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Editor's Introduction

It is our great pleasure and my personal honour as the editor-in-chief to introduce Volume 12 Issue 2 of the *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*. This issue is a selection of papers received through open submissions directly to our journal.

This is the eighth issue of the journal under my editorship (the 21st for IAFOR journals), this time, with the precious help of our new Co-Editor, Dr Alyson Miller (Deakin University, Australia), and our two Associate Editors, Dr Murielle El Hajj (Lusail University, Qatar) and Dr Fernando Darío González Grueso (Tamkang University, Taiwan).

We are now 32 teachers and scholars from various countries, always eager to help, and willing to review the submissions we receive. Many thanks to the IAFOR Publications Office and its manager, Mr Nick Potts, for his support and hard work.

We hope our journal, indexed in Scopus since December 2019, will become more international in time and we still welcome teachers and scholars from all regions of the world who wish to join us. Please join us on Academia and LinkedIn to help us promote our journal.

Finally, we would like to thank all those authors who entrusted our journal with their research. Manuscripts, once passing initial screening, were peer-reviewed anonymously by four to six members of our team, resulting in eight being accepted for this issue.

Note that we accept submissions of short original essays and articles (1,500 to 2,500 words from introduction to conclusion, NOT including references/footnotes; no abstract/keywords needed). These are peer-reviewed by several members of our team, like regular research papers. Authors are welcome to submit a paper for our regular 2024 issue. Please note that pre-screening will be stringent so follow our guidelines carefully (<https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-literature-and-librarianship/author-guidelines>).

Please see the journal website for the latest information and to read past issues: <https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-literature-and-librarianship>. Issues are freely available to read online, and free of publication fees for authors.

With this wealth of thought-provoking manuscripts in this issue, I wish you a wonderful and educative journey through the pages that follow.

Best regards,

Bernard Montoneri

Chief Editor

IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship

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Disemboweled Tradition in Seishi Yokomizo's *The Honjin Murders* (1946)

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Coronavirus: A Literary Perspective from the Arab World

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Disemboweled Tradition in Seishi Yokomizo's *The Honjin Murders* (1946)

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Abstract

This research paper examines Seishi Yokomizo's first postwar detective novel, *The Honjin Murders* (1946), which scrutinizes Japanese culture and society, specifically the rural area. This study engages in a thematic analysis of the novel within the context of Japan's experience with the Meiji Enlightenment, the decline of feudalism, the import of Western detective literature, and Japan's postwar shift to democracy. By placing the murder mystery genre in a feudal milieu as the characters struggle to grapple with changing times, Yokomizo enacts the transition of a traditional society into its progression to a modern one. Looking at honor entwined with the act of *hara-kiri* or *seppuku* and the contention between traditional and contemporary values, it is found that tradition itself has broken down with the family structure of the Ichiyanagi family as its symbolic representation. While the head of the family, Kenzo Ichiyanagi, has the appearance of a rational individual, he is wrought with the ambivalence of his rural and urban identities; thus, the only true herald of modernity present within the rural boundary is the detective Kosuke Kindaichi.

Keywords: Japanese detective fiction, *The Honjin Murders*, seppuku, honor, traditional values, modernity

Detective fiction, which has captivated Japanese audiences since the late 19th century, was defined as “the serum for diphtheria” by the famous author Kyūsaku Yumeno (1889-1936) in 1935. The genre held a strange, cure-like allure in Japan during the early 20th century to acclimate the readers to the hovering malaise of modernity. According to Sari Kawana (2008) the early years of Japanese modern history not only brought along economic growth, political drama, and cultural diversity but also turbulence, plaguing the new generation with melancholy over the century past while moral concern over public well-being continued to grow. The beginnings of modernity in Japan can be marked by a departure from the blind worship of civilization during the Meiji Enlightenment period (1868-1912), coming to full fruition in the self-reflexive culture of decadence found in the Taisho period (1912-1926).

During the Meiji Enlightenment, the country imported Western-driven assumptions regarding rationality and progress in order to survive colonial dominance. Additionally, the newly imported ideas were Japan’s passage from cultural “immaturity” and feudalism to become a world power. In the same era, the *honkaku* (translated as “orthodox”) mystery emerged that focused on the process of criminal investigation and valued the entertainment that was born out of pure logical reasoning and deduction (Crampton, 2021). Japanese writers working in this genre such as Haruta Yoshitame, Taro Hirai (better known by his pen name Edogawa Rampo), and Kuroiwa Ruiko followed the standards set by British and American Golden Age crime fiction writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Edgar Allan Poe (Hirohisa, 2000). Where American and British writers were experimenting with sub-genres of detective fiction such as “locked room” and “nursery rhyme” mysteries, their Japanese counterparts imitated and adapted these sub-genres, and made them their own.

Nakanishi (2014) posits that the early optimism brought forth by this Enlightenment soon dissipated by the interwar period, due to increased crime, disappearance of traditional neighborhoods, and unjustified violence against the socially weak in the name of war and scientific progress. Despite the growing social unrest and habitual attacks on the genre due to its roots in Western literature and a disregard for the Japanese writing tradition by prominent critics such as Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957), the popularity of the genre continued to grow among the readers as a reaction to their historical and cultural diphtheria (Saito, 2012).

Following the ban on Anglo-American detective novels in 1941 after the break-out of World War II, Japanese writers turned towards adventure or spy stories that would publicly support the war effort (Seaman, 2004). Not only was the detective genre revived in postwar Japan but the idea of preservation of honor through the act of ritualized suicide, *hara-kiri*, also known as *seppuku*, also became questionable in a nascent modern society. The terms may seem interchangeable, but that is not quite the case. *Hara-kiri* combines two Japanese words, “hara,” namely, stomach, and “kiri,” to cut, in which a person uses a short sword or knife to cut open their own abdomen. While *hara-kiri* is a transliteration of the word *seppuku*, they are used in two different contexts. *Hara-kiri* involves cutting the stomach by the individual privately in instances of shame or dishonor but is hardly used in formal contexts. *Seppuku* is a more formal term, a self-inflicted punishment for committing a serious offense and violating specific codes and regulations pertaining to the *samurai* (Seward, 2012). The term came to characterize the

bushido ideal, that is, the moral code of a warrior class. It was not only an honorable death sentence but also “practiced to demonstrate and emphasize resistance, remonstrance, loyalty, and affirmation of the correctness of one’s position” (p. 12).

This ritualized suicide was performed by *samurais* in the 12th century in order to preserve their and their families’ honor. Although the practice was outlawed in the 19th century, the imperial government during World War II brought back the adherence to the old *samurai* code of ethics called *bushido* for it to be followed by their soldiers (Hurst, 1990). The two words are also context and location-specific, and since the text situated in the village of Okayama employs *seppuku* specifically, the same term will be used in the analysis.

As Japan surfaced from years of suffering and defeat at the war’s end, detective fiction writers sought to revive the genre and contribute to the nation-building effort. Edogawa Rampo, in particular, is acknowledged as the grand master of the golden age of Japanese detective fiction and has exerted a massive influence on the literary culture of Japan, including the author of *The Honjin Murders*, Seishi Yokomizo. In his short stories, Edogawa Rampo, in the 1920s, exhibited a sense of grotesque that was unique and unparalleled for any writer in the world for its time period (Sharp, 2006). Before the dawn of the Meiji era, crime and mystery fiction in Japan was weaved from court trial accounts that, after several hundred years, the reading public had outgrown. Japanese readers were eager for the freshly translated works from Europe and America. Rampo’s stories were ripe for this time as they proved to be an “intriguing artistic synergy that has existed between East and West since Japan wholly opened itself up to the outside world in 1868” (p. 26). As part of the literary world, Rampo and Yokomizo worked together in close proximity, and Yokomizo, who was eight years his junior, supported the literary master’s work before World War II (Komatsu & Siercks, 2023). While the older writer struggled with the long form, Yokomizo soon garnered attention for his mystery novels inspired by traditional customs and folklore rather than the growing urban life.

Seishi Yokomizo (1902-1981) called upon his fellow authors to promote rational thinking among the populace via their works. His immediate work after World War II is *The Honjin Murders* (1946), which plays on the conventions of the locked room mysteries of John Dickson Carr and Agatha Christie by clearly stating the inspirations behind the novel (Liu, 2020). Although the novel won Yokomizo his first Mystery Writers of Japan award in 1948 and his “scruffy, amateur sleuth” Kosuke Kindaichi starred in another 76 novels, selling more than 55 million copies, it has only been published in English after 73 years by Pushkin Vertigo, with Louise Heal Kawai as the translator (Flood, 2020). The novel, however, was not a public hit until the 1970s. Its commercial success came as a result of the commercial strategies of the Kadokawa Publishing Company, which began publishing Yokomizo’s works in 1971. The company specialized in paperbacks, so the novel was given a fresh look while aiming to garner revenue from both film adaptations and novels. The new president, Haruki Kadokawa, invested in the company’s first film, *The Inugami Family* (1976), based on Yokomizo’s novel *The Inugami Curse* (Fuwa, 2018). Using the shocking image of a corpse’s leg sticking upside down from the surface of a lake in posters, TV commercials, and soundtrack versions of the main

theme song, coupled with innovative advertising, made the film a huge success and the author's most popular film adaptation to date (IMDB, n.d.).

The locked room mystery novel follows the Ichiyanagi family in pre-war Japan's rural area in 1937, where the newly married couple Kenzo Ichiyanagi and Katsuko Kubo are found murdered on the night of their wedding, leading to the arrival of Kosuke Kindaichi to investigate the case. It is revealed through logical reasoning and chance that the double homicide was a pre-meditated suicide murder orchestrated by Kenzo in the form of *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) because she had taken a lover before their marriage.

The narrative explores the impact of war and modernity on a rural area, the irrational exclusionism of rural communities, and groundless prejudice against marrying outsiders like Katsuko, emphasizing *iegara* (social standing, pedigree, and good family) while also scrutinizing the manifestation of honor preservation in the form of male violence. This research paper critically analyzes *The Honjin Murders* through the concept of honor and the clash between the traditional and new values in a closed rural community struggling to adapt to a fading culture of feudalism and the rise of modernity in Japan.

Literature Review

The existing literature on the rise of detective fiction in Japan primarily discusses the impact of war, industrialization, and modernity on culture, the individual, the development of logical reasoning within the narrative, and an influx of crime in an urbanized Tokyo. Sari Kawana (2003) examines the relationship between fictional and historical reality in early modern Japan through detective fiction, which shaped the genre and reformulated characters and plots. Detective fiction writers gave less consequence to upholding genre conventions and were more interested in disseminating their ideas on urbanization, violation of privacy, sexuality, and war – all deemed modern phenomena. The central figures in these stories are termed the “undercover agents of modernity” who probe three particular sources of modern mystery, namely, the city, colony, and body. These undercover agents of modernity were daring transgressors of conventions who: “Fueled both by their daring attitude to know and their willingness to transgress conventional boundaries, these agents explore and redefine these spaces and repackage the general anxiety toward modern life into a digestible, consumable form” (p. vii). Since the English translation of *The Honjin Murders* by Louise Heal Kawai is only a recent one with not enough significant literature available, my research paper will explore the detective Kindaichi as an undercover agent of modernity within the novel.

Sari Kawana (2007) again analyzes Japanese detective fiction but focuses primarily on the post-war murder mysteries of Seishi Yokomizo, whose works have received minimal scholarly attention in both English and Japanese traditions. In the wake of the war, the rural world of Japan had gone through vast devastation and destabilization, manifested in the form of anxiety, fear, madness, and senseless murder. Yokomizo seeks to make a political statement through fiction: to encourage readers to return to rationality. This attribute could have prevented the rise of militarism and fascism, in his opinion. In this sense, he is adhering to the tradition of

Kuriowa Ruiko, who sought to educate the masses about progressive, rational thinking through his translations of Western detective stories. Although detective fiction at that time was inspired by Western authors, the works of Yokomizo “demonstrate the virtuosity with which Yokomizo could manipulate the existing rules of the genre and the conventions of Western detective fiction to introduce to postwar Japanese readers a new type of murderer who could kill anyone at any time for no comprehensible reason” (p. 119). While the article studies his novel *Death on Gokumon Island*, I will scrutinize the interplay between traditional and contemporary values in *The Honjin Murders* post-war.

Satomi Saito (2007) also historicizes the formation of the Japanese detective genre, differentiating itself from “serious literature” as modern popular literature while distancing itself from popular fiction. By examining the sociopolitical, cultural, and literary trends, the emergence of detective fiction stitches the fantasy and the desirous together to form the national subject in the domain of culture. It explicitly presents the case for *The Honjin Murders* as an “authentic” piece of detective fiction, proclaimed by the writer Seishi Yokomizo. She argues that:

The key word in these discourses about Japanese detective fiction is “authentic” (honkaku), which signifies a classic whodunit written true to the rules and conventions set in the Golden Age of detective fiction in the West, and authentic was considered “modern” in terms of its celebration of scientific reasoning. The opposite is “inauthentic” (henkaku), which employs some elements of detective fiction but its main focus is more or less sensationalism (eroticism and the grotesque) related to criminal investigation, and thus connotes the premodern (p. 17).

The novel negotiates within the genre by setting itself apart from the Western model (albeit explicit about it being a source of inspiration) and incorporating domestic alienation from the convention of featuring detective stories from the Edo and Meiji periods only. One aspect closely tied to Japanese tradition is an institutionalized sense of honor, practiced mainly by the *samurai*. Inspired by the teachings of both Confucianism and the Japanese Shinto faith, its most iconic interpretations include “fealty, a dignified code of conduct, and the consequences of breaking said code” (Nave, 2021, p. 4). In response to a devaluation, specific to the loss of sexual purity within gender dynamics, the preservation of honor can also present itself as male violence (Rodriguez Mosquera, 2013). An infamous example often seen in Japanese fiction is that of *seppuku*, the ritualistic disembowelment of one’s self as a result of a breach of conduct and to preserve honor after death rather than lose it in life (Seward, 2012). My research paper probes into the use of honor and *seppuku* in *The Honjin Murders* within the context of postwar, modern Japan and its changing cultural and literary tradition – an unexplored area in criticism.

Kenzo and the Split Between Tradition and Modernity

The spirit of honor is most prominently found in the proposed “master of the house of Ichiyonagi” (p. 15) and the culprit of the death of himself and his wife, that is, the second eldest son, Kenzo Ichiyonagi. In his character, the reader can astutely find the contradictions of a

personhood split between the strict traditional values of a respected and dignified Japanese family and the impact of contemporary values brought forth by a change in tradition, war, and Western culture's influence. It can be argued that the character also encapsulates Japan's state, wrestling with the growing pains of modernity. Kenzo's introduction captures his personality as an unbending person who is sure of himself and his values and would ultimately adhere to them no matter the situation:

The passenger in the rickshaw was a man of forty or so with a dark complexion and a severe expression on his face. He wore dark Western-style clothing, and sat stiffly upright in his seat. He never once glanced to the side, or took in his surroundings, but kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead. With his sharp cheekbones and prominent nose, there was something austere and unapproachable about him (p. 15).

Despite his rigidity, he also carries within himself the essence of individuation and rationality. This essence can be associated with his Kyoto City education at a private university. Despite him being a great scholar and academician and having seen the greater world out there, city life is not a viable option for him due to his deteriorating health: "he had taught for a few years at his alma mater after graduation but had fallen prey to a respiratory disorder and returned home, shutting himself away from the world" (p. 19). This breaking away from the polluted city and returning to the seemingly pure pastoral setting indicates the inner turmoil that constantly plagues him – to choose tradition or modern values, with the ultimate choice being the former. Moreover, it is in line with the Taisho literary period (1912-1926), when the modern cityscape was depicted as a ghostly site, resulting in split selves and loss of identity due to the disappearance of places and objects that had existed in the pre-modern era (Nakamura, 2020, p. 42). Perhaps, it is this interaction with the cityscape that results in the warped sense of identity that Kenzo experiences himself. However, his return to the pastoral in the textbook sense does not mean he is a romantic either. The text makes it clear that he has always valued his studies over marriage prospects: "It wasn't his poor health that had prevented him from marrying—he was just too busy with his studies to think about such matters," (p. 19) making his character far more complex.

Moreover, Kenzo has mastered the appearance of pragmatic values and rationality. However, his true personality comes to light when his diary is exposed by his brother Saburo, revealing that his emotions went from "extreme to extreme" and he had a "very strict sense of justice," holding others to an unattainable standard of honesty:

In normal circumstances this might be considered a human virtue, but in Kenzo's case I think it should be considered one of his defects. It was merciless and it allowed for no flexibility whatsoever. He was hard on himself for any dishonesty or deceit, but he was also too strict with others. And then he had to grapple with the extra problem that by birth he was required to be a landowner with power over a whole community. This was at complete odds with his sense of justice, and his deep dislike of feudal ideology and practices. But the irony was that at the same time as abhorring the system, he could sometimes be the most haughtily aristocratic of all the Ichiyangis. It was the result of

being at once the powerful head of a clan, a descendant of the honjin and a large-scale landowner—when someone failed to show him respect, he was incredibly offended. In other words, Kenzo was a creature full of inconsistencies (pp. 154-155).

When Gronow (1998) discusses modern culture and the emphasis on rationality, they present the idea that extreme rationalism in modern societies can take the form of irrationality instead. I argue that under challenging circumstances, Kenzo embodies that idea. While he succumbs to the traditional act of *seppuku* to escape from humiliation and maintain a semblance of “honor,” it is, in fact, his extreme rationality, bred from a misconceived notion of modern values, acting in a place that bleeds into irrationality. When he finds out that Katsuko, his wife-to-be, is not a virgin and her former lover Taya could potentially leverage his dignity in return for favors to keep quiet about the relationship, he finds it unforgivable. As he was, after all, a part of a noble family, Kindaichi believes that the murder was inevitable: “He is to the end, in the eyes of such a family, proud descendants of a honjin, it becomes perfectly natural and reasonable. No, I’d go so far as to say that this was an unavoidable murder. Kenzo had to murder Katsuko; there was no other way” (p. 158). Even his brother Saburo, an accessory in the murder, remarks that once this information was revealed to him, “no honor or pride was left in him” (p. 183). In his misguided display of honor and adherence to traditional values, he does not even measure up to the ideal of the *samurai* who devotes his entire life to a “single moment of perfect honor and loyalty” (Hurst, 1990, p. 5) to die with inner peace and is shrouded in mystery and mysticism. Kenzo cannot resolve the ambivalent tussle between his rational self and the tradition and sense of duty he feels he must adhere to be respectable in Japanese society.

Another tipping point for the dual murder was the split in his personality. His self is the center of a battle between a rational self, a product of a modern approach to social values, and a traditional self that still relies on old traditional family values for self-worth while harboring a conceptual dislike of it. His social standing after all comes from being born into privilege (p. 155). For example, his lineage makes everyone “impure” while he is the only pure being as narrated by the maid Kiyo:

She told me how one time a visitor came to the house in winter and she set up a brazier. The visitor’s hand happened to graze the brazier slightly. After he left, Kenzo couldn’t settle until that spot had been disinfected with alcohol. I would characterize this as an abnormal preoccupation with cleanliness. I’d go so far as to say Kenzo couldn’t help feeling that all human beings other than himself were dirty, impure (p. 157).

This split and the injury to his sense of honor and intrinsic values manifested in the form of *seppuku* and the murder of his wife, the “only” choice he had left to maintain honor and position in death. Even his act of murder lies between extreme rationality with his experiment with the sword to make it look like murder by a foreign perpetrator rather than suicide versus the act of *seppuku* itself, a Japanese *samurai* tradition enacted as a form of punishment (Turner, 2018). The all-important murder method is flouted as Kindaichi is able to reveal how and why the murder was committed.

It is also highlighted in the initial chapters as a form of foreshadowing of the path he would take for himself: for his wedding, he was to be dressed in the garb of a *samurai* “*kamishimo*” (p. 24). Known for their loyalty, courage, honor, and bravery, the *samurai* have been an exemplified part of Japanese warrior history (Nave, 2021), which Kenzo cannot amount to. Kenzo genuinely believes he is committing the formal act of *seppuku* instead of *hara-kiri*, as he truly thinks of himself as the embodiment of a *samurai*. It is evidently pointed out by Kindaichi while he explains the reason for the murder-suicide and why he couldn't have just severed ties with his wife-to-be: “To him, to back down and break the engagement in front of all the relatives that he had power over would be akin to removing his helmet and surrendering to the enemy” (p. 157). Even though he thought he was making a rational choice, it was done to preserve his warped sense of tradition. Kenzo's modern values and rationale are, ultimately, only a farce.

Purity of Lineage

Additionally, his individuation, which sets him apart from the rest of his siblings, comes from his insistence on marrying Katsuko Kobe despite his family's insistence to the contrary. The text makes it clear that words like “lineage” have fallen out of use in the city but remain alive and well in the rural communities. As mentioned earlier, Kenzo represents the new values of the city where the ideas of lineage and creed which have fallen out of usage but are held close in rural villages. His brother, who lives in the city, supports the marriage while the rest are against it. Kenzo's new values are referred to as “a large pebble [that] had been dropped into a still pond,” (p. 21) leading to an uproar within his family. Kenzo's act of going against his traditional family values ultimately douses the fire of tradition (earlier in the narrative, at least). A marriage of choice matters more to him than upholding family tradition to marry someone of a suitable “pedigree” which matters the most to this family:

Despite this, in the eyes of the Ichiyangi family, it didn't matter how educated she was, how wise or intelligent, or how large a fortune she possessed—the daughter of a tenant farmer would always be just that: the daughter of a tenant farmer. She had no family name, no pedigree, and they thought of her as no more than the child of Rinkichi Kubo, poor peasant farmer (p. 23).

One of the shortcomings of individuation includes a disconnectedness from the family and in effect from a symbolic family lineage, quite the opposite of what would be expected from a traditional family man. While the family is aware of his honorable stubbornness and apparently progressive ideas, he can repress and hide his darker, base instincts from the rest of society. Although Kenzo attempts to be individualistic, he ultimately succumbs to socialization regarding ideas of honor, which results in the murder of his wife and his self-disembowelment. It could also be argued that by presenting *seppuku* as resistive to a change in values, Yokomizo is extending his critique to the Japanese Empire's attempts to revive the practice of *seppuku* among soldiers during the wartime era. It is exactly that notion of irrationality that Yokomizo wants his readers to turn away from.

What is also of import here is the killing of a woman for the sake of honor. Katsuko is described as a “woman in possession of both her own fortune and a career,” (p. 23), whose only crime was falling prey to conniving city man Taya and not being a virgin before her marriage to Kenzo. Transgression of ideas of sexual purity, particularly on the part of a female relative, is taken as an affront to the man’s reputation as described by Kindaichi: “This woman who with her defiled body was attempting to become his wife. It must have driven him to indescribable fury” (pp. 157–158). Kenzo by upholding tradition, bears the flag of patriarchy as well, which I believe Yokomizo scrutinizes, too. This is evident in his other works such as *Death on Gokumon Island*, wherein the chieftain Kaemon’s three granddaughters are murdered despite them being the rightful successors of the family, in order to make way for their male cousin to inherit the title in their place. In both cases, the female characters fall short of the expectations of their patriarchs which leads to their demise.

Familial Breakdown

With Kenzo, it is furthermore questioned if family traditions passed down through generations can be so conveniently broken when the text reveals that his father Sakue, committed suicide through *seppuku*, and then his uncle Hayato, who had died violently by the sword, too. It is not fate that strikes all three of these men by way of blood but their unrelenting tradition, as also described by the villagers: “The Ichiyanagi family had suffered for generations from stubborn, headstrong men and their intense personalities” (p. 70).

The Ichiyanagi family are also upholders of tradition and a closed unit alongside the villagers of the village Okayama. However, the only thing that unites them is distrust toward outsiders or the “other.” At the same time, the Ichiyanagi family home was a *honjin* or an inn where the Edo period nobility used to stay. With the collapse of the feudal system, they were compelled to move to their current home village. Despite their perceived pride in their lineage, they are still considered “unpopular among the narrow-minded villagers” and called *kappa* “mythical, water goblins” (p. 18). Like the villagers consider the Ichiyanagi family as outsiders, the family, in turn, is resistant toward welcoming Katsuko as a bride of Kenzo, owing it not to wealth but to “lineage” as she is the daughter of a poor peasant farmer. While Katsuko has broken free from the traditional economy, passed through generations as her father accumulated wealth from America, was raised in a non-traditional family set up by her uncle, and earns her keep as a teacher, she is reduced to being the “bride of the heir to the family” (p. 22). The preoccupation with “heirs” and “lineage” suggests transferring tradition from generation to generation and staying clear of outside influences. From his own experience of living in the village of Okayama to escape the air raids in the capital, this is done to depict how the “green pastures of the countryside hide just as much darkness as the brothels of Yūrakuchō” (Kawana, 2008, p. 200), standing in the way of Yokomizo’s quest for rationality.

This discord and prevalence of death in the family represent the breakdown of the tradition and values upheld by the Ichiyanagis (values that have become obsolete) itself triggered by Kenzo’s actions. After the couple’s death, Saburo died in the war, Suzuko passed away the following year, and their cousin Ryosuke died in the bombing of Hiroshima; there are daily family

quarrels – representative of the complete downfall and collapse of familial relations. Although Kenzo's actions seem like a dying attempt at preserving tradition, change has become inevitable (If no child is left behind then it is the end of the family tree as well). In the shadow of the *honjin*, the narrator can smell "the odor of decay" left in the wake of a broken family, thus tradition. The *honjin*, which is also an inn meant for nobility, is symptomatic of this breakdown and the beginning of a new world order. This would mark the shift from "inauthentic" to "authentic" sensibilities of the Japanese populace, "challenging the dichotomy itself which dictated the prewar discourses" (Saito, 2007, p. 183) and a departure from "an inward aestheticism conditioned by fascist ideology toward an outward modernization suitable for postwar democracy" (p. 172). The inauthentic, in my opinion, includes the extreme rationality possessed by Kenzo.

In a period of social upheaval, Yokomizo writes that "farmers and peasants are increasingly no longer obliged to kowtow to the upper classes or to show the same level of respect for those with high social standing, fortune or property. Those values have come crashing down in the wake of Japan's defeat. However, what is still intact is lineage" (p. 21). Through the breakdown of the noble family and their *honjin*, Yokomizo breaks down the last surviving piece of irrationality. What Yokomizo is criticizing is not a reductive understanding of tradition as regressive and modernism as progressive in itself but the irrationality that corrupts both ends of the spectrum.

Instruments of Murder

The symbol of the *koto* – an ancient Japanese musical instrument – is employed by Yokomizo to represent the obsolescence of traditional values in rural Japan. In the chapter where Ikoto, Kenzo's mother, insists that his bride has to fulfill the custom of playing the *koto* on their wedding night because, "For several generations, the bride of the heir to the family title had been expected to play certain pieces on a *koto* at the official wedding ceremony," (p. 24), he outright refuses to follow the set value, deeming it unnecessary.

The image of the *koto* – or tradition – becomes an accessory to the crime scene, and its sound haunts the Ichiyonagi family henceforth. Kenzo's sister Suzuko, in Katsuko's stead, performs a traditional song written by a head of the Ichiyonagi family called 'The Lovebirds' which is held in great respect by them:

Many years ago, the wife of the head of the Ichiyonagi family was a very talented koto player. It so happened that a noblewoman—the daughter of a daimyo—was passing through on her way west for a wedding ceremony and stopped at the *honjin*. The expert koto player performed a song that she had written herself called 'The Lovebirds'. The daimyo's daughter admired the song so much that the next day she sent the family a koto, which they nicknamed 'The Lovebird'. Ever since, the Ichiyonagi family has required the bride of the heir to play the koto at her wedding ceremony (p. 33).

The fact that Katsuko reveals that she knows how to play the *koto*, contrary to what Kenzo implied, he robs her of the chance to assimilate herself within the family tradition, not just due

to his ignorance of the fact but also because he does not deem her worthy. The tradition held so near and dear in the form of the “Lovebirds’ instrument” instead has become a death warrant, choking the life out of its victims. Chiho Nakagwa (2014) also agrees that the murder has “traditional aesthetics and patrician overtones,” (p. 91) and it is that very instrument that becomes essential to carry out her murder.

The main instrument of murder though is the *katana* which makes the act of *seppuku* possible. The speculation by the elders of the village that “the cursed Muramasa katana that Sakue had used to kill his opponent that night was the very same sword that had been used to murder Kenzo and Katsuko,” (p. 88) proves to be interesting. While the claim is refuted, the sword is still a weapon that has traditionally been used by his father and uncle to commit the act of *seppuku*, one by the head of a noble family and one by a military man, respectively. Kenzo, who also considers himself akin to a *samurai*, no other weapon would have sufficed for the ritual.

Given the use of the *samurai’s katana* and the *koto*, (an aristocratic instrument) Kenzo’s need to uphold tradition rings true. Here, Yokomizo is criticizing the old values that repress those who fall under its shadow while exploring the “turbulent postwar world of rural Japan” (Kawana, 2007, p. 119), which is not the idyllic harbor of revered tradition but can also be rife with madness, anxiety, and prejudice brought to light with the destabilizing effects of war. The red ochre locked room in which the grotesque murder-suicide takes place is akin to the *mise en abyme* “a means by which the work turns back on itself, appears to be a kind of reflection” (Dallenbach, 1989). Yokomizo in the form of the locked room, holds up a mirror for Japanese society to reflect on. This is precisely what makes *The Honjin Murders* a unique locked-room mystery novel that represents the locked room as a microcosm of the rural area, where uncanny, strange occurrences ran rampant, away from the scrutiny of the outside world.

The Undercover Agent of Modernity

In contrast, sleuth Kindaichi is Yokomizo’s actual “undercover agent of modernity,” as termed by Kawana (2003) rather than the pretend modernist Kenzo. It can be argued that the characters are a foil to each other. Unlike Kenzo, Kindaichi is unbothered by how he appears and is described as a “scruffy-looking youth” (p. 81) who scratches his already disheveled hair and is prone to stuttering whenever excited about the mystery. His apparent oddity is owed to his exposure to city life in Tokyo, where “characters” like him are abundant. Logic and reasoning are his areas of expertise as he prefers to use his head rather than a “tape and measure” to deduce the culprit of the *honjin* murder, which means that he is not rational to the extreme where he would solely rely on scientific measures but observes closely for any discrepancies. He harbors a flexible rationality that the rigidity of Kenzo could not attain. Kindaichi is Yokomizo’s mouthpiece for a change in tradition and intellectual thinking that was stressed less during the war, which he wants to bring back into focus for the readership. Now, after World War II, he argues that the “need to write rational (*gōritekina*) and intellectual (*chitekina*) detective fiction in order to enlighten our readers” (Kawana, 2008, p. 187). This reflects a more

significant social trend to examine Japan's defeat in the war and to revive the nation through detective fiction.

For him, rationality is a tool to combat “irrational spiritualism,” which plagued Japan to succumb to fascist ideals during the war – also criticizing rigid conservatism and stubborn tradition in rural areas. The difference between him and the rural community is that he is impervious to indigenous prejudice, which has the villagers assign the murder to an outsider – the three-fingered man. This exact “rational exclusionism” in place of Kindaichi's “flexible rationality” got someone killed. It becomes clear that Kenzo's prized values and ideas of honor are on the decline. Moreover, Kindaichi does not expect everything to be rational; he also relies on chance and the illogical schemes of the killer. He recognizes that in a postwar world, not everything makes sense and that Kenzo's designs may be rational, but his motive is irrational. For him, it is not enough to decipher how the murder took place and by whom but also why: “The true horror of this case isn't in the way it was done, but why it was done” (p. 153). As a detective, he is sharp enough to expose exactly what Kenzo's rationale was behind the murder-suicide, but he is empathetic enough to recognize that it cannot be reduced to a double suicide, an observation the local Inspector cannot make: “A lovers' suicide?...No. I am sure it wasn't. This was a regular murder, fuelled by malice, hatred, and fury at Katsuko for having entrapped him in this impossible situation...” (p. 158).

Without this recognition, he would not be an able postwar detective. Also, he is not tied to any organization or institution like the police, which might not accept his eccentric approach to solving cases. He can only penetrate a highly exclusive society because Katsuko's uncle invited him. His independence and individuation are dissimilar to that of Kenzo, where he is not subject to external control of values past and values of a set institution. Henceforth, he can dismantle the mystery without dishonoring his personal values.

Conclusion

In summation, *The Honjin Murders* is a deep analysis of Japanese culture and society through the genre of detective fiction. More than being relevant to Japanese readers in the 1940s, the novel and subsequent releases owe a significant amount of their success to the commercial strategies adopted by the Kadokawa Publishing Company in the 1970s, which led to television and film adaptations of Yokomizo's works. It aligned with the literary movement to return to the “authentic” detective stories. With the onset of modernity and after the defeat of Japan in World War II, the novel not only revives and reconfigures the detective fiction genre but also examines the changing values of Japanese society, from those of feudalism, creed, and aristocracy to democratic rationalism. Seishi Yokomizo criticizes the conservatism and prejudice of villagers and the Ichiyonagi family while reproving the extreme rationality practiced by Kenzo Ichiyonagi. The conflict between tradition and new values is depicted through the characterization of Kenzo and his last act of *seppuku* to preserve “honor,” his family and the villagers' aversion to outsiders, and the aristocratic symbols of the *katana* and *koto*, where the breakdown of the family ultimately results in the death of tradition itself. Detective Kindaichi becomes the only “undercover agent of modernity” who draws on the

power relations in tight-knit rural communities and employs logic, reason, and the probability of chance to deduce the mystery. The exploration of such themes is again relevant to a post-1970s audience where the genre had taken a turn from “whodunnits” to “whydunnits” as the tussle with societal pressures, the onset of modernity, and the psychological turmoil of an individual prove to be the focus of Yokomizo’s novels. While ideas of rationalism and modernism seem to be borrowed with the influx of Western detective novels and given the aftermath of two World Wars, Yokomizo does not fail to indigenize his criticism of traditional values as well as extremes of rationality in his works.

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**A Widow's Diet: Negotiating Politics of Food and Widowhood in
*The Anger of Aubergines***

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Abstract

Widowhood, in Indian society, is a dreaded condition of a woman after the death of her husband. It is an imposed performance that entails a set of ritualized practices and behavior to mark her transition to the state of a woman without. On many occasions, this state is ensured and maintained through multifarious rituals and practices, which range from restrictions on mobility, choices, and desires to injunctions on clothes, bodily demeanor, and food. This physio-social exercise of control and restraint alludes to a framework of religio-cultural discourse that renders widows as social and sexual non-beings. The present paper attempts to understand the state of widowhood through the analysis of two short stories in the collection, *The Anger of Aubergines* (1997) by Bulbul Sharma from the perspective of food. Food and eating, being the elementary aspects of everyday life, become important signifiers in studying the deprived state of widowhood. The paper intends to unpack the politics behind the imposition of a curriculum of gastronomic injunctions and food taboos on Hindu upper-caste widows. Further, the paper conceptualizes the appetite of widows as a subversive category not only in challenging the gender discourses behind their oppression but also in exonerating their status as desireless beings.

Keywords: food, gender, widows, appetite, patriarchy

In India, like elsewhere, widowhood is not a natural state of being for women. It is a transitional social, cultural, and material becoming of a woman after the death of her husband. Widowhood is an ordeal by the proximal society which seeks to impose this dreaded condition on them for multifarious reasons. The gender structure of Indian society, due to its patriarchal nature, makes the state of widowhood very excruciating. After the death of her husband, a wife loses her personhood and, hence, transpires the erasure of her existence. For Hindu widows, especially upper caste widows, this is particularly true, as their subjectivity is deeply contingent on the life of the husband. Uma Chakrabarti (1995), in her essay *Gender, Caste and Labour*, underlines the rooted patriarchal notion that “woman becomes a social entity only when as a wife she is united with her husband, the death of her husband represents the cessation of her social existence and the end of her personhood” (p. 2250). Taming of the sexual energy that women innately possess is the other reason why women have to be bound in the shackles of widowhood. It is written in Hindu *Dharmasastras*¹ that women, in general, have a wicked and licentious disposition which can be ascribed to the bad karma in their previous birth (Sogani, 2002). The very birth of a woman in the present life is premised on the negative connotation of karma which makes them as lustful and demoniac creatures whose destructive energy should be controlled and channelized within the boundaries of marriage or repressed at all other occasions. Hence, after the death of her husband, society contrives inhibitions and restrictions to control the unbridled sexual energy of widows, which culminates in the deplorable state of widowhood. Rituparna Bhattacharya and Suman Singh corroborate this argument with their study on the Hindu widows living in Varanasi, which finds that a widow is “perceived as a sexual threat” to the affinal family and the proximal society, resulting in social exclusion (2018, pp. 766–777). So, widowhood becomes a medium of socio-cultural apparatus to be exercised on these wanton widowed women to keep in check their promiscuous nature, and maintain the socio-moral order of the Hindu tradition.

On most occasions, widowhood in Hindu culture demands women to follow the rituals of penance for their committed sins that resulted in the death of their husbands. It behooves a strict sense of atonement for not being able to carry out her *stridharma*² in her present life. She essentially becomes the reason for the death of her husband due to her bad *karma* in her previous birth which she cannot counterpoise through her wifely devotions within the marriage. Uma Chakrabarti (1995) calls out the incriminatory aspect labeled on widows referring to the lack of their virtuousness, “A true *pativrata*³ can never be widowed because she will never

¹ *Dharmasastras* are ancient Hindu religious texts that lay down the moral principles and the religious codes of conduct for Hindus. It also prescribes the moral laws of punishment and atonements for righteous Hindus (Sogani, 2002). See more, Kane, P.V. (1974). *History of Dharmasastras: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

² *Stridharma* refers to the ordained duties and functions of Hindu wives towards their husbands (Chakrabarti, 1995, p. 2249). It entails a strict sense of fidelity and absolute subservience that the wives have to follow to lead a righteous life. In Indian society, it is also used as an ideological mechanism to ensure social control over women. See more, Leslie, J. (1989). *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajavan*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³ *Pativrata* is a term used in Hinduism to refer to the virtuous married woman who has made a religious vow to staunchly remain loyal and devoted to her husband in life and even after that. The concept of *pativrata* is instituted in Hindu tradition to make widows “control their own sexuality and avoid transgressing patriarchal norms” (Sogani, 2002, p. 5).

leave her husband, even in death. She will either die before him as a ‘*sumangali*’⁴ or will accompany him in death” (p. 2250). Hence, a widowed woman is not considered a true *pativrata*, and widowhood is used as a measure of atonement through which the woman can still have some chances of carrying out her *stridharma* even after the death of her husband. Here, the question arises then, how is the state of widowhood expressed in a patriarchal society like India for the widows, especially for the Hindu upper caste widows, and why?

In Hindu tradition, the state of widowhood entails a set of ritualized practices to mark the transition of a woman from the *Subhgyavati* (blessed) wife to an unfortunate widow. In order to establish the state of widowhood as a condition of a woman without, the symbolic ideas of patriarchy are given expression in ritualized patterns and cultural practices. The death of the husband, without whom the widow ceased to be a social entity, is ritually expressed through special ceremonies signifying the social death of the woman. The rituals and practices encompass social restrictions in terms of mobility, choices, and desires to cultural injunctions on clothes, color codes, and food. Uma Chakrabarti and Preeti Gill (2001), in their anthology on Indian writing on widows, *Shadow Lives*, state that:

Codes of bodily mortifications, food restrictions, symbolic relationship with colour, dress and access to spaces and ceremonies, were all elements that reinforced the patterns of belief wherein the upper caste widow was regarded as entering a state of social death when her husband died (p. 7).

The concept of widowhood stands as an antithesis to the idea of marriage which can be marked by the different yet resembling set of rituals performed on the two occasions. On the one hand, marriage encompasses rituals like smearing of turmeric, adornment of red *kumkum* and *sindoor*, braiding hair with flowers, and wearing a red sari, all of which symbolize female procreative power and fertility, on the other hand, widowhood involves rituals like smearing out of *sindoor* and *kumkum*, wearing white or ochre sari, ban on applying turmeric and in some cases tonsuring head. The female sexual energy and potency which was once considered to be an integral aspect of married women’s life and rituals, turn into destructive and disorderly in the case of widowhood. Hence, the rituals and practices during and after widowhood are performed with the intent to desexualize the women. They are pushed to the liminal state of physically alive and sexually dead, ultimately signifying their sexual death. Uma Chakrabarti (1995) brilliantly sums up this state, “The customs and rituals mark a social and ideological resolution of the tensions inherent in a conceptualisation of widowhood in which the widow continues to exist but is sexually a non-being” (p. 2249).

Along with the rituals of widowhood, there are some prescribed behaviors that the Hindu widows have to follow, so that these can be insistent reminders of their deprived state. They include sartorial injunctions regarding dress codes, impermissibility to access certain parts of

⁴ In Hindu culture, *Sumangali* denotes those fortunate women whose husbands outlive them. This indicates the materialization of their ideal wifehood (Chakrabarti, 1995, p. 2250). Find more, Samanta, S. (1992). Mangalmayima, Sumangali, Mangal: Bengali perceptions of the divine feminine, motherhood, and “auspiciousness.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 26(1), 51–75.

the house like the kitchen, insistence on observing fasts, the permissibility of eating only vegetarian food, and prescription on avoiding spicy food, amongst others. The *Dharmasastras* prescribed that “A widow should give up adorning her hair, chewing betel-nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day” (Sogani, 2002, p. 7). What is important to note here is that food being a daily act of sustenance, becomes one of the central mediums through which widowhood is persecuted on women in the physio-socio-cultural realm. Hence, food can be an important marker to read and understand the state of widowhood as “food and eating are at the core of lives, inscribed in psyches, embedded in culture, vehicle and substance of social interaction, enmeshed with the relationship of the self to the world” (Sceats, 2004, p. 186).

The present article attempts to study two short stories in the collection, *The Anger of Aubergines* (1997) by Bulbul Sharma to understand how Hindu widows, especially upper caste widows, are controlled by the structures of patriarchy through the restrictions and taboos on food and eating. The paper conceptualizes the appetite of widows as a critical category in which gender plays a significant part in keeping in check the alimentary and sexual desires of widows. Further, it also strives to depict how food, in general, and appetite, in particular, can bring out a subversive and agentic self in the widows.

Food, Women and Widowhood in Bulbul Sharma’s *The Anger of Aubergines*

Food is deeply enmeshed in Indian society and culture. The inextricability of food in Indian culture can be assumed by the array of rules and norms that are rooted and manifested through the culinary codes. The indispensability of food in birth rituals, marriage rituals, death rituals, and other turn-of-life events makes food an important signifier in the rites of passage of Indian life. Supriya Chaudhuri and Rimi B. Chatterjee (2011), in their introduction to the volume *The Writer’s Feast*, note, “Indian culture gives enormous importance to food, to the customs surrounding the preparation and serving of meals, and to the body of cultural assumptions and myths associated with eating” (p. x). The semiotic value of food is well captured in the Indian literary and religious texts that shed light on the condition of widows in Indian society. The critical intersectionality between food and widowhood can be found in the ancient religious texts like *Dharmasutras*⁵ and *Dhramasastras* to classical literary creations in Sangam poetry. The dietary injunction in the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* pronounces that “A widow shall avoid during a year the use of honey, meat, spirituous liquor and salt” (Chakrabarti & Gill, 2001, p. 35). Similarly, the classical Sangam poetry describes the woes of widowed women in the following lines, “Now my great husband is dead, I eat at untimely evening hours and the lilies give me lily seed, a widow’s rice” (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 178). These ancient texts enunciate the age-old disapproving relationship between food and widows. These alimentary injunctions

⁵ *Dharmasutras* are the authoritative Sanskrit treatises on Hindu social and religious life, containing guidelines on social principles, moral precepts, and ethical norms that should ideally regulate the Hindu way of life. There are four surviving *Dharmasutras* in the present era, and *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* is one among them which contains lines on the appropriate dietary habits for widows. Read Uma Chakrabarti and Preeti Gill’s edited volume *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood* (2001) to find such dietary injunctions on Hindu widows in the ancient religious texts like *Dharmasutras* and *Dhramasastras* that are collated in the volume.

still continue to haunt the lives of the widows which is also reflected in a number of contemporary literary texts, including *Chchinnamasta* by Ashapura Devi, *The Remains of the Feast* by Gita Hariharan, *Water* by Bapsi Sidwa, and the current text under analysis *The Anger of Aubergines* by Bulbul Sharma.

The Anger of Aubergines by Bulbul Sharma is a collection of 12 short stories and 20 recipes, where each short story ends with one or two recipes mentioned in the story. The collection explores the imbricated ways in which “food speaks about women and about how women speak about food, and about how women speak about themselves through food” (Sarkar, 2019, p. 38). The short stories become a kind of culinary testimonials through which women get “a powerful, highly charged, and personalized voice” (Abarca, 2006, p. 4). The individualized and nuanced food voices of women in these stories make the collection a critical area of feminist analysis. Further, the text comes forth as the gastronomic literature which “offers a rich and complicated history of value-systems implicit in the preparing, serving and eating of food” (Chaudhuri and Chatterjee, 2011, p. viii).

When women are associated with food, they are most often seen as the producers and provisioners of food rather than consumers, but Sharma’s narrative represents women as embodied eaters and cravers of food. By focusing on the consumptive practices of women, Sharma, in her stories, unveils several aspects and situations in the lives of women through the culinary perspective. Among these, widowhood remains central as the volume starts with the story of her widowed grandmother titled *Saying it with Cauliflowers*. In the story, she describes the culinary prowess of her grandmother and also delineates the eating practices of an orthodox Brahmin widow like her grandmother. Another story that primarily focuses on the unconventional dietary proclivity of a widow is *Constant Craving*. By focusing on the different consumptive ways of two widowed women in the two stories, Sharma represents the individualized and contextual subjectivity of widows, thereