you did, Sir, yet, in faith, if you did, it would not much approve me.  
 Well, Sir?  
 Osric: You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is—  
 Hamlet: I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence, but to know a man well were to know himself.  
 Osric: I mean, Sir, for his weapon, but in the imputation laid on him by them, in his meed, he's unfellow'd  
 Hamlet: What's his weapon?  
 Osric: That's two of his weapons—but well. (Shakespeare,1599/1992, 5.2.127-37)

Hamlet's twisting of Osric's language, even before the attendant can finish his sentences, recalls the earlier wit that Hamlet has used to baffle his enemies. However, instead of using wit

as an act of hostility, Hamlet employs clever language here in playfulness, merely poking fun at Osric for his admiration of Laertes. Moreover, since Osric comes from a lower station than Hamlet, ridiculing the attendant does not carry the same audacity as deriding the King. Hamlet may mock Osric, but the prince's language does not share the same gravity of wit in earlier scenes.

A similar interlude occurs when Hamlet speaks with the crass and riddling gravedigger. Hamlet takes an inferior stance to another's witty convolution, unlike any other dialogue in the play.

Hamlet: Whose grave's this Sirrah?

First clown: Mine, Sir [...]

Hamlet: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't

First clown: You lie out on't, Sir, and therefore 'tis not yours; for my part, I don not lie in't, yet it is mine.

Hamlet: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

First clown: 'Tis a quick lie, Sir, 'twill away again from me to you.

Hamlet: What man dost thou dig it for?

First clown: For no man, Sir

Hamlet: What woman then?

First clown: For none neither.

Hamlet: Who is to be buried in't?

First clown: One that was a woman, Sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.

(Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.110-27)

Although Hamlet tries to assert his dominance by addressing the clown with the derogatory "sirrah" and punning his meaning of "liest", the gravedigger reverses Hamlet's scholastic dominance with facetious responses and a pun on the prince's use of "quick". The mockery of Hamlet's words so infuriates the prince that he abandons his cleverness for a series of basic questions, which the gravedigger subverts into witty answers. The prince later expresses his disgust for the clown's insolence in a witty comment that affirms his cleverness: "The age is grown so pick'd that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe" (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.130-2). Nevertheless, Hamlet never bests the gravedigger in their witty dialogue. The clown possesses a considerable verbal skill for a character who has no name and speaks almost entirely using state-of-being verbs.

Reconciling the passage with this phase of the play presents several problems. The dialogue occurs in a part of the play primarily devoid of wit, but the passage also has the peculiarity of inverting Hamlet's usual linguistic dominance over other characters. Robert Wilcher argues that the reversal of Hamlet's role confirms that the prince has forsaken his ineffective means of vengeance for a position more appropriate for a hero: "the very mode of duologue reinforces the growing sense of restored order and sanity in the world of Hamlet as the prince drops his aberrant role as a jester and assumes his proper comic and social relationship as straight-man to the familiar rustic clown" (1982, p. 99). Hamlet's frustration with the clown's wit and his assertion of aristocratic authority indicates that the prince realises the inefficacy of mere language, opting for a more practical method of finding justice.

Wilcher, however, also finds evidence in this scene that contradicts the appearance of Hamlet's change. While speaking with Hamlet, the gravedigger discovers Yorick's skull and offers it to the prince, who grieves for the end of the jester's jollity as he looks upon the remains. "Where

be your gibes now, your gambols, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to be set the table on a roar?" asks Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.176-8). Wilcher interprets this lament as a comic apostrophe to a dead object, proof that Hamlet retains some of his former wittiness and that his complete transformation has yet to occur: "Hamlet's lapses into the fool role [...] reveal that Hamlet has not yet found the complete stability that will only come when he moves from the fool's helpless detachment to the action of the 'sweet prince' and 'soldier' (1982, 100).

Whenever Hamlet assumes a more dynamic posture, the prince changes too late to avoid a disastrous, bloody end. Hamlet's witty schemes and suggestions alert Claudius that the prince could threaten his position, prompting the King to contrive arrangements for his ward's end. Through his antics, Hamlet also leads other characters down paths that threaten his safety. Hamlet drives Ophelia towards insanity and then death, which, with the murder of Polonius, incites Laertes' desire for revenge. Hamlet's inclination for wit prolongs the act of justice and worsens the ills in Denmark to such an extent that only death can provide an absolution.

Only Horatio survives the carnage at the end of the play. Since typically only virtuous characters remain after the purging of sin in a tragedy, Shakespeare suggests that Horatio's method of coping with the ills of Denmark proves more substantial than Hamlet's. Like the prince, Horatio studies at Wittenberg, which has conditioned him with a similarly enhanced faculty for language. Shakespeare introduces Horatio with a witty line, as the author does with Hamlet, when Barnardo presumably responds to strange noise during his watch with the inquiry, "What, is Horatio there?" the student answers facetiously, "A piece of him" (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.18-9). If Hamlet's introduction with a witty line predicts his response throughout the rest of the play, then Horatio's initial words should act similarly. However, Horatio demonstrates a response drastically different from the prince's ineffective wit, assuming a more pragmatic reaction to events in the play.

Just as Laertes' demand for immediate, bloody vengeance characterises him as a foil to Hamlet, Horatio similarly enhances the depiction of Hamlet's position through a contrast of behaviour. While Hamlet still laments over his mother's sexuality, Horatio seems aware of greater ills in Denmark, especially in his contemplation during the first scene. "In the gross and scope of mine opinion. / This [appearance of a ghost] bodes some strange eruption to our state," he says (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.68-9). When Horatio meets the apparition, he shares Hamlet's suspicion of its true nature but considers it may be the root of Denmark's disturbing atmosphere. "If thou art privy to the country's fate, / which happily foreknowing may avoid, / O speak!" says Horatio (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.133-5). The imperative with which he addresses the ghost, and the isolation of the final line demonstrate Horatio's feeling of urgency.

Horatio's more reasonable response also qualifies Hamlet's wit throughout much of the play, emphasising the portrayal of its effectiveness. When Claudius storms out after viewing his act of murder in the play-within-a-play, Hamlet celebrates the craft of his deed with Horatio, who does not share the prince's jubilation:

Hamlet: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well, my lord.

Hamlet: Upon the talk of the pois'ning?

Horatio: I did very well, note him. (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 3.2,271-5)

Horatio uses short sentences, repeating the banal phrase “very well” to indicate his understanding and lack of excitement. Horatio has the same capacity for wit as Hamlet but restrains himself when that language provides no benefit. Since Horatio recognises the need for a practical approach to resolving Denmark’s ills, even if he comes from too low a station to enact change, the scholar serves as a model character to contrast with Hamlet, escaping death at the end of the play because through his greater awareness he takes no part in the family quarrel.

Hamlet’s failure to initiate vengeance for his father’s death derives from the value of his language. The prince does not understand that wit consists of mere words and cannot replace the physical act of vengeance. Although Hamlet realises his folly toward the end of the play, his epiphany comes too late to reverse the tragedy in progress. Hamlet’s faith in the exercise of wit instigates his doom.

### ***Catch-22* and Evasion Through Wit**

Plays offer writers a matchless opportunity to explore the nature of wit because the texts entirely consist of spoken dialogue, encouraging the creation of characters who can drive the plot through words alone. As seen in *Hamlet*, the course of action may not follow what the characters intend with their words, but dramatic movement develops from their verbal interaction.

However, the opportunity for plays to examine the role of wit does not exclude other kinds of texts from investigating the device. Some of the most provocative performances of wit unfold in novels and poetry. Renaissance poets and early novelists crafted works with remarkably clever language that still receive attention from scholars today. However, the wit in these texts differs from similar language in plays because it conforms to the discourse of a single authorial voice. Since most novels and poems feature a central narrator who focuses on work philosophy, the explorative aspects of wit must correlate to his thoughts. This understanding of wit places a significant burden on the speaker to manage the device in conjunction with the text’s characters, plot, and theme. Additionally, the centrality of the speaker imposes a more passive role on the characters, who act as objects for the narrator to comment upon in witty language. This relationship of an active speaker to dependent characters mainly manifests itself in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

In the novel, Heller demonstrates the distortion of modern society through his depiction of bureaucratic corruption during the Second World War. The Air Corps base on the island of Pianosa serves as the core setting of the novel, through which other failings of society become manifest. Like *Hamlet*, *Catch-22* features wit that displaces action or direct discourse, serving as an ineffectual remedy for the senselessness of the modern world. However, unlike *Hamlet*, in which the protagonist uses his clever language to confront his problems. Heller’s novel depicts a protagonist who relies on the narrator’s wit to ameliorate his circumstances. Wit in this text has a greater distance from the action emphasising its indirect nature. Although Yossarian demonstrates sensitivity to the inhumanity that surrounds him, he avoids danger by hiding in the hospital or the beds of the acquiescent women while the narrator makes his witty assaults. Yossarian, however, cannot find veritable safety from the inane law of *Catch-22* by mere invasion because he acts in the same manner as the nonsense that threatens him. Yossarian’s failure to respond appropriately continues until the speaker adopts a more sombre tone, exposing the truly horrific nature of modernity. Only at this point does Yossarian recognise a proper heroic role and flees to Sweden as a symbolic means to combat the menace

of his world. This section will analyse Yossarian's reliance on the narrator's wit and the consequent realisation of its uselessness that prompts more fitting desertion.

To understand Yossarian's reluctance to stand against his society, we must first recognise the narrator's use of wit to assault the insane system. The clever language of the narrator provides the only resistance to the logic of *Catch-22* for more than half of the novel. We function primarily to describe the senselessness the Americans are fighting in the Second World War. One early sentence particularly illustrates the narrator's disdain: "All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind, least of all the boys who were laying down their young lives" (Heller, 1961/1995, p.19). The awkward circularity of starting and ending with the same notion of dying soldiers reflects the absurdity of the sacrifice. The narrator emphasises the loss through his reminder of the soldier's youth, referring to them as "boys" and using a superfluous adjective in "young lives". The passive construction of "had been told" suggests that the cultural morality of this sacrifice comes from nowhere and serves an unknown purpose. Although the language in this sentence hints at the morbid aspects of war, its witty construction approaches the horror playfully, using irony to devalue patriotism indirectly.

The narrator attacks not only the insanity of war but also almost every other twisted aspect of modernity, such as religion, McCarthyism and medicine. The description of Major Major's father derides the glowing dependency of agriculture on the government by inverting clichés that traditionally describe the hard work of farmers:

The more alfalfa he did not grow, the more money the government gave him, and he spent every penny he didn't earn on new land to increase the amount of alfalfa he did not produce. Major major's father worked without rest at not growing alfalfa. On winter evenings, he would remain indoors and did not mend his harness, and he sprang out of bed at the crack of noon every day to make sure that the chores would not be done. (Heller, 1961/1995, 104)

The simple, paratactic sentences impart an ironic wholesomeness to the character's torpidity. While most of the verbs for which Major Major's father is the subject have a negative before them, the narrator describes the reward from the government with a positive verb, emphasising the injustice of the system. Moreover, the twisting of common phrases of praise for agricultural workers recalls the ideal of difficult labour from which Major Major's father abstains, augmenting the denigrating depiction of his character.

A passage of similar wit also censures the overwhelming pervasiveness of Milo Minderbinder's capitalism. As in the previous section, the narrator's portrayal of Milo inverts traditional aphorisms of heroism to ridicule the character's marketing savvy:

He had flown fearlessly into danger and criticism by selling petroleum and ball bearings to Germany at reasonable prices to make a good profit and help maintain a balance of power between the contending forces. His nerve under fire was graceful and infinite. With a devotion to the purpose above and beyond the call of duty, he had raised the food price in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him to eat. (Heller, 1961/1995, 456–7)

To illustrate modernity's erroneous praise for Milo's tyrannical capitalism, the narrator refers to selling at "good prices" to make a "good profit", using the double meaning of the word

“good” to indicate both a large amount and a noble pursuit. So many phrases are connected in single sentences that they almost run on incoherently, reflecting Milo’s marketing skills’ overwhelming and unstoppable power. The narrator criticises Major Major’s father and Milo in these passages, but, as in his description of war, the witty playfulness never goes beyond whimsicality to illustrate the detriment of the characters to society.

Although the narrator relies heavily on wit, he also frequently resorts to other devices of the absurd in his satire. If, as Forster and Hazlitt indicate in their definitions, wit reveals hidden deficiencies while humour shows blatant absurdity, the narrator resorts to a combination of wit and humour in his assault. The unpretentious style of the narrator’s wit veers toward humour regardless of comparison. Two passages that ridicule Colonel Cathcart for manipulating the war to advance through the ranks illustrate the speaker’s different levels of amusing language. The first comes from the narrator’s direct description of Cathcart, while the second is taken from a dialogue in which the Chaplain and colonel discuss the establishment of prayer meetings before missions:

He [Cathcart] was someone in the know who was always striving pathetically to find out what was going on. He was a blustering, intrepid bully who brooded inconsolably over the terrible ineradicable impressions he knew he kept making on people of prominence who were scarcely aware that he was even alive. (Heller, 1961/1995, 233-4)

The Chaplain felt his face flush. “I’m sorry, Sir. I just assumed you would want the enlisted men to present since they would be going along on the same mission.”

“Well, I do not. They have got a God and a chaplain of their own, have not they?” (asked Cathcart).

“No, sir.”

“What are you talking about? You mean they pray to the same God we do?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And He listens?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Remarked the colonel, and he snorted to himself in quizzical amusement. (Heller, 1961/1995, 240-1)

In the first passage, the narrator projects absurdity on Cathcart through the intricate manipulation of language. The contradictions of being both perceptive and oblivious and authoritarian and obsequious situate him between two opposite poles of idiocy, illustrating the personal tension of Cathcart and enhancing the denigrating depiction of his character. The narrator loads his description of the first characteristics with adjectives, making the later contradictions more unexpected. The second passage, in contrast, demonstrates the colonel’s absurdity without much effort from the narrator, who merely recounts the dialogue. However, the humorous depiction of Cathcart’s naivete illustrates as much ineptitude as the more skilful language. Wit and humour equally demonstrate the foolishness of the colonel. Despite the more active approach of wit, however, the depiction of Cathcart’s absurdity does not deter him from his pursuit of power that endangers the lives of his subordinates.

Wit pervades *Catch-22* to such an extent that it resonates in the novel’s structure. The narrator leaps from one episode to another without considering continuity or chronology. The most important action has already occurred when the novel begins with Yossarian in the hospital. Arranging each chronologically, the narration even defies conventions of cause and effect



(Merill 1986, p.140). For example, the narrator indicates that Snowden is still alive during the mission to Bologna, yet Yossarian exhibits paranoia in this scene, characteristic of his behaviour after Snowden's death. Even the chapter titles that supposedly indicate a discussion focus often fail to identify the subject matter. The irregular structure resembles the unusual language played in wit and serves the same function.

Despite the complexity and amusement of the narrator's wit, the language can only comment on the dysfunction of modernity, failing to initiate any change. The beginning of the novel symbolically captures the ineffectiveness of wit within the text:

It was love at first sight.

The first time Yossarian saw the Chaplain, he fell madly in love with him.

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of jaundice.  
(Heller, 1961/1995, 7)

The initial lines contain a fragment of quizzical wit, playing on the cliché of falling in love at first sight. Yet without explaining this introduction, the narrator digresses to the main story, withholding the reason behind Yossarian's adoration for several pages. This beginning foreshadows the futility of wit in the rest of the novel. Wit yields to the substance of narration, providing amusing observations that prove as senseless as the system that the device assaults. Because the narrator can only demonstrate the errors of the modern world without correcting them, a character within the text must act against the system to effect change. However, Heller assigns the duty of combating the law of *Catch-22* to a protagonist whose interest in self-preservation leads him to evade the problems through immature actions. More than any other character in the novel, Yossarian recognises the dangers of his society. "They're trying to kill me", Yossarian confides to Clevinger, who only rebukes his friend's paranoia (20). However, the errant captain only responds to the threat in short-term and ineffective means of avoiding his missions. In a futile effort to cancel the mission to Bologna, Yossarian moves the bomb line on the intelligence tent map and arranges for Corporal Snark to pour laundry soap into the squadron's dinner (Heller, 1961/1995, 149 and 155). Yossarian's ability to fake a liver ailment and see everything twice allows him to escape to the hospital frequently. The errant captain also often finds solace in the arms of sensuous women, particularly those of the coy Luciana or the voluptuous Nurse Duckett. Yossarian sleeps with a squat maid in Snowden's bed (Heller, 1961/1995, 203). Although Snowden is still alive simultaneously, the act disregards the young gunner's horrific death, which the reader has already been informed of. Yossarian's evasion of his duties as a protagonist is unfortunate because the reader looks to him to ameliorate the injustices of their shared society. However, because the surrounding wit identifying more serious problems lends its whimsicality to Yossarian's evasiveness, the protagonist's actions seem less significant in comparison, allowing the reader to empathise with him.

Arguably, Yossarian is aware of the narrator's wit and feels that he only needs to protect himself until the device conquers the system. Claiming that a character knows about the fictional constructs of his world certainly presents problems, but the complacency with which Yossarian avoids his enemies suggests that he recognises an alternative force acting for him. Yossarian demonstrates his satisfaction in evasiveness by delighting in Milo's cuisine: "None of the officers in the squadron had ever eaten so well as they regularly ate in Milo's mess hall, and Yossarian wondered awhile if it wasn't perhaps all worth it. However, he burped and remembered that they were trying to kill him, and he sprinted wildly out of the mess hall" (Heller, 1961/1995, 25). Although Yossarian's indifference to the war is brief, his comfort indicates his lack of exertion to rectify his problems. Perhaps reminiscent of the flak that

surrounds him during his missions, a burp reminds Yossarian that his chief concern is survival. Throughout the more significant part of the novel, Yossarian generally perceives no problem in his evasiveness but senses a deficiency in his actions on rare occasions. This awareness becomes most apparent after Yossarian destroys the communication system in his plane to avoid flying to Bologna.

Yossarian only adopts a similar attitude when he can no longer rely on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator removes the wit from his observations, forcing Yossarian to assume a more proper heroic role. The narrator, however, does not entirely remove this wit at a single point in the novel but intermittently abstains from wit until the device vanishes from the text. The Chaplain's realisation of Nately's death exemplifies the exchange between wit and more direct discourse.

The narrator's abstinence from wit pervades most prominently in the delineation of Yossarian's wanderings through the streets of Rome. Heller aptly names the chapter of this description "The Eternal City", recalling the city's importance in fashioning Western civilisation to enhance the disdain for its modern decrepitude. As in the depiction of the Chaplain's grief for Nately, the simplicity of the sentences emphasises the passage's directness and marks a distinct departure from the earlier wit.

Merrill argues that the erratic and repetitive structure of *Catch-22* contributes to the need for Yossarian's desertion. While the novel's scenes initially seem amusing, they become more genuinely horrific as the narrator refrains from illustrating their absurdity. He argues, "this is why one of the funniest novels is finally not very funny, for Heller arrests the reader's laughter and exposes the complacent beliefs he has shared with Yossarian" (Heller, 1961/1995, 150). In this sense, the narrator's initial wit provides an ineffectual placebo for the protagonist and the reader. Yossarian carries us along with his earlier beliefs, first allowing us to accept his evasiveness. However, we also make a reversal similar to Yossarian's when he realises true heroism at the novel's end.

In *Catch-22*, Yossarian depends on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies, evading his duties as a protagonist with actions as equally asinine as the society he lives in. However, the narrator's wit can only comment upon the errors of modernity, failing to provide any means to alleviate them. Yossarian must recognise a proper heroic action to deliver a meaningful assault. When the narrator finally changes his tone, Yossarian realises the horrific aspects of his world, encouraging him to take appropriate action against it. Deserting Sweden, Yossarian takes a symbolic stance that undermines the senselessness of modernity.

### Conclusion

Despite its ability to reveal absurdity, wit fails to rectify any of the problems in each of the texts that we have examined. Hamlet's witty parleys against his enemies only alert Claudius to the prince as a potential threat, initiating the protagonist's tragedy. For Yossarian, wit takes the front against the insanity of the modern world while the errant captain evades his responsibilities in the beds of hospitals and sensuous women. In these two cases, the indirectness and banality of wit prevent the device from enacting positive change, proving more integral to the mode of language than the amusement and complexity that lend it such attractiveness.

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## **The Islamic Other in Post-9/11 America: Reading Resistance in Hamid and Halaby**

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### Abstract

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11th September, 2001, left behind 2977 dead, an altered Manhattan skyline and a changed world order marked by a formidable upsurge of global discourses pertaining to terrorism, multiculturalism, xenophobia, collective memory, and so forth. Indeed, 9/11 inhabits a discursive field of narratives/counter-narratives defying closure. Taking into cognizance this inevitability of myriad discourses, the present paper engages with the politics of the emergence of the discursively constructed Islamic Other in the post-9/11 national imaginary. Using the Foucauldian ideas of Power/Knowledge and “regime of Truth” along with Said’s major premises as are found in the works *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, the paper attempts to debunk the idea that “innocent”, neutral and objective representations in the media have been the norm. It argues that the fanatical, regressive and jihad-driven stereotype of the Islamic Other that gained visibility/ circulation/ legitimisation in the post-9/11 American socio-political culturescape had a Stateist genesis rooted in the reductive, ahistorical, Manichean binary of “us versus them” which essentially constituted the official discourse. It traces the trajectory of the Arab-American experience from initial erasure/ invisibility to hyper-visibility in the post-9/11 years, a time marked by deep fractures in the civil society where xenophobia, racial profiling and jingoistic patriotism became normalised. One way of generating resistance to such workings of power is by launching a counternarrative through the literary text. Consequently, the paper ends with a detailed engagement with two novels, one by Mohsin Hamid and another by Laila Halaby, that resist the official stereotypes/discourses while foregrounding the various registers of Othering in the post-9/11 years.

*Keywords:* 9/11, Arab-American, Foucault, Islamic Other, Said, stereotypes

On September 11, 2001, two fully fuelled airplanes struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, leaving behind 2977 dead, an altered Manhattan skyline and a changed world order. In an extremely well-coordinated terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda, as many as four domestic passenger airliners were hijacked by 19 terrorists on the fateful day and used as missiles to bring down the Twin Towers in a surreal spectacle of bellowing smoke, fire and debris. That same evening, President Bush addressed the nation asserting that “our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts... these acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve” (“Statement”, 2001).

Nine days later addressing a joint session of the Congress, President Bush attempted to impose upon 9/11 discourses the unproblematic Manichaeic binary of “us-versus-them” wherein the United States stood for the success of a democratically elected government that ensured multiple freedoms of religion, speech and dissent. The civilised world could not help but rally to America’s side, for she stood for human freedom and unbounded opportunity. In a binary opposition to the United States was the Islamic Other that stood for all that was anti-civilizational, undemocratic, brutal, oppressive and regressive. The Islamic Other was “the heir to all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century” (“Text”, 2001), who is waiting to destroy “a way of life” and impose upon the world its fascist, radical, totalitarian vision. Interestingly, a nearly identical idea is echoed in The 9/11 Report (2004) three years later, giving evidence of an invariable and official Stateist perspective:

Because the Muslim world has fallen behind the West politically, economically and militarily for the past three centuries, and because few tolerant or secular Muslim democracies provide alternative models for the future, Bin Laden’s message finds receptive ears... The resentment of America and the West is deep, even among leaders of relatively successful Muslim states. (p. 518)

Hence, by dividing the world into two camps, President Bush exhorted all nations that believe in “pluralism, tolerance and freedom” to join in this fight for civilization. In unequivocal words that have now become notoriously familiar, he said that “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Text”, 2001).

Ostensibly, when President Bush offered this unimaginative polarity of “us versus them”, he was talking of nation states. However, such a reductive discourse coupled with jingoistic patriotism (“I will not forget this wound to our country”) and revanchist rhetoric (“Our grief has turned into anger and anger to resolution”) had the potential of carving out deep fractures in civil society, where xenophobia, distrust and racial profiling could become the order of the day. And this is exactly what transpired in the post 9/11 era wherein the figure of the Islamic Other was discursively constructed. Such a foreboding narrative was playing to the interests of the State by providing a formula to legitimise the United States’ protracted military adventurism: the narrative, epitomised by the phrase “War on Terror”, served to generate consensus for an attack on Iraq that was based upon the non-existent threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Indeed, the use of fear psychosis, panoptical surveillance and the creation and subsequent consolidation of fissures along racial, religious and ethnic lines within the national consciousness is a deliberately manufactured, state sponsored social attitude calculated to pre-empt any national, cultural or political soul-searching either at the community or at the individual level. The rise of this phenomenon may be profitably analysed using Foucauldian ideas of Power/Knowledge and what he calls the “regime of truth.”

### **Power/Knowledge and the Foucauldian “Regime of Truth”**

Foucault’s observations on the relationship between power and knowledge and the “modes of objectification by which human beings are made subjects” (Smart, 1985, p. 71) is particularly relevant in the post-9/11 era. In essence the creation of “knowledge” about the Islamic Other is intended to gradually translate into “truth” regarding the Arab or the Muslim; it is predicated upon the exercise of “power” which is capable of producing, circulating and legitimizing a particular “discourse” and concurrently eliminating other “discourses” that may be generated. These four terms—“knowledge,” “truth,” “power” and “discourse”—are inextricably interrelated in Foucault’s poststructuralist thought.

In his essay, “Prison Talk”, Foucault (1972) says, “it is impossible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (p. 52). This would imply that on the one hand knowledge is an integral part of the struggle for power, while on the other the very act of producing knowledge is tantamount to laying a claim to power. Hence, Foucault coins the compound “knowledge/power” to indicate the relationship between the two elements. Imbalances of power, whether between institutions or groups of people, will inevitably lead to the production of knowledge about the less powerful/marginalised groups, and this knowledge is produced by those who exercise power and thus wield society’s mechanisms of persuasion. Foucault thus debunks the myth of the dedicated scholars producing “disinterested knowledge”: it is power/knowledge which determines what will be disseminated as knowledge as well as what is worthy of being known. An important implication of this interrelation between knowledge and power is that “what we take to be true or false, indeed the very distinction itself is located within a political field” (Smart, 1985, p. 76). For Foucault knowledge is the product of a certain discourse which has enabled it to be formulated in the first place.

In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1989), Foucault tells us that the term “discourse” refers to “the general domain of all statements, and sometimes as individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (p. 90). Such a “regulated practice” formulates discourse to be the structures/rules that make certain utterances possible and at the same time affords it legitimacy and visibility. Hence discourse may be looked upon as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1989, p. 54). In his interview titled “Truth and Power”, Foucault (1972) views truth as not something transcendental, i.e. “outside power”, but as a “thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power” (p. 131). He then goes on to elaborate on the concept of “regime of truth.” Falling back on the circular relationship between knowledge and power Foucault argues that truth is produced, sustained, circulated, legitimised and regulated by procedures and techniques that are “political”. Alternatively, truth itself reinforces and induces the effects of power. In the words of Foucault:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, and the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; that status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1972, p.131)

Hence truth is not universal but contingent and predicated upon the operation of power that endorses its production, circulation and regulation.



If truth can lay claims to no transcendental universality in the post-Foucauldian world, what passes for truth is the group of statements that are sanctioned by “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated” (Foucault, 1972, p.132). In the post 9/11 era, “this ensemble of rules” or discursive formations regarding the Islamic Other made possible the production and circulation of a homogeneous, non-individuated, fanatical, regressive, terror-affiliated figure of the Muslim. Given the official dissemination of a quasi-xenophobic discourse such a representation found legitimacy in the prevailing “regime of truth.” The national imaginary, already in the grip of a fear psychosis, held on to this representation as an immutable version of “truth,” a “truth” that was at least partially manufactured by the apparatus of the state. As such, the politics surrounding the representation of Muslim or Arab Other is carried out in a discursive field where, as Edward Said observed, “malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West” (1997, p. xii).

### Edward Said: Un/Covering Islam

Postcolonial theory in general, and especially in the works of Palestinian-American critic Edward Said (1935-2003), can be productively used to make sense of the politics of representation in the post 9/11 scenario. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is a devastating critique of how the West “constructs” the Orient, which is more specifically the Islamic Middle East, through the production of knowledge within the framework of a conscious and determined effort at domination. Said examines how the Orient is “constructed” through imaginative representations such as novels, or through purportedly factual narratives such as travelogues and journalistic reports. It is also constructed through claims to knowledge about Oriental historical and cultural specificities as in academic, anthropological, cultural and political tracts. Together, all these writings give birth to a Foucauldian discourse that makes production and articulation of “knowledge” about the Orient possible. Such production of knowledge is not disinterested, but is instrumental in furthering a hegemonic agenda. In the Introduction to *Orientalism*, Said says that

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (p. 3)

In *Covering Islam* (1997), Said foregrounds the politics of representation with respect to the media. With its selective foregrounding and erasures, the media determines how the Western world should view Islam and the Muslim world. In a chapter aptly titled “Knowledge and Power” Said observes that

For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is ‘news’ of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government, the geopolitical strategist, and... the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to Western civilization...[N]egative images of Islam continue to be very much more prevalent than any others, and that such images correspond not to what Islam “is” ...but to what prominent sectors of a particular society take it to be. Those sectors have the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image therefore becomes more prevalent, more present, than all others. (1997, p. 144)

This is the crux of Said's argument, and the intense focus on Islam in the last few decades has had the effect of loading Western consciousness with "speculations about the latest conspiracy to blow up buildings, sabotage commercial airliners, and poison water supplies" (Said, 1997, p. xi). Hence, Islam has come to stand for fundamentalism, oppression of women, and primitive socio-cultural structures, as is evidenced by the beheadings and stoning; it is also anti-intellectual, as seen in numerous cases of book burning; restrictive in matters of personal choice, and a cause of conflict all over the world. The production and proliferation of such a discourse relates to a homogeneous, undifferentiated monolith termed "Islam". But such an entity does not exist: "'Islam' defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages and of course, an infinite number of different experiences" (Said, 1997, p. xvi). Local and concrete circumstances wherein certain events transpire are ignored, and situations are removed from their contextual significations when considered within the abstract monolith termed "Islam".

Acknowledging Islam's heterogeneity would open spaces for contesting monolithic interpretations where more nuanced engagements could be methodised. The layered problematisations that might take into cognizance the history, sociology, language and culture associated with Islam and its diversity are inhibited by the enduring impress of that simplistic binary wherein Muslims are represented as a troublesome and often treacherous presence, inimical to the values of individualism and freedom that are cherished in Western democracies.

Insofar as all representation in the post-Foucauldian world can be interpreted as a function of power and therefore never "innocent", it is interesting to see how Muslims are extrapolated from context-specific controversies and painted as "a homogeneous, zombie-like body, incapable of independent thought and liable to be whipped into a frenzy at the least disturbance to their unchanging backward worldview" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011, p.1). The mainstream media and cultural productions are marked by the ubiquity of such structures of representation and the circulation of various reductive tropes about the Muslim Other. Hence the bearded fanatic, the veiled and hence obviously oppressed woman, the jihad-driven terrorist—these are the stereotypes of the Muslim that are etched permanently on the national consciousness by way of their repeated circulation and endorsement by the prevailing "regime of truth." Unquestionably, the markers of socio-cultural differences like the dress or the body type or even material practices and behaviour come to be construed as "a kind of moral index...cementing the threatening strangeness of the Muslim Other" (Morey & Yaqin, 2011, p. 3). In a wholesale distortion of Islam and its culture in all its diversity these representations tend to be static and homogeneous; the attempt is to "fix" the Other to delimit the potential of its perceived threat. Hence, the reliance on stereotypes as instruments of representation and containment. There is a central ambivalence built into the politics of stereotyping. Stereotypes attempt to stabilise the Other as a category that is the result of thorough analyses and therefore "known". The result is incessant repetition that is marked by an anxiety to arrest the stereotype, to freeze it as it were, to prevent it from metamorphosing. The Islamic Other is a monolithic entity that is totally "knowable" and is hence frozen into certain reductive tropes and stereotypes. However, the ambivalence resulting from the fact that the Other exceeds the stereotypes and has the potential to breach containment necessitates a program of repetition *ad infinitum* (Bhabha, 1994).

### **From Invisibility to Hyper-Visibility: Socio-Cultural Trajectory of Arab-Americans**

It is interesting to note that although the primary marker of identity for Arab-Americans today is the monolithic banner of “Islam,” the Arabs who immigrated to the United States in what is known as the first wave of migration (1880-1945) were predominantly Christians from Syria and Lebanon. The pioneer immigrants had “strong traditional loyalties with little or no concept of social order beyond sect, village of origin, or family (Samhan, 1987, p. 12). These categories of identity were not recognised in the United States, and because they migrated from an Ottoman province (Syria), the U.S. official records classified them as Turks. Furthermore, because Greeks, Albanians, Armenians and other Eastern groups were all categorized as Turks by the state, the Arab identity was at best an ambiguous one where the US government emphasised their non-European origin despite their religious affiliation. However, what is significant is that “most early immigrants were nationally committed to their new home, the United States, even though they remained culturally and socially attached to their homeland” (Naber, 2010, p. 39)

The second wave of immigrants who arrived between 1945 and 1965 included a larger number of Muslim immigrants along with a large number of refugees who had been displaced by the 1948 Palestine War. There was a distinct change in the political allegiance and demographic makeup of this set of immigrants. Firstly, a greater percentage of the immigrants were Muslims. Also, unlike the first wave, the second wave had a larger number of professionals and university students. Furthermore post World War II, with the emergence of political autonomy of several Arab nations, the immigrants’ identification with the category of “Arab” was more pronouncedly political adumbrating new and specific forms of Arab nationalism in the US public space leading to the gradual crystallisation of a distinct Arab-American identity (Naber 2010, p. 40).

The third wave of immigrants followed the “The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965”, also known as the Hart-Celler Act which abolished the quota system based on national origins that had been American immigration policy since the 1920s. War in the Arab world also contributed to the increase in the Arab immigration. Nevertheless, the third wave of Arab immigrants were distinguished by “an intensified political consciousness” (Naber 2010, p. 40) leading to a stronger sense of Arab nationalism and a proportionately weaker civic identification. The Arab- Israeli war of 1967 marked a turning point in the development of a distinct Arab-American identity, fuelled predominantly by a feeling of glaring Arab dispossession. Arabs, Middle Easterners and Muslims generally were made to coalesce into a monolithic category and, according to Naber (2010), the media presented them as “one of the preeminent enemies of the West” (p. 41).

The US alliance with Israel gave Arab Americans their first taste of programmed exclusion leading to the rise of an ethno-political consciousness. On the other side of the divide many Americans of Arab descent, who had previously identified themselves according to their country of origin—or generically as “American” – coalesced, as a political strategy, under the label of Arab-Americans. Consequently, in the post 1960’s a form of anti-Arab racism was gradually entrenched in mainstream American society engendered by the Arab political activity in the United States. This is what Helen Hatab Samhan (1987) calls “political racism that takes prejudice and exclusion out of the arena for personal relations into the arena of public information and public policy” (p. 16). In essence this implied the political activity of Arab Americans was singled out for attacks, and not the individual Arab per se.

Therefore, racism directed against Arab Americans, political or otherwise, served to increase tensions between Arab-Americans and mainstream US culture and, as a consequence, the politically inflected category of Arab-Americans who had hitherto never really figured prominently in the national consciousness gradually gained visibility. Along the political register, the Arab-American identity was conflated with a pro-Palestine and anti-Israel discourse. Along the register of popular visual and media culture the Arab emerged as a monolithic category despite myriad religious, ethnic and regional affiliations. And finally, along the register of religion, Islam was superimposed seamlessly on the Arab American identity, which “fixed” all Arab Americans as Muslims.

Hence, the post-1960’s period saw the creation and gradual entrenchment of borders within the borders of the nation; anti-Arab racism led to “the marginalization of Arabs as it is informed by exclusionary conceptions of Americanness,... the profiling of Arabs based on name, religion or country of origin, and the elimination of civil liberties based on distrust of the entire group rather than on individuals who may merit suspicion” (Salaita, 2006, p. 13). What started as political racism gradually expanded into the larger public sphere. When 9/11 happened, the situation became more vitriolic and oppressive, adding fresh dimensions to the existing situation in three mutually overlapping registers.

Firstly, racism notwithstanding, the peripherality or marginality of the Arab American was substituted by a glaring conspicuousness. An insatiable curiosity about Arabs and Arab Americans was the order of the day with everybody from the lay American to the high-ranking politicians wanting to know about the people who had irrevocably punctured the mythos of American invincibility and altered the American way of life. The media worked overtime disseminating and demystifying the Arab and concurrently Islam to the rest of America and ended up ossifying prevalent derogatory stereotypes. What Nadine Naber (2010) called the “invisibility” of the “ambiguous insiders” was replaced by a hypervisibility that resembles the Foucauldian panoptican gaze of perpetual surveillance and obligation to conform.

Secondly, the explosion of the discourse on Arab Americans in the public sphere, whether it be media or academic, required the Arab Americans to define themselves and “transmit and translate their culture to mainstream Americans” (Salaita, 2012, p. 149). Such a demand carried its own self-defeating pitfalls. Given the circulation of spurious stereotypes in a media-saturated public consciousness, the community was always-already written off as violent, retrogressive and prone to terrorism. Post-9/11, the five million Arab-Americans who were either ignored or outright slandered, were offered unceasing attention and asked to define and redefine themselves on a daily basis so as to scrutinize their assimilation into Americanness. Further, as Steven Salaita (2012) points out, the Arab Americans did not have “a mature scholarly apparatus” (p. 148) before 9/11 that could be profitably used to resist the mainstream definition and activate representational counter discourses. Hence the figure of the Arab was always-already spoken for. Reformulating a self-image was of paramount significance but was essentially lacking:

More than anybody, Arab Americans experienced far-reaching socio-political implications following 9/11 without, unfortunately, generating a corresponding body of internally constructed — i.e., Arab American produced scholarship — to examine the rapid transformations occurring in the community. ...Most importantly, though, Arab Americans did not have a mature scholarly apparatus before 9/11. (Salaita, 2012, p. 148)

Echoing similar reservations, though in a generalised context, Said says that the experts whose field is modern Islam, “worked within an agreed-upon framework for research formed according to notions decidedly not set in the Islamic world (1997, p. 19). This lack is highly problematic, for the Arab American community “continues to enhance its ambivalence by allowing the dominant society to define it and speak on its behalf” (Salaita, 2012, p. 153).

Thirdly, the discourse of what has been labelled by Steven Salaita as “imperative patriotism” (2012, p. 154) saturated public consciousness. Patriotism was to be a manifest signifier of being American, which defines civilizational and ideational progress. President Bush’s artless binary where one is either “with us or against us” is played out in American public space as uncritical patriotism bordering on jingoism. Arab Americans had to be ostensibly patriotic by supporting American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. This patriotism as a marker of assimilation was underscored by xenophobic sentiments that propose the label “American” as a stable, fixed identity rooted in physical and cultural Whiteness and Christianity, an identity for which many immigrants do not qualify. Hence, statements like “If you don’t like America why don’t you just leave” gained circulation, setting the limits of discourse and pre-empting the activation of an alternative discourse. At a popular level it was assumed that “to be a ‘true’ American was to be patriotic and capitalist and less explicitly, Christian and White” (Salaita, 2012, p. 156).

### **Resistant Voices and Literary Representation: Hamid and Halaby**

The politics of representation rest on slippery grounds, always haunted by an anxiety of the anarchic, uncontrolled “spillage” of the Other. Hence, a fundamental ambivalence is instituted by an anxious repetition in order to “fix” the Other continually in place and avoid being subverted by counternarratives, by a “writing back” to the privileged “metropolis” of representation. Diasporic Muslim writers like Laila Halaby and Mohsin Hamid have scripted narratives that resist the Anglo-American conflation of Islam and fundamentalism, foregrounding the Muslim migrant experience in the wake of 9/11 along registers of racism and Islamophobia, foregrounding as well a Third World perspective of how the United States’ monopoly in shaping the destinies of nations has been counterproductive.

Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is perhaps the first novel that tries to reconfigure 9/11 by locating it in a non-Western field of discourse. It is in the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by the protagonist, Changez, to an un-named American at a tea-stall in a crowded hub of Lahore. The identity of the American and the purpose of his visit remain ambiguous and hence threatening. The novel is the story of Changez’s stay in America first as an international scholarship student and later as a management analyst. Invited into “the ranks of meritocracy” (Hamid, 2007, p. 4) by the pragmatic and effective American system, Changez joins Princeton and excels in that ruthlessly competitive academic milieu. Graduating from Princeton, he is offered a dream position by the extremely coveted valuation firm Underwood Samson and Company. This enables him to penetrate the sphere of the financial elite in the US while his career takes on a steady upward graph. He is determined to “assimilate and claim his own piece of an American dream defined in terms of power, money, and prestige” (Scanlan, 2013, p. 30). On the personal front he falls obsessively in love with Erica, an amazingly stunning lady whom he meets on a holidaying trip to Greece with fellow Princetonians. However, Erica’s perpetual melancholia on account of the loss of her childhood love to cancer dooms the relationship from the start. Meanwhile, 9/11 ushers in an America that overnight turns him from a welcome immigrant protégé into a terrorist suspect on account of his religion and nationality. In a moment of epiphany, he perceives his always-already suspect status in the vast rubric of the American body politic, kindling a sense of lost identity

based on nation and culture. In an act of restored intellectual agency, Changez realises that “America had to be stopped in the interest...of the rest of humanity” (Hamid, 2007, p.168) and returns to Pakistan to take up the job of a radical university lecturer.

The resistance posited by *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) to the all-pervasive US hegemony is operative on various levels of the narrative – structural, thematic, symbolic and even in the name itself. Hamid’s use of the dramatic monologue is a structural trope signifying recovered selfhood through the agency of articulation. It is as if the “Other speaks back” and he speaks back with a vengeance. In a novelistic strategy of dehierarchisation, “the voices of Erica, Jim, Wainwright et al., ...are ventriloquized by Changez” (Morey, 2011, p. 139). Further, the title itself destabilises established understandings of “fundamentalism” and unsettles dominant formulations. It promises the seductive lure of a “confession” along the lines of Ed Husain’s *The Islamist* (2007) where a former radical Islamist has come round to the ways of “civilisation” and “enlightenment”. Changez, who is an epitome of US scholastic and economic elitism, cannot be considered a religious fundamentalist by any stretch of the imagination. During his trainee days in Underwood Samson he was continually exhorted to “focus on the fundamentals” which signified, “a single-minded attention to financial detail” (Hamid, 2007, p. 98) so as to maximise profits. In a playful polysemy, the fundamentalism of the title is linked to the ruthless logic of American acquisitive and interventionist corporate culture. Araujo remarks, “Financial fundamentalism, rather than...Islamic terrorism... moves the novel” (2015, p. 109).

It is in Manila during one of his tours where he heartlessly appraises companies that 9/11 happens, rupturing his newly found authority as an agent of the ubiquitous and omnipotent American financial networks. With remarkable candour he recounts his response as he saw the fall of the Towers: “And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased...that someone so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, 2007, p. 72-73). Indeed, Changez asks his American interlocutor whether he felt no joy at seeing “American munitions laying waste the structure of your enemies?” (Hamid, 2007, p. 73). Hence Hamid embeds 9/11 in a historical past which had its fair share of political culpability and debunks the myth of a national “fall” from innocence. But since 9/11 imposed the regime of “imperative patriotism” necessitating a visible participation in the discourse of shock and anguish, Changez publicly represses being “remarkably pleased.” On his way back to New York his primary identity in the public domain and for the State becomes his religion. He is strip-searched at the Manila airport and made to join the queue for foreigners at New York. His boarding the flight disorients other passengers. He could feel the palpable pressure to define himself, make public his allegiance, be vocal in condemnation and grief: “I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face” (Hamid, 2007, p. 74).

With the coming months the fractures in the social body deepen and America’s rejection of the Other in the form of Changez, whose identity as a Pakistani immigrant Muslim is triply suspect, takes on sinister proportions. The turning point in this unequal narrative of fear and loathing comes when Changez meets Juan-Batista, the chief of a publishing house he has gone to value, at Valparaiso, Chile. In what turns out to be a moment of epiphany, Juan-Batista familiarises Changez with the word “janissary”: “Christian boys...captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army...They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilisations, so they had nothing to turn to” (Hamid, 2007, p. 151). Changez realises that he had all along been a janissary to the imperial and financial machinations of the United States, which was presently laying waste to Afghanistan and would have no qualms in destroying his country too.

At a symbolic level, Erica's melancholia and obsession with the death of her high-school lover Chris, leading to her mental collapse and possible suicide, may be read as an allegory of the post-9/11 American nation. Am/Erica is a nation caught up in the ceaseless cycles of melancholia for the loss of a powerful, confident past epitomised in a pre-9/11 state of invincibility and exceptionalism. Erica's retreat into the past "mirrors America's cultural and political retreat into the nations' cherished myths and legends" (Randall, 2011, p. 140). Her ultimate loss of mental equilibrium links up with the imposing of an Agambenian "state of exception" within the borders and irrational aggression without. Erica's rejection of Changez signifies America's insularity towards the Other. In a desperate attempt to break open her impenetrability, Changez suggests that she pretend that he is Chris while making love, suggesting the "demands America makes upon the migrant: to forget the past and become totally immersed in Americanness" (Nash, 2011, p. 110).

Yet another voice of resistance to the post-9/11 culture of instituting fault lines within the nation itself is Laila Halaby's second novel, *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). The novel makes a fictional incursion into the post 9/11 American fractured socio-cultural fabric. Halaby's hybrid location as an Arizona-based writer of Palestinian-Jordanian and white American parentage provides her with the experiential knowledge of both the American and the Arab Muslim cultures, making her novel inhabit a politically inflected "in-between" space after the fall of the Towers. In the preface Halaby adumbrates the conflation of 9/11 and Arab identity which is problematised in the rest of the novel: "Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslim. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything" (p. viii). The story revolves around the lives of this Jordanian, childless, professional couple, who belong to the class of fairly assimilated, upwardly mobile immigrants chasing their version of a fantasy-ridden, consumerist American Dream without any identification with the ideology of radical Islam. Jassim is a hydrologist while his wife, Salwa is a banker and a trainee real estate agent. After the terror attacks of September 11 both are impacted by the spurious hypervisibility of their Arab identity. In a blurring of the personal and the political, Jassim kills an American teenager who turns out to be a paranoid Arab-hater leading to an FBI investigation and ultimately the loss of his job, despite his excellent service credentials. Salwa's desire to have a baby against her husband's wishes leads to a miscarriage and, to compensate for the marital estrangement that had been growing for some time, she has a steamy love affair with Jake, a co-worker who, feeling rebuffed in her decision to return to Jordan, assaults her grievously in a drug-induced stupor.

The way markers of Muslim identity stand conflated with threat and suspicion was soon evident when the couple go shopping to a department store shortly after September 11. Amber, the sales clerk, calls security on Jassim, her explanation being, "I thought he looked suspicious" (Halaby, 2007, p. 31). The fact that she is merely performing the Stateist demands of being its eyes and ears shows the measure of her acceptance of the politics of exclusion. It also lends her a feeling of participation in the broader narrative of the war against terror. An analogous political culture is enacted through the surveillance of Jack Franks, a former marine whom Jassim meets during his morning ritual of swimming. Jack acts as a citizen spy for the local FBI office, keeping a tab on Jassim's activities. This epitomises the dangers of conflating patriotism with racial/ethnic profiling that equated Muslim/Arab identity with plausible terrorist actions.

The same undercurrent of Islamophobia runs through the investigations into Jassim's accident conducted by the FBI. The teenager that Jassim hit had his skateboard adorned with vituperative anti-Arab stickers and, though Jassim is cleared of any wrongdoing by the officer

at the spot, the case is reopened to prove that Jassim had intentionally run over the boy in an act of racist rage. The investigation soon focuses on Jassim's professional access to the city's water supply as a hydrologist, leading to an unfounded shadow of suspicion settling over him. Even his progressive, anti-war, anti-Republican boss Marcus capitulates to this construction of Arab terror that grips the popular imaginary, as he was assailed by "that vague doubt that had been lodged way back in his brain" (Halaby, 2007, p. 237).

The same miasma of distrust and suspicion dogs Salwa at her workplace. Her client, who is a native Tusconan, American born and raised, wants to know where she is from and, learning that she is a Palestinian from Jordan, feels she would "feel more comfortable working with someone I can understand better" (Halaby, 2007, p. 114). The discourse of "imperative patriotism" (p. 155) that Salaita (2012) talks about is manifest when Salwa's boss suggests that she mark her car with an American flag decal which "will let them know where you stand" (Halaby, 2007, p. 55). The flag becomes not only a totemic object of American cathexis and a protective patina but also a signifier of self-definition that is being demanded and a signature of Stateist complicity. At a more personal level, Salwa is reminded of how in the American consciousness her identity is simply a function of her ethnicity, with all its stereotypical, malignant connotations, when Jake asks her if she is running back to her "pigsty". The "pigsty" is the Middle East, the "Otherised" space always imagined in negative, regressive terms. The invective he hurls at her while attacking her with a picture frame, "Arab bitch", leaves no doubt about the primary marker around which her identity is constructed for white, Christian America. The novel ends in a note of ambiguity: we are not sure whether Salwa will survive the assault. Katharina Motyl (2011) reads this as "an ambiguous outlook on the future of Arabs in the U.S." (p. 233).

### **Conclusion**

Both Mohsin Hamid and Laila Halaby activate a counter discourse to the discursively created stereotype of the Islamic Other in the post-9/11 America. Neither Changez nor Salwa and Jassim fall into the reductive trope of the "the bearded Muslim fanatic, the oppressed, veiled woman, the duplicitous terrorist who lives among "us" the better to bring about our destruction" (Morley & Yaqin, 2011, p. 2). Such a spurious "framing" was carried along the registers of the political and cultural spheres with the help of the media. Stereotyping and homogenisation of Muslims led to the "production" of a version of "truth" that carried legitimacy and gained circulation. Since the limits of discourse were firmly established by the prevailing "regime of truth", these voices of dissent assume paramount significance. In essence, writers like Hamid and Halaby attempt to subvert and dehierarchise the power structure that persistently create/endorse a discourse where Islam is always portrayed in negative, regressive and spurious terms.



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**The Beasts and the Beastly: Colonial Discourse and the (Non-)human  
Animals of Pantisocracy**

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### Abstract

In 1794 Coleridge and Southey made a plan to set up a utopian community on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania; the proposed society was christened Pantisocracy. The project, however, did not materialize. The differences between Coleridge and Southey regarding the place of servants in Pantisocracy and an uncertainty over the role of women in the community have often been cited as the key issues that led to the failure of the project. However, a close attention to Coleridge and Southey's writings on Pantisocracy reveals that a third reason for the abandonment was the anxiety of the two poets over the non-human animals and native humans of America. Considering critical theory's interest in posthuman issues, the present paper revolves around the question of the non-human animals in Pantisocracy. It contends that the non-human animals are central to an understanding of the utopian scheme and aims to discuss the role of non-human animals in the construction of racial other and in the formation of colonial discourse. Further, it proffers the argument that the human-non-human entanglement that is witnessed in issues regarding Pantisocracy underscores the fact that human agency is an assemblage of the human and the nonhuman actors.

*Keywords:* colonialism, humanism, non-human animals, Pantisocracy, race

In June 1794 on his first walking tour to Oxford, S. T. Coleridge met Robert Southey in his room at Balliol College and soon they became good friends. Their friendship thrived as both were inspired by the radical politics of the time and had a shared sense of disillusionment with the contemporary socio-political order of Britain. The scheme to set up a utopian community on banks of Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania was born out of this common discontent with the corrupting climate and oppressive socio-political order of Britain. The proposed egalitarian community was christened Pantisocracy by Coleridge. However, this project to build an ideal community did not materialize. It failed for several reasons. Some practical causes behind the failure have been identified as lack of funds, Southey's journey to Portugal (1795), Coleridge's marriage and loss of enthusiasm, and so forth. However, the major issues leading to the abandonment of the project was ideological in nature: The disagreement between Coleridge and Southey regarding the place of servants in Pantisocracy and their uncertainty over the role of women in their proposed society were two main issues that led to the abandonment of the project.

Another less highlighted but important matter that forced them pull out was their fear of the non-human animals and “savage” native tribes of the American wilderness. Coleridge and Southey were deeply troubled by the possible threat to their proposed community from the beasts and the “bestly” natives of the Americas. Although much has been written on the Pantisocracy as a major example of Romantic radicalism and utopianism (Roe 1988, p. 113–115, 211–212) and the project has been criticised for its colonial implications (McQusick 1998, p. 107–128), the non-human animals of this utopian scheme have received little attention. The present article aims to address this research gap taking into account the posthuman turn in critical thinking and the rising demand for paying attention to the non-human animals for a better appreciation of colonial history and colonial discourse formation (Deb Roy and Sivasundaram 2015).

The article is influenced by Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2021) thesis that the “planetary” (as opposed to the “global”) is a “dynamic ensemble of relationship” (p. 70), and Bruno Latour's (1999) view that agency is a property of the collective, an assemblage of the human and non-human actors.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this article follows the methodology and critical perspectives developed in the special section of the journal *South Africa and the Middle East* (Vol. 35, No. 1, 2015), “Nonhuman Empires,” dedicated to the consideration of non-humans in colonial and imperial spaces. The editors of the section underscore the urgent need to bring the animals in colonial spaces into the domain of critical discourse because, they argue, neither animal studies scholars nor postcolonial critics have given adequate attention to non-human life in the colonies. The present article brings the animals of Pantisocracy into the ambit of (postcolonial/posthuman) criticism and argues that an analysis of the animals of Pantisocracy can provide important insights into the mechanism of violence in the colonies. Secondly, by locating the connection between speciesism and racism in Pantisocracy, it lays bare the important role non-human animals played in the formation of racial and colonial discourses.

### **The Pennsylvanian Utopia**

Inspired by the radical thinkers of the time and the post-French revolution political ardour in England,<sup>2</sup> Coleridge and Southey considered the banks of Susquehanna in Pennsylvania an

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<sup>1</sup> It is a basic theme in Latour's writings. See Latour, “A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans,” *Pandora's Hope*, 174–93.

<sup>2</sup> Pantisocracy, as summarised by Edmund White, “may be described as a fusion of ideas from Paine, Priestley, Hartley, Godwin, and Dyer concerning human rights, the perfectibility of mankind, civil liberty, religious

ideal place to escape from “terrors and dilemmas of European history” and materialize their revolutionary dream (McKusick 1998, p. 113; Carol Bolton 2006, p. 108). The structures of inequality existing in the English society troubled both the poets. As related in a letter to Grosvenor Charles Bedford (Feb., 1793), Southey nurtured the idea of fleeing from the “artificial distinctions” in England and find a new home “where all should be convenient without luxury all satisfied without profusion” (CLRS 1791-1797, No. 42).<sup>3</sup> In Coleridge, he found a perfect companion to explore the possibility of migrating to some virgin land and establish a utopian social order. In two small verses on Pantisocracy written in 1794, Coleridge explored his despondency and shame of living in England and his wish to travel beyond the Atlantic in search of peace:

No more endure to weigh  
The Shame and Anguish of the evil Day,  
Wisely forgetful! O'er the Ocean swell  
Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag'd Dell.  
(“Pantisocracy” *The Complete Poems*, p.57, ll.2-5)

The other verse titled “On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America” (*The Complete Poems*, p. 57) also harps on the “pale anxiety” and “sad Despair” at home. He wished to leave claustrophobic Britain for the “Bliss on Transatlantic shore” (l. 14). Coleridge and Southey shared the same sense of anguish that in the years of 1794 and 1795 most of the young English radicals felt, and it was this agony that spurred them on to their exit plan.

By August-September 1794, the two men started working on the theoretical foundation of the project and planned to write a Book of Pantisocracy (left unwritten) to guide them in their new life. Simultaneously, they also started addressing practical issues like raising funds, contacting land agents, and gathering members for the society. In September 1794, Southey wrote to his brother Thomas that they were “getting our [their] plan & principles ready for printing to distribute privately.” Two basic principles of the society were to be Pantisocracy and Aspheterism, “the first signifying the equal government of all — & the other — the generalization of individual property.” They preached these principles in Bristol and Southey was happy that the “words [were] well understood now in the city...” (CLRS 1791-1797, No. 110). The common ownership of property and equal participation in the government, thus, were to be the central pillars on which they thought to build their society. Southey hoped that by March next year they would “depart for America,” and also mentioned in the letter names of people who were willing to join the party. He wrote a letter to Horace Walpole Bedford around this time and illustrated the scheme of Pantisocracy further. Southey wrote:

...every man laboured two hours a day at some useful employment. where all were equally educated — where the common ground was cultivated by common toil, & its produce laid in common granaries. where none were rich because none should be poor. where every motive for vice should be annihilated & every motive for virtue

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freedom, benevolence, and similar concepts flowing in that “stream of Utopian thought” (73). In his article “‘Wisely forgetful’: Coleridge and the Politics of Pantisocracy,” James McKusick (1998) considers the project as “grounded at a more unconscious level in an economics of colonial exploitation,” but his survey of the project also locates its origin in the radical politics of the time and a desire to “escape from British tyranny” (p.113).

<sup>3</sup> The scholarly web edition of Southey’s letters published in the website *Romantic Circles* (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>) in four parts is cited all through this article. The general editors for the project are Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer. In the parenthesis, the years covered in each volume cited is mentioned along with the letter numbers, for example, *CLRS 1791-1797*, No. 159.

strengthened? such a system we go to establish in America.” Once again the principle of equality is underlined and private property is blamed for the “various vices & misfortunes.” (CLRS 1791-1797, No. 99)

However, as we read through the letter, we start doubting Southey’s declared principle of equality because he also writes about “hiring labourers” for clearing the land for cultivation. This provokes several questions: Will there be labourers in Pantisocracy and if so what about the declared principle of equality? Is Southey thinking of employing labourers from outside their community? What will be the racial identity of these labourers? Read retrospectively with reference to the letter that Southey wrote to Grosvenor Bedford in December 1793, the labourers, in all probability, would be of African origin former slaves. Southey wanted Bedford to imagine him in America: “Fancy only me in America...three rooms in my cottage, and my only companion some poor negro whom I have brought on purpose to emancipate” (CLRS 1791-1797, No. 73). Following Southey’s letter, it becomes apparent that the former African slaves would constitute an underclass in Pantisocracy. Thus, the idea of hiring labourers betrays critical contradictions in the Pantisocracy concept.

Specifically, it was this question of keeping former slaves as servants in Pantisocracy that led to the breakdown of the friendship between Coleridge and Southey and to the abandonment of the project. Southey’s aunt Miss Tyler had two African origin servants, Shad and Sally. Southey proposed to take them to America. Coleridge readily agreed to it and wrote, “SHAD GOES WITH US. HE IS MY BROTHER!” (LSTC, Vol. 1. p. 77).<sup>4</sup> Coleridge, however, was outraged when he learned that Southey wanted them to continue as servants and “perform that part of labour for which their education has [had] fitted them.” He unequivocally expressed his displeasure: “I was vexed too and alarmed by your letter concerning Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, Shad, and little Sally. I was wrong, very wrong, in the affair of Shad, and have given you reason to suppose that I should assent to the innovation” (LSTC, Vol. 1. p. 82). “The leading idea of pantisocracy” Coleridge wrote, “is to make men necessarily virtuous by removing all motives to evil—all possible temptation” (LSTC, Vol. 1. p.82). For Coleridge, Southey’s thoughts on keeping servants was a temptation to evil. Coleridge reprimanded Southey for the same issue in another letter written in November. He wrote:

My feeble and exhausted heart regards with a criminal indifference the introduction of servitude into our society; but my judgment is not asleep, nor can I suffer your reason, Southey, to be entangled in the web which your feelings have woven. Oxen and horses possess not intellectual appetites, nor the powers of acquiring them. We are therefore justified in employing their labour to our own benefit: mind hath a divine right of sovereignty over body. But who shall dare to transfer “from man to brute” to “from man to man”? To be employed in the toil of the field, while we are pursuing philosophical studies—can earldoms or emperorships boast so huge an inequality? Is there a human being of so torpid a nature as that placed in our society he would not feel it? A willing slave is the worst of slaves! His soul is a slave.

(LSTC, Vol. 1. p.89)

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<sup>4</sup> See *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Coleridge, Ernest Hartley. Vol. 1. Project Gutenberg, 2014. 2 vols. Henceforth will be referred to as *LSTC*.

## The Question of the Non-human Animals

While Coleridge's condemnation of Southey is central to the passage, what is truly problematic is the contrast drawn by Coleridge between humans and animals: that animals are brute creatures, all body without any intellect, and therefore, humans enjoy sovereignty over the animals. The logic that nonhuman animals can be exploited because they are inferior in intellect has further implications and was also used to justify slavery and colonialization. This anthropocentric conception of nonhuman animal as the inferior other of the human runs parallel to the racial othering of the native Americans. However, before turning to the point of human-animal parallelism in Coleridge and Southey's writings on Pantisocracy, it might be appropriate to focus on the human-animal difference and how they conceived the animals of Pantisocracy in the first place.

A close look at Coleridge and Southey's writings around the project reveals their three interconnected positions on the animals of Pantisocracy: firstly, they completely disregarded the nonhuman life forms which would be displaced as result of their colonial settlement; secondly, they emphasized on the brute nature of the animals when acknowledged their presence; and thirdly, they thought of subjugating and decimating non-human animals if confronted.

In 1794 Coleridge spent several evenings with a land agent discussing the prospects of settling on the banks of the Susquehanna. Narrating the subtleties of the conversations, Coleridge wrote to Southey that the agent praised the exquisite beauty of the place and confirmed that it enjoyed a "security from hostile Indians" and "he never saw a Byson his life" and the "mosquitoes are[were] not as bad as our gnats."<sup>5</sup> The references to animals and insects indicate Coleridge's sustained anxiety over possible encounter with wild animals in Pantisocracy. The same anxiety can be seen in Southey's December 1793 letter to Grosvenor Bedford, where he imagines himself in America toiling hard: cutting down the "tree & now the snakes that nestled in it" or "building a nice snug little dairy," until an "ill looking Indian with a tomahawk & scalps me" (CLRS, 1791–1797, No. 73). Southey feared that he "will [would] either be cookd for a Cherokee or oysterized by a tyger" (CLRS, 1791–1797, No. 73).

This imagery returned to haunt Southey in 1794 when the two poets had been trying hard to realize their dream of settling in America. In his letter to Horace Walpole Bedford, Southey jokingly wrote, "either [they] will find repose in the Indian wig-wam—or form an Indian tomahawk" (CLRS, 1791–1797, No. 99). Both, the humans and the non-human animals are presented as violent and threat to their community, but to continue with the discussion on demonization of the non-human animals, it is pertinent to recall that such a representation sits very incongruously with the more sympathetic treatment of non-human animals by Coleridge and Southey in several of their poems.

Surveying the texts and discourses on animal rights in Romanticism and Animal Rights, David Perkins has noted that there was a steady growth of concern for the animals in the eighteenth century. Numerous books and pamphlets, sermons were published that highlighted the plight of the animals and human cruelty against them.<sup>6</sup> Most of the late eighteenth century writers

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<sup>5</sup> See *Collected Letters of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, v. 1, (6vols), p. 113. Henceforth to be mentioned as *Letters* when cited.

<sup>6</sup> John Hildrop's *Free thoughts Upon Brute Creation* (1742), *Clemency Against Brutes* (1761), and Humphry Primatt's *Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Beast* (1776) were some important books. This protective tendency



and poets shared this concern for non-human animals and they were sensitive to the animals, be it the beasts of burden, the little insects, the field mice, or birds (e.g. Robert Burns' "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse," Letitia Barbauld's "The Mouse's Petition"). A poem like "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns not only reveals the sympathy for animals but also testifies to the fact that the Romantics were not unaware of displacement of non-human animals due to human activities.

This compassionate attitude to non-human life also characterises much of Coleridge and Southey's poetry. For instance, in Southey's "To a Spider" (1797), the speaker of the poem refuses to "crush thy [spider's] bowels out" and assures it that "thou need'st not run in fear about." The speaker finds the spider's work as valuable as that of the humans: "And is not thy weak work like human schemes/And care on earth employ'd?" However, the kindness shown towards the spider in the poem is completely missing when it comes to the animals of Pantisocracy and he was oblivious to the fact that the very settlement by deforesting an area would kill thousands of spider-like species. Moreover, he thought of hunting animals in the American wild.<sup>7</sup> This goes against the animal rights discourse in the eighteenth century England as hunting was widely condemned by animal rights advocates.

Similar self-contradictory positions can be noted in Coleridge as well. Coleridge wrote his play *Osoio* in 1796-97 (revised and staged as *Remorse* in 1813). In the play, he celebrates the Oneness of human and non-human life and condemns the killing of even an insect. The protagonist of the play *Alvar* would not allow even an "insect on the wall" to be killed because "it has life, ... life and thought;/ And by the power of its miraculous will/ Wiolds all the complex movements of its frame /Unerringly, to pleasurable ends! (Act IV, p. 147).

A more interesting example in the present context is Coleridge's well-known poem "To a Young Ass." In 1794, the young poet befriended an ass at Jesus College. He often fed it and thought of taking it to the "Dell of Peace" (i.e. Pantisocracy). The poem begins with gestures of love for the ass and a description of its innocence and meekness and goes on trace the mother of the young foal engaged in hard labour by its owner. Extending the narrative further, Coleridge connects the ass's mother to its owner who lives in an impoverished state and is as oppressed as the ass is. Afterwards the poet reflects upon his friendship with the young ass and the animal is humanized to the point of brotherhood: "I hail thee Brother spite of the fool's scorn!"

What we see in the poems discussed above is a celebration of "Fraternity of the universal Nature", but no such attempt is made to humanize and harmonize human and non-human life in Pantisocracy; on the contrary, the recurring image is that of beastly violence. This difference is understandable because Pantisocracy was "grounded at a more unconscious level in an economics of colonial exploitation" (McKusick 1998, p. 108). It was premised upon the colonial imaginary of vast empty spaces ready to be occupied by the European settlers. In his December 1793 letter to Charles Bedford, Southey imagined himself in an Edenic America whose ground, Southey remarked, had been "uncultivated since creation" (CLRS 1791-1793, No. 73). Such an imaginary tended to overlook both humans and nonhumans living in the area to be colonized, and it is illustrative of the fact that the human and non-human population in

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toward the non-human animals has been interpreted as an extension of the effort to protect humans from cruelty and violence that was witnessed emerging in the late eighteenth century (Elias 162-163).

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Southey's letter to Horace Walpole Bedford, 22 August–3 September, 1794: "when Coleridge & I are sawing down a tree we shall discuss metaphysics, criticise poetry when hunting a buffalo... ."

colonial settlements were subject to a form of discursive violence prior to their physical displacement and subjugation. This clarifies why Coleridge and Southey were largely oblivious to the existence of numerous species of animals that were part of the ecology of the forest and were neglectful of the violence their settlement would unleash on non-human animals.

The Pantisocracy scheme, therefore, stands as a telling example of the fact that the colonial contact zones were not only marked by a racial conflict, but was also characterized by a sharp contest between the colonizers and the non-human animals. Further, it proves that animals played a key role in colonial discourse formation: the colonial strategy of othering the colonized by presenting them as violent, savage or uncivilized to justify their exploitation is comparable to Coleridge and Southey's tactic of locating violence in the animals of Pantisocracy. The colonial desire to exercise dominance over the non-human animals is also reflected in Southey imagining themselves in the role of hunters: "when Coleridge & I are sawing down a tree we shall discuss metaphysics, criticise poetry when hunting a buffalo," wrote Southey (CLRS 1791-1797, No. 99). Naïve as it may look but, as McKusick (1998) has pointed out, the fantasy of hunting wild animals was created by them as a mechanism in their mind to counter the anxiety generated by the wild animals (122). This hunter/hunted binary is also very important to an understanding of the difference between their thoughts on animals in general and the animals of the Pantisocracy. In the domestic context, they could be very sympathetic to animals or insects because their dominance over non-human animals remained unchallenged, but in Pantisocracy their hierarchical position is tested and the pantisocrats find themselves in the place of the hunted. This unsettles their familiar perspective on non-human animals.

However, to concentrate only on the human-animal difference and hostility between animals and colonizers in Pantisocracy, means dealing with the one half of the problem only. A close look at the passages cited from Coleridge and Southey to illustrate their positions on the non-human animals show that there is an easy transition in these from the animal to the human and a clubbing together of the two in terms of bestiality. A typically condensed expression of this comes from Southey when expressing his fear, he writes either he will be "cookd for a Cherokee or oysterized by a tyger." Both, the non-human animals and native humans are defined in terms of violence and considered a threat to their utopia. Thus, the love and sympathy shown to the racial other (for Shad and Sally or the slaves), totally evaporates when it comes to the human others of Pantisocracy. Coleridge and Southey's writings in the European context is characterized by a clear attempt at humanizing the animals, the racial others and the working class. The poem "To an Ass" constitutes an example of how the animal and its working class owner become a part of the humanizing rhetoric. Similarly, cruelty on slaves is unequivocally condemned in Coleridge and Southey's writings on slavery and slave trade.

### **The Bestial "Other"**

In Pantisocracy, however, things take a reverse turn. A process of bestialisation becomes central here: the beast and the beastly humans are the violent other who must be subjugated or annihilated to assert dominance of the human settlers from Europe. In the domestic space, the humanity of the animals is central to the project of drawing sympathy to the animals, but in Pantisocracy the animality of the humans is the principal point emphasized. Thus, the brute beasts and savage Indians form part of the same equation and this stands in complete opposition to the human animal divide that Coleridge charted when he replied to Southey's plan of having servants in Pantisocracy. The two incongruous positions on the animal other demonstrate the

colonial strategy of exploitation by displacing violence on to the native human and the non-human population of Pantisocracy.

The parallels drawn between humans and non-human animals by Coleridge and Southey in their writings around Pantisocracy also reminds readers of numerous such analogies in eighteenth and nineteenth century discourses on race and slavery, where the racial other was often equated with the animal other. A primary argument that was used to justify slavery, for instance, was the inferiority and bestiality of the Africans. Edward Long in *History of Jamaica* (1774) and Charles White in *Account of the Regular Gradation of Man 1799* argued that the whites and blacks were two distinct species (White 42). Coleridge's negative analogy carried the load of this popular rhetoric, even though he had refused to equate Shad and Sally with animals. Paradoxically, therefore, Coleridge's construction of the human-animal binary becomes complicit in the project of colonialism as "brute" humans of the colonies were often pitted against the "civilized" Europeans. What emerges from the writings on Pantisocracy, therefore, is more than one category of humans: humans who are different from the animals as clearly demarcated by Coleridge while criticizing Southey, and humans resembling the animal that populates much of their writings on the project. The first category humans are the male Europeans, and the second, the indigenous Americans, who are closer to the animal. Thus, irrespective of whether one considers the human-animal equation in terms of difference or similarity between the two, an analysis of the Pantisocracy project reveals a human-nonhuman entanglement and affirms the fact that human agency is an assemblage of human and non-human actors. It indicates that animals and discourses on animality were key factors in constructing the idea of the human.

### **Pantisocracy's Women**

Another interesting dimension of the human-animal entanglement is its concomitant mechanism of othering. It works to project certain groups of humans as less human than others, and it is within this social contrivance that the status of women in Pantisocracy is conceived. Women are represented as intellectually inferior and incapable of harbouring greater moral wisdom. They were thought to be fit for only one kind of work, that is, household duties, while metaphysics and poetry would be the primary engagement for the community's men. The "beautiful, amiable and accomplished" women of Pantisocracy, as Southey fancied, would exercise a soothing influence on the pantisocrats working in the harsh weather of their Utopia (CLRS, 1791–1797, No. 99). Coleridge repeated to Southey a "prophecy" that was made by a Cambridge acquaintance of his, that "your women [will lack] sufficient strength of mind, liberality of heart, or vigilance of Attention - They will spoil it!" (CLRS, 1791–1797, p. 119).

That Coleridge was suspicious of the ability of "their" women is revealed in his warning to Southey that they should work on "strengthening the minds of the Women and stimulating them to literary Acquirements" to make them worthy of Pantisocracy. Coleridge continued, "in the present state of their minds...the Mothers will tinge the Mind of the Infants with prejudications" (CLRS, 1791–1797, p. 119). Interestingly, animal imagery is used by Coleridge to illustrate how the women of the community were to be infused with the spirit of Pantisocracy: "The Heart should have fed upon the truth, as Insects on a Leaf - till it be tinged with the colour, and shew its food in every the minutest fibre" (CLRS, 1791–1797, p.115).

A sustained anxiety, therefore, characterizes Coleridge and Southey's conversation on their female companions and a rhetoric of control and containment forms the core of it. Besides, just like the American Indians, the women are placed at the intersection of the human and the

animal to justify the containment strategies. Of course, women are not presented as savagely violent as the native Americans, but they are not good enough not to qualify as appropriate companions of the male pantisocrats. Thus, just like the native humans and animals of Pennsylvania, the women are considered a threat to Pantisocracy and what they threaten is the pantisocratic ideals.

### The Idea of Race

An analysis of the Pantisocracy project, therefore, reveals the intimacy of the human and non-human animals in the colonial encounter and how exchangeable their roles are in colonial discourse. In his article “Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race,” Sujit Sivasundaram (2015) has contended that “race can be seen as an idea that comes into being at the intersection of the human and animal in post-Enlightenment contexts” (p. 157).<sup>8</sup> He has studied the animal and human entanglement and the construction of the racial other in the context of the Indian sub-continent to prove his thesis. The Pantisocracy scheme is another telling example of this entanglement which affirms that race as a category was born in the intersection of the human and animal. During the Enlightenment many treatises were produced on race and racial difference. While men like Edward Long (1774) and Charles White (1799) argued that the whites and blacks were two distinct species (White 1799, p. 42), monogenesis theorists like Blumenbach (*The Anthropological Treatises*) and Buffon (*Histoire Naturelle*) rejected the idea of polygenesis. However, the theory one subscribed to notwithstanding, in most of the racial discourses of the time, the notion inferiority of the coloured people compared to the whites was quite common.

A central question underlying any discussion on race was who or what constituted the human, and the idea of the human was defined in terms of the degree of progress from animal. In other words, discourses on animal and animality were crucial to the conceptualization of “Man” in the Western humanist tradition. Thus, with the emergence of the theories of race, there emerged several categories of human during the Enlightenment. Robert Southey (1828), who was interested in colonial policy making and was deeply influenced by Enlightenment humanism, once observed: “This is the order of nature: beasts give place to man, savages to civilized man” (p. 623). He made this remark in his review of the missionary effort in Africa to bring “civilization” to the “dark continent”. The expression typically embodies Enlightenment notion of progress that was predicated on a journey from animal to the “savage” human and from the human to the properly human. The equation suggests that existence of the idea of human is impossible without the non-human animals.

### Conclusion

The Pantisocracy scheme is a revealing example of the inseparability of the human and the animal. Racism and speciesism, it suggests, are but two sides of the same coin. If bestialisation of the certain groups of humans helped generate and flesh out racial and colonial discourses, prior to bestialisation it was the othering of the beast itself. This inquiry of the Pantisocracy scheme keeping the non-human life forms in perspective, therefore, underscores the importance of adopting a (planetary-) posthumanist perspective for a comprehensive analysis of colonialism and its planetary implications.

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this also applies to the idea of gender.

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**Fellini in Memoriam – The Absurdist Elements of Fellini’s Cinema as a  
Reflection of our Disrupted COVID-19 Reality**

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### Abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need to “think outside the box”. As societies across the planet gradually become more interconnected, the dominance of outmoded social practices surrounding human interaction, work, leisure and space is being challenged on a daily basis. Mediatic productions such as film have always presented opportunities for expanding the reach of particular messages and disseminating topical views and perspectives. In honour of Federico Fellini (1920-1993) on the 100th anniversary of his birth, this paper undertakes a comprehensive comparison between the bold and absurdist cinema of the Post-Neorealist filmmaker and today’s also strange and perplexing social environment. Contextualising his cinema within an auteurist framework, we highlight how ground-breaking Fellini was in embracing the unconventional; by doing so he provided a practical guide for navigating contemporary reality. With productions that seduce and impress viewers worldwide, Fellini defied established cinematographic practices, as exemplified by his experimentation with overlapping narrative styles. His films bestir a new way of thinking by generating an anomalous world, one where events take place beyond the scope of what the viewer anticipates as “natural”. But the appraisal of what is “natural” is contingent upon the viewer’s belief structure: by presenting a world where events happen outside the realm of practical expectations, Fellini’s timeless cinema questions outdated belief systems and sets the guidelines for how to navigate the unanticipated complexities of the contemporary world. Reality and fiction merge into one.

*Keywords:* absurdism, COVID-19, Fellini, interrupted realities, reality resembling fiction



## Introduction and Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to pay tribute to Federico Fellini (1920-1993) in consideration of the 100th anniversary of his birth in Rimini (1920), and to draw analytical parallels between his absurdist cinema and our surreal contemporary reality. The Italian filmmaker has been credited with creating his own style of cinema, where he broke with his Neorealist predecessors and mentors like Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977). Rossellini harnessed Fellini's skills in films like *Paisà* (1946) and provided the former cartoonist (who in a 1960's interview explained that he was "born for the cinema" but that he didn't choose "the career of the film director with any premeditation") (Levine and Fellini 1966, p. 77) with a platform that allowed him to draw from more formalist traditions and eventually venture beyond the boundaries of neorealism. Delving into surrealism, Fellini used psychoanalysis to represent and explore other, part realistic, part confusing and incongruous, worlds and spaces, thereby creating his own cinematic style and reaching fame as an auteur in his own right. Labelled "the master of absurdism" (Shrayber, 2020, title) and "the Italian master of absurdity" (Dunne, 2016, para. 1) – much like his contemporary Albert Camus would be called "the master of the absurd" (Cavanaugh, 2013) – Fellini invites us into a different realm where he challenges conventions and constructs a new representation of reality. With that, he "leaves the neo-realism with its social ideology to express a personal world" (Indico, 2019, para. 2).

Fellini's reconstructed dreams merge with reality and present alternative outcomes. Childhood memories are often represented on screen, where they translate into feelings, attitudes and behaviours among stock characters that symbolise certain stereotypes within Italian society. But the characters that populate Fellini's surreal universe are never conventional. Rather, they range from underdogs and antiheroes who provoke our sympathy, to absurd, ridiculous, even grotesque. Always blending fantasy and realism, Fellini was "an evocative visual artist whose drawings were integral to his creative process" (Wolfe, n.d. para. 1). He was fascinated by clowns and saw them as "the caricature of a well-established, ordered, peaceful society." Commenting on the absurd and fleeting aspects of contemporary society, Fellini continued by declaring that "[b]ut today all that is temporary, disordered, grotesque. Who can still laugh at clowns? Hippies, politicians, the man in the street, all the world plays the clown, now" (Fellini, as quoted in Free, 1973, p. 214).

In his repertoire Fellini draws from public ridicule and the macabre to confront us with our own inadequacies, fears and anxieties – often delivering a pun on authorities and political movements like Fascism. Both his characters and his viewers, by extension, partake in a circus-like alternative reality. In our own incongruous, unpredictable, ominous and bewildering pandemic times, Fellini's absurdist cinema feels strangely relevant. Not only are his characters often irrational and absurd, but the absurdist elements in, for example, the self-referential *8½* (1963), *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), *I Clowns* (1970), the semi-autobiographical *Amarcord* (1973), *Casanova* (1976), *La Città delle donne* (1980) and even Fellini's *Roma* (1972), are constantly highlighted in a set of characters lost in a chaotic and irrational universe. It has been held that "the Absurd arises out of the conflict between our search for meaning and the apparent random nature and meaninglessness of the universe" (Knoll, 2020, para. 2).

In Fellini's personal universe – which spills over into our own incoherent pandemic reality – characters are often trapped in a world that makes little sense. Such is the case of pure and childlike Gelsomina in *La Strada* (1954) who embarks on a road trip without real purpose, naively going with the flow and leaving the familiar behind until she breaks down in the face of human injustice. Indeed, the itinerant world of *La Strada* conveys life on the road and the

rootlessness of its three lonely main characters and “finds one never at home, scarcely ever at rest.” (Grunes, 2007, para. 3). The character Il Matto (“The Fool”) lives life hedonistically and meets a gruesome death. Likewise, in the perplexing visual landscape of *Fellini Satyricon*, the grotesque and macabre dominate the opening scenes, where repulsive characters parade exhibitionistically across the screen to stimulate our visual senses – for better or for worse. As has been generally declared, “[a]bsurd worlds and universes, by definition, allow a degree of unexplained circumstances for characters to be victim to, propagators of, or to explore” (Davie, 2021, para. 2). Fellini’s characters, including his own alter ego in a film like *8½* – which according to Roger Ebert “weaves in and out of reality and fantasy” (Ebert, 2000, para. 5) – struggle to make sense of their own reality only to find that the reality in which they find themselves refuses to be readable or readily understood.

With this as a point of comparison, we argue, in this paper, that Fellini’s world in many respects reflects our own. His cinema is both timeless yet by the same token timely and relevant in the context of today, a period of inherent unpredictability and rapid departure from what was familiar. As we continue to navigate our COVID-19 present there is a sense of interrupted or suspended reality, which reminds us of Fellini’s surreal version of reality or the alternative reality which is evidenced in his films. Such a version of reality throws us into the realm of the peculiar and the bizarre – a space unlike anything we’ve ever known; we seem to “shed one sense of self and inhabit another” (Bowles, 2020, para. 3). Can Fellini’s films help us navigate some of the many complexities of our own off-screen, but increasingly cinematic reality? Fellini reassuringly shows us a way forward by introducing darkly comical, caricaturised characters who, like us, often try to make sense of their bewildering reality.

### **Fellini’s Surrealist Cinema and Tributes to his Work: Centenary Celebrations and New Publications**

As the world tries to make sense of the new reality brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, people turn to cinema to escape the confusion. Therein we discover a world that partly resembles our own – a world where the surreal takes over and reality and fiction meet and merge. It has been stated that “with a global event as impactful as the pandemic, perhaps it’s actually not surprising – and maybe even inevitable – that our reality would seep into our escapes.” (Volpe, 2021, para. 19). When we voluntarily allow media to become our current escape route, the strange visual landscapes we flee into become safe havens where we find a sense of refuge. And the movie set, as Gary Susman argues, thus becomes a place where “one could resolve through art problems that are intractable in real life” (2013, para. 13).

In our extended states of lockdown, we now have the opportunity to celebrate a filmmaker who created a whole new world of his own, screened for the delight of our senses. The 100-year anniversary of Fellini’s birth in Rimini 1920 was acknowledged worldwide in 2020, with cities paying tribute to a true artist whose films continue to impress. It is a cinema that challenges norms and conventions. Our own COVID-19 reality being anything but conventional, Fellini’s films strike a particular chord and the centenary was timely, even opportune, in the sense that it coincided with a pandemic that has made us question, re-examine and reinterpret what is or was once considered normal.

Viewers are now invited to rediscover the specifically Felliniesque universe of the bizarre, the flamboyant, the irrational, absurd, and grotesque – yet at the same time the irresistibly alluring. Specifically in the UK, in 2020, the British Film Institute, in partnership with Cinecittà, “announced a major year-long celebration to mark the centenary of one of cinema’s most exuberantly playful filmmakers” (BFI, 2020, para. 1). Hong Kong, in turn, organised a full

retrospective of Federico Fellini's works and other classics conjuring cinematic illusions that mirror today's reality (HKIFF, 2020). Also in New York, museums, theatres and exhibitions revisited his films. Finally, in Australia, to mention but a few major celebrations, Sydney and Melbourne held their own special Fellini retrospectives (at the Instituto Italiano di Cultura, and the Classic Cinemas in Elsternwick, Melbourne, respectively). This filmmaker who carved a space for himself as a creator of his own peculiar cinematic universe and bent conventions of genre, movements and style, invites us into a parallel space where dreams and reality overlap. As established by long-term Fellini scholar Peter Bondanella,

[f]or Fellini, the cinema exists solely for the purpose of individual self-expression; fantasy, rather than reality, is its proper domain, because only fantasy falls under the director's complete and absolute artistic control. (Bondanella, 2004, p. 231)

Challenging the conventions of neorealism and partly abandoning this movement while he explores the surreal, Fellini leaves a mark on a motley crowd of characters ranging from cartoonist and parodic, to whimsical, dramatic, grotesque, carnivalesque, provocative, and seductive – as in the case of Sylvia (Anita Ekberg) in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) who embodies both of these last traits. Anything but stereotypical and challenging norms and conventional behaviour, they stand out and stand apart, drawing us into narratives where many of these characters and the stories they are part of often lean towards the farcical and exaggerated – again, much like the bewildering times we ourselves have now unexpectedly been catapulted into. Caricature portrayals of characters whose perplexing world makes little sense to the audience, Fellini's films hold a special allure; they fascinate us on a subconscious level and pull us in.

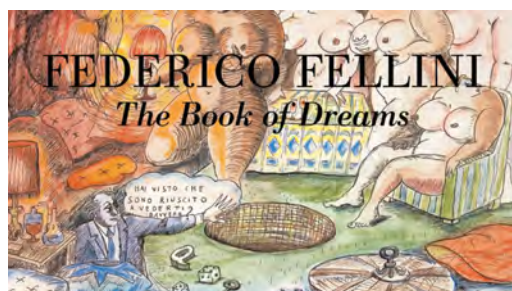
In parallel with the cinematic focus on Fellini in 2020, recent books do their part to shed further light on a filmmaker who has caught our attention and entered the public imagination. The year after Bondanella published *The Italian Cinema Book* (2019) and Gremese International came out with the collection of essays *Tutto Fellini* (edited by Enrico Giacobelli), *Federico Fellini: The Book of Dreams* (Rizzoli, 2020) landed on the bookshelves. It was promoted as a new edition of Fellini's own 1960-1990 diaries "to represent his nocturnal visions in the form of drawings, scribbles and ungrammatical notes" (Amazon, 2021). Also noteworthy is *A Companion to Federico Fellini* (John Wiley & Sons 2020), the republished and updated *Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern* (Frank Burke, 2020),<sup>1</sup> DVD set "Essential Fellini" (the Criterion Collection), as well as earlier "Scola racconta Fellini: Che strano chiamarsi Federico" (DVD documentary, 2014) which importantly covers Fellini's career from his early years as a cartoonist until his death in 1993. Again, from a screen perspective, the Italian Contemporary Film Festival in Toronto, in turn, chose Silvia Giulietti's *Fellinopolis* as its opening film 2020 (Biglands 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Burke here "addresses the contemporary relevance of each film in contexts ranging from politics, gender, race, sexual orientation, individuation, Jungian study of dreams, and theoretical frameworks, highlighting the recurring themes, patterns, influences, the filmmaker's unique forms of cinematic expression, critiques and various interpretations" (Brizio-Skov 2021).

## Image 1

*The New Compilation of Fellini's Images and Diary Entries, "The Book of Dreams" (2020)*  
<https://www.frieze.com/article/book-dreams>



A January 2020 issue of *The New Yorker* further focuses on “A 100 years of Fellini” (Lane 2020) and defines Fellini’s cinema as a “record of the human visage.” Fellini himself called “spontaneity” the secret of life and is said to have claimed that that “[a]t the start I’m directing the film. Then the film starts to direct me” (IMDb 2021). Defying narrative conventions and stepping away from neorealism, Fellini acknowledged the ultimate universality and timelessness of a film like *Fellini Satyricon* which, even if set in ancient times, “is ... not a film about the Roman world but about antiquity, and by antiquity I mean something completely unknown, deep within us” (Fellini 1983, p. 240). In an interview about the same film with a Stuttgart newspaper, the director responded that he “showed ancient Rome but if you want to see a mirror of our own times in *Satyricon*, I wouldn’t contradict you” (Tornabene 1990, p. 93).<sup>2</sup>

## Image 2

*Fellini Satyricon (1969). The Italian Theatrical Release Poster*



Wikipedia Commons:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellini\\_Satyricon#/media/File:Fellini\\_Satyricon\\_poster\\_italian.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellini_Satyricon#/media/File:Fellini_Satyricon_poster_italian.jpg)

In these times of lack of control and confusion where we collectively shape a new narrative and take stock of the past, the celebrations of Fellini included the establishment of a Rimini museum hosting Fellini’s archive materials. Originally scheduled to open in December 2020 (MacKay, 2020), it was postponed to 2021 (Chiamamicitta 2020). And the aforementioned 2020 Classic Cinemas Fellini retrospective in Melbourne was likewise cancelled when stage four lockdown ground the screenings to a halt. All films except the 1987 drama-comedy and documentary *L'intravista* were eventually screened, with the last film highly innovative and multimedial film *E la nave va* (And the Ship Sails On) – a “stylized re-creation of a decadent, bygone era” (Criterion Collection). Fellini here explores film as a medium of communication

<sup>2</sup> Note that Francesco Tornabene here makes reference to Reisfeld, “Ein mesterhafter Alptraum”, p. 36.

in a meta-film where music does much of the talking (Pina Bausch is referred to, as are Austro-Hungarian flagships, visualised as a cardboard-like silhouette against the horizon) and he stretches cinematographic and narrative possibilities. The film moves from black and white, from silent movie to sound and features an omnipresent narrator or chronicler who establishes a direct dialogue with the audience and becomes our ears and eyes. We are actively engaged in this cross-disciplinary film within a film but identify with no one specific character.

The Melbourne Classic Cinemas festival repertoire included movies released at important junctions of Fellini's career and that highlight the unconventional aspects of his cinema: the Carnavalesque *Lo sceicco bianco* (The White Sheik, 1952),<sup>3</sup> where Fellini lays bare the difference between real and artifice when at the end he reveals the face behind the mask of pretence;<sup>4</sup> the not to be overlooked film *Il bidone* (1955); the stark social fable *La Strada* (1954); the interconnected masterpiece *Notti di Cabiria* (1957); the canonical *La Dolce Vita* (1960), Fellini's iconic tribute to a capital city as nostalgically decadent as the busty actress making an entrance into the Rome landmark Fontana di Trevi; the autobiographical *8½* (1963); *Fellini Satyricon*, where Fellini "felt compelled to present an incoherent, inaccessible Rome that was neither the true past nor the present either" (Seagal, 1971, p. 56); the semi-autobiographical *Roma* (1972); the multi-award winning *Amarcord* (1973); and Fellini's *Casanova* (1972). The absurd and the farcical dominate most of Fellini's narratives, with Giulietta Masina adding a burlesque touch to a string of movies (she was cast in *Lo sceicco bianco*, *La Strada*, *Notti di Cabiria*, *Giulietta degli spiriti*, and *Amarcord*). According to Vernon Young, "this woman is patently linked with the great clowns of repute and her art must be apprehended, not subsumed, by the relation it bears to the art of Chaplin or Barrault or Marceau" (Young, 1956, p. 443).

### Fellini as an Auteur

A cinematic icon and with a bold approach to cinema as an artform, Fellini was a groundbreaking auteur, with an idiosyncratic style that set him apart from the rest. Writing for the Massachusetts Film Review already at the early stages of Fellini's career, Anne Paolucci called him:

the most talented of the Italian filmmakers ... he has captured the complexity of the modern soul and the paradox of human existence with more feeling and sympathy than any other contemporary film artist. (Paolucci 1966, p. 564)

Fellini, nominated for 12 Oscar Academy Awards (winner of five) over the course of his illustrious career, was also conferred a Palme d'Or for *La Dolce Vita* in 1993, and an honorary Lifetime Achievement Award at the 65th Annual Academy Awards the same year. Decidedly going his own way yet drawing from realist elements and acknowledging the artistic endeavours of his predecessors, Fellini created a world parallel to reality as we know it – a landscape rich in surrealist images and on-screen fantasies. With a "bold and brilliant visual style" (Farr, 2014, para. 4), Fellini embraced topics and themes that are locally important and likewise globally relevant, establishing a dialogue with cinema goers in Italy and abroad. Often timeless in character, his narratives, the characters and the plots are steeped in Italian traditions

<sup>3</sup> According to Vernon Young, this early comedy by Fellini is "[t]he most artful Italian comedy short of *Miracle in Milan*" (Vittorio De Sica, 1951). (Young, 1956, p. 437).

<sup>4</sup> Note that Mary Ann McDonald Carolan's 2014 comparative cinema analysis *The Transatlantic Gaze: Italian Cinema, American Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013) features a chapter dedicated to Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco*.

while at the same time they speak to the world outside. Fellini's characters resonate with people at a time when the abnormal has become the new normal. Distinct Fellini features like the grotesque, the burlesque and the absurd have become signpost words also for a year of COVID-19 that has turned the world upside down and where absurdist elements travel from the screen and enter our new, unpredictable reality. "The grotesque work of art", in the words of William J. Free, "evokes an estranged world which defies our powers to explain its coherence and order, one which disobeys the common sense of laws of cause and effect which we have come to expect of reality" (1973, 2016, p. 215).

In Fellini's cinema, life resembles not so much a cabaret as a confronting circus show where the lines between normality and abnormality are blurred. "Fellini's world was so real it was bizarre" writes Caryn James (1993, p. 26) and with that she points also to the odd and peculiar elements of current society and the world at large. In our unprecedented times of disrupted realities, the ripple effects of a virus that disregards rank and social standing are felt at all levels: socio-politically, culturally and psychologically. We now face the daunting task of having to reconstruct our lives and find sense in the patchwork of different elements out there. In the midst of the global disruption and emotional turmoil we would be wise to seek common ground and a sense of inclusion with others – realising that we are, in fact, not all that different after all. If Fellini's diverse characters can find common ground, why can't we?

### Image 3

*Split Personalities at a Time of Interrupted Realities*



Pixabay: <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/self-knowledge-mask-anonymous-2817857/>

### Fellini's Trajectory from Neorealist Beginnings to a Complete Personal Universe

Gradually breaking away from his predecessors, Fellini commenced his career as an adept of Rossellini, collaborated with the latter on *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945) and the aforementioned *Paisà*, and like the older Italian master was promoted in his work by the gigantic and prosperous Cinecittà media apparatus. Fellini later largely defied neorealist trends and "always viewed neorealism as a moral position rather than a true movement" (Bondanella, 2004, p. 114). While Rosellini's *Roma città aperta* fits neorealist criteria with a focus on extreme urban poverty, the use of non-professional actors, and scenes shot in natural light, in the opening scene of *La Dolce Vita*, a visual and sensorial feast where the narrative is inspired by Jungian dream theories, Fellini initially plays with notions of time and place when in one and the same frame he juxtaposes ancient history, Christianity, modernity and present in what has been called an "aesthetic of disparity" (Richardson, 1969, p. 114). Fellini created a cumulative impression of elements that at first seem disjointed but that when they come together in a montage shot strangely seem to fit and make sense. This and other scenes of *La Dolce Vita* makes for a visual kind of literature that effectively interconnects past and present in a highly hybrid manner.

## Image 4

BFI Poster for “La Dolce Vita” (1960)<sup>5</sup>



“Fellini’s Masterpiece” Daily Mirror. BFI poster ad on Twitter.  
<https://twitter.com/BFI/status/1215246601284878338/photo/1>

A character larger than life, Fellini was guided by a vivid imagination, with a style that broke cinematic and narrative conventions. In an interview with Gideon Bachmann (1994), Fellini explains:

The stories are born in me, in my memories, in my dreams, in my imagination. They come to me very spontaneously. I never sit down and decide to invent a story; it’s not a programmed activity. Often it’s a suggestion that comes from something read or from a personal experience. These things encounter a pretext; they meet in my mind with some triggering thing, like a face that suddenly looms up in front of me in the subway or a smell that reaches my nostrils, a sound that suddenly occurs, which somehow evokes my fantasy, and I create characters and situations that seem to organize themselves, to take shape in my mind without my active intervention. (Bachmann & Fellini 1994, p. 3)

Fellini’s auteurism, covered in depth by John C. Stubbs in his comprehensive analysis *Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of His Films* (2006), is one of a different kind. While in the case of filmmakers Michelangelo Antonioni, Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica their films were shot in a more or less neorealist vein, the auteurism and authorship of Fellini is, rather, one that fits the definition of David Bordwell, that is, the “authorial expressivity” of the “art film” (Bordwell 1979, p. 57). Speaking of Fellini and auteurism in *Giulietta degli spiriti* (Juliet of the Spirits, 1965), Bordwell notes that the film “shows how the fore-grounding of authorial narration can collapse before the attempt to represent character subjectivity” (p. 60). Fellini’s both artistic and authorial expressivity is reflected in films like the earlier *8½* where the director’s screened alter ego explores the fluid landscape between past and present, dreams and represented reality.

As Fellini lends his own experiences to the plot development, he becomes a character in his own film and with that proves to what extent auteurism is at work in his cinema. In *8½*,<sup>6</sup> protagonist Guido Anselmo (again played by Mastroianni) virtually and metaphorically steps into the shoes of his cinematic creator when he moves between alternative realities – we, too, having learned to do the same in these times of parallel realities and lived (science) fiction. As Anselmo faces a both creative and existentialist crisis as a filmmaker, the metanarrative of this film within a film reflects the parallel crisis of Fellini in his own career. He was dealing with a stream of memories and, in a way, faced his own demons at the time of shooting the film,

<sup>5</sup> “Fellini’s Masterpiece” Daily Mirror. BFI poster ad on Twitter.  
<https://twitter.com/BFI/status/1215246601284878338/photo/1>

<sup>6</sup> The title *8½* “refers to the fact that, up to then, Fellini had made seven features and two episodes in composite films that added up to about a half” (Malcolm, 1999, para. 4).



including going through what has been regarded a midlife crisis. One of the finest examples of Fellini's creative vision and a cinematic masterpiece, *8½* received two Academy Awards (for Best International Feature and Best Costume Design, in 1964). It draws from fantasy and real memories, combining these elements into a cocktail of images and emotions. Experimenting with notions of time and space, Fellini sets the tone for the fluid narrative to come from the very start, with an opening scene featuring a dystopic and drawn-out black and white dream sequence “woven into a film in which dreams and fantasies are manufactured as a way of escaping dreary reality” (*The Guardian*, 2020). The scene highlights feelings of entrapment and the protagonist's struggle to break free (from himself, from the collective and, by extension, from societal norms and conventions). Fellini's personal ponderings and queries spill over into the cinematic realm with a story that plays with notions of the double; through Fellini's alter ego, and through his on-screen lover Carla, played by Sandra Milo who was Fellini's real mistress and muse while Giulietta Masina remained his spouse and lifetime confidante. And thus, art becomes a reflection of life. As explained by Michael Newton of *The Guardian*, *8½* draws us into a hall of mirrors, where reality and art prove indistinguishable from each other. We gaze into an endlessly receding abyss, and yet (and this is the miracle of the film) we can perceive how that abyss overbrims with abundance (2015).

## Images 5

*Marcello Mastroianni in 8½ (1963), directed by Federico Fellini*



Public domain: Wikipedia Commons

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/8%C2%BD#/media/File:Marcello\\_Mastroianni\\_in\\_8%C2%BD.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/8%C2%BD#/media/File:Marcello_Mastroianni_in_8%C2%BD.jpg)

It may be argued that *8½* offered a sense of therapeutic relief for a filmmaker obsessed with the workings of the mind; of Jungian analysis and the unconscious, and the psychoanalytical exploration of parallel realities. The film “assigns a vital role to the cognitive unconscious, which regulates personality by means of dreams and fantasies” (Conti and McCormack 1984, p. 292). Made at the peak of Fellini's career, *8½* was followed by a period of expressive hiatus, with Burke arguing that “from *8½* on there is an increasing undermining of authorship in the Fellinian text” (as quoted by Sbraglia 2015, p. 660).

The late 1960s saw the continuous release of aforementioned *Juliet of the Spirits* and *Fellini Satyricon*, and in 1972 *Amarcord* was released. Winner of Best Feature Film, *Amarcord*, with the title a universion of “a m'arcôrd” (“I remember”) in Romagnol dialect, was nominated for two Academy Awards in 1976. With a seductive soundtrack by Nino Rota, Fellini's film reflects the lasting importance of memory studies in both cinema and other art forms. It delivers a commentary on the nature of his own medium and is about “all kinds of memory: autobiographical, historical, literary, cinematographic” (Marcus, 1977, p. 418). The shooting locations were reconstructed within the massive Cinecittà studios and the town of Borgo in the film makes symbolic reference to Fellini's own birthplace. Still, it is not so much the location that matters, as Fellini's exploration of a past and a rural place of nostalgic memories even if, at the same time, Fellini “satirizes the ritual of the provincial community” (Hay 1991, p. 12).



*Amarcord* also delivers an uncommonly political commentary<sup>7</sup> in its open ridicule of fascism. Bondanella explains that:

*Amarcord* [and *Prova d'orchestra*] are unique in their concentration upon political issues. In *Amarcord* [...] Fellini combines a nostalgic look back at his own provincial upbringings with a relentless dissection of the origins of Italian fascism that some critics initially defined as only a bittersweet remake of the provincial milieu of *I Vitelloni*. (Bondanella 1992, p. 37)

From our own perspective of interrupted realities and revised memories at a time of social absurdity and enforced lockdowns, where the lines between the external and the internal are blurred, “lesser” films in Fellini’s oeuvre might be easier for us to identify with. That is where *Fellini Satyricon* (or just *Satyricon*) holds real value in the pandemic context of today. A fantasy film loosely based on Petronius’ *Satyricon* and set in imperial Rome, it begins by establishing “Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini.” Fellini’s seals his authorship from the very start, declaring his on-screen capacity to revisit and reinterpret history and influence our perception of the classical era. *Fellini Satyricon* is a masterpiece in its own right. Despite its episodic structure, or what has been regarded as “[a]n episodic barrage of sexual licentiousness, godless violence, and eye-catching grotesquerie” (Criterion Collection: *Fellini Satyricon*) the film defies narrative traditions, going its own way and delving into the grotesque, the macabre and the absurd while it ultimately highlights the erratic aspects of a reality that makes little sense. The film’s storyline is less important than the faces we encounter in the crowd of repulsive yet fascinating characters, the random theatrical acts they engage in; the orgies, the urgent lust-seeking, and the pained expressions reflecting a mixture of pleasure and fear.

We can strangely identify with all this, only that in the context of a still anxiety-ridden 2022 our longing for renewed interconnectedness and urge for carnal pleasure at a time of lingering physical separation from each other, is not always openly expressed. In Fellini’s cinema, on the other hand, the macabre is written all over the show and the surreal world that envelops us is performative, exaggerated and illogical on so many levels yet it appears this is exactly what we need at present: to be shocked into acceptance and exposed to reckless frenzies as a way for us to give in and finally let go. Fellini’s dreamscape and the absurdist characters in *Fellini Satyricon* have become, to an extent, our own strange and outlandish, even nightmarish, reality – “We might be charmed and dazzled but often we can’t breathe” – writes Anthony Lane (2020, para. 13). Our lack of control, both as viewers and in our own pandemic society, is real and only by accepting that we cannot predict the future may we be better able to deal with the present.

In *Fellini Satyricon*, as in other Fellini films, dreams inspire his art and art inspires us in turn, even if Fellini’s artistic expressions do not always make sense – nor are they supposed to. Fellini himself is generally known to have claimed that “[e]ither a film has something to say to you or it hasn’t. If you are moved by it, you don’t need it explained to you. If not, no explanation can make you moved by it.” Fellini’s exploration of alternative realms and realities in *Fellini Satyricon* – where he reinterprets myths and history at large and explores a visual landscape that made little sense to the viewer then but perhaps more to us today – corresponds with the

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<sup>7</sup> In the words of Lina Wertmüller, “Federico has given us the most significant traces and graffiti of our history in the last twenty years. He declares he is not concerned with politics and is not interested in fixed themes or ideological layouts, but he is, in the final analysis, the most political and sociological, I believe, of our authors” (as quoted in Faldini and Fofi, 1981, p. 275).

filmmaker's declaration that "it is not memory that dominates my films" (as quoted in Wagner, 2020) but that he has invented everything.

And according to Bondanella, Fellini stands apart as the archetypical case of the art film director. He calls the director a "master showman, whose poetic powers cause us to suspend our judgment in wonder at his skill" (Bondanella 2002, p. 75). Fellini's absurdist aesthetic philosophy and the notion of the bizarre is closely aligned with the auteurist elements of his cinema, as both relate to:

a wholly realized imagery straight from the mind of its creator – presenting dreams, as it were – film presents an unadulterated view of artistic purity. And since no rules apply in a dream, an artist will be free to deconstruct whatever meaning, characters, structures, visuals, or aural conventions that preceded her [or him]. (Critically Acclaimed, 2019)

It is in his apparent disregard for the rules that many of us hold as guidelines to abide by also within the field of art, that Fellini breaks conventions and goes his own way. Giving in to dreams and not holding back, Fellini shows us how our own lives become more multidimensional if we welcome the cinematic, the absurd and the unpredictable. His words turned guiding stars "There is no end. There is no beginning. There is only the passion of life", in his cinema Fellini takes us on a rollercoaster ride into the crevasses of his and our own minds. His characters shock, entertain and bewilder all at once and a film like voyeuristic *La Città delle donne* (City of Women, 1980) – where cinema becomes a spectacle and women, according to Laura Mulvey, are viewed exclusively through an objectified, heterosexual, male gaze (MacKay 2020) – also explore apparently extreme feminism. Ultimately, in this film Fellini overturns notions of masculinity and femininity only to reveal parcelike elements that draw us in and toy with our imagination, making us question what is real and not (as is also the case in *Fellini Satyricon* and *I Clowns*). *La Città delle donne* also points to the continuously increased questioning of traditional gender roles and a further liberalisation of women through the Feminist movement. At a time when Black Lives (still) Matter and the pervasive Me Too-movement calls for civil action and has triggered a resurgence in the fight for female rights across the globe, a film like *La Città delle donne* holds acute relevance also in the context of today. What some critics have seen as a misogynist representation of women should, as we see it, in fact be viewed as a bold visual and narrative commentary on gender norms and misrepresentations. Fellini's film ultimately overturns gender stereotypes, provokes the viewer in its exaggerated representation of women rebelling against the patriarchy, and challenges us to redefine the battle of the sexes. Fellini boldly probes deeper, posing questions, but it is ultimately up to us if we want to reflect more psychosocially on the real essence of the film.

In *La Città delle donne* roles are swapped and the male protagonist (played by an aging Mastroianni) haphazardly becomes an observer who voyeuristically beholds the woman while traveling through a landscape where females dominate the scene physically and symbolically. She herself observes the male protagonist. Thus, seeing, observing and occasional admiring happens on several levels and the male gaze is at work alongside the female – the man ultimately shocked into submission and defeat; bemused, perplexed and horrified all at once.

The spectacle that takes place at the level of cinematic fantasy spills over into reality and questions posed in the film concern us to this day. On a purely visual level, that of Fellini is a theatrical dream world prone to visual exaggeration, so specific to the filmmaker that it has given rise to the expression Felliniesque in much the same fashion as Almodovaresque refers

to the cinematic narratives and imagery unique to the iconic Spanish filmmaker – with a repertoire rich in postmodern elements.<sup>8</sup> The two share commonalities: vivid colour schemes, absurdist narrative twists and turns, and what on several occasions have been called specifically European sensibilities. In Fellini’s cinema the absurdist, non-conventional, farcical, and grotesque become intrinsic aspects of his screened representation of society. Off-screen, in the dystopic reality of today with societies in flux and turmoil, Fellini teaches us to use humour to deal with the tragic elements of this black farse of which we all play a part. Ours is a tragicomic world where the clown is dead and the artist seeks to “create a meaningful vision amid a grotesque and humourless reality” (Free 1973, p. 227). In the words of R.B. Gill, “Fellini’s comic vision abandons the pathos of Neorealism in order to affirm meaningfulness in this world” (Gill 2007, p. 65), and Bondanella similarly recognises the auteur in a filmmaker whose style has become:

[s]ynonymous with any kind of fanciful, even baroque image in the cinema and in art in general. More than just a film director, Federico Fellini had become synonymous in the popular imagination in Italy and abroad with the figure of the Promethean creative artist. Like Picasso, Fellini’s role as the embodiment of fantasy and the imagination for a generation of fans and film historians transcended his art: People who had never seen one of his films would nevertheless eventually come to recognize his name all over the world and to identify with that special talent for creating unforgettable images that is the heart of filmmaking. (Bondanella 2002, p. 8)

In our dystopic era of pandemonium – where, in the words of Leonard Cohen, the world is plunged in darkness and chaos – all the world’s a stage and cinematic images seep into everyday reality. Only by welcoming Fellini’s overall ethos: the absurd, the baroque and the hitherto seemingly unimaginable into our everyday reality and normalising these elements while finding sources of joy in spite of all the despair, may we be better able to cope with what has become another very rocky pandemic year. Fellini’s cinema is here to teach us to become less fearful of the unknown, of the unconventional, of the going against the norm and of challenging conventions. If we view his cinema as a surreal extension to our own reality, we may be capable of interconnecting the two realms: reality and fiction. By allowing the cinematic to seep into our lives we are perhaps more readily able to embrace absurdism as something to draw from. The surreal elements of Fellini’s cinema that we now re-experience in partial solitary confinement as we watch his movies within the comfort zone of our own homes while we try to keep the virus at bay, can be read as a commentary on the darker sides also of ourselves. His repertoire and the parallel realities we step into teach us to become more resilient and to take healthy distance from ourselves. As members of a collective of thinkers, worriers and eccentrics leading lives in the margins of normality, we should try to interconnect and be less fearful in general – and we have much to learn from some of Fellini’s feisty characters.

### Conclusion and Final Reflections

As we ourselves now face a reality out of synch with the lifestyles that we enjoyed before our current, lingering state of pandemic uncertainty, we have gradually come to realise that the surreal and contradictorily glamorous “freakshow” we are presented in a film like *Fellini*

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<sup>8</sup> A relatively recent critical tribute to Fellini’s cinema holds that “Fellini became a brand, the adjective *felliniesque*, and his image was transfigured both in Italy and abroad by comics, films, murals, novels, and urban legends into the myth of the sublime art-director: a being made of pure inspiration, a sorcerer heroically facing the unknown, summoning rows of voluptuous women and fanciful atmospheres.” (Pacchioni 2014, p. 4).

*Satyricon* (where Fellini eliminates what is generally called history<sup>9</sup> even if he draws inspiration from Petronius' *Satyricon*, and of which a rather unconvinced Pauline Kael writes that it "is all phantasmagoria, and though from time to time one might register a face or a set or an episode, for most of the film one has the feeling of a camera following people walking along walls") (Kael as quoted by Ebert, 2011) contains characters and elements with which we can strangely identify. It could be held that ours, too, is a freakish reality where we have lost our footing; a world in turmoil where we are unable to tell what the future holds and where humanity is heading. Fellini's cinema embraces the unpredictability of human existence, challenges our perception of reality, and presents us alternative lifestyles, events and outcomes. It is a cinematic repertoire where his fluid treatment of time and space invites the surreal into the narratives and the dreamscape presents feasible alternatives.

A filmmaker who stirs, seduces, and impresses audiences worldwide, Fellini takes us on an exploration of the landscape of the absurd and the bizarre. In doing so he defies cinematic traditions and combines references to different beliefs, people, places, and eras in a refreshingly ground-breaking manner. "The cartoons, caricature sketches, and radio comedy that were his popular art métier brought him to the cinema as a gagman and scriptwriter" (Shanahan, 2002), influenced him in his art as a filmmaker and translate into films that criticise contemporary society while they sympathise with characters subjected to the parody of their on-screen realities. Universally applicable, Fellini's films count among the most aesthetically expressive made in cinema history. The previously mentioned DVD tribute to Fellini by Ettore Scola: *Scola racconta Fellini: Che strano chiamarsi Federico* serves to further understand a filmmaker who started off at a young age, was provided the right guidance then shot off to directorial fame having discovered his own particular idiosyncratic style. Breaking with cinematic conventions and traditions and finding inspiration in the world of theatre, Fellini recommends an "entirely new way of seeing" (Nashawaty 2018) as he embraces different narrative styles and crosses genres. In his cinema he presents us a world that steps away from the norm – paving the way for a whole range of exciting possibilities. With that we can enjoy a moment of respite from pandemic exhaustion and may be able to revive ourselves sufficiently in order to better tackle our own off-screen absurdist reality.

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<sup>9</sup> Fellini as quoted by Sullivan, J. P. (In Winkler, ed., 2001, p. 260).

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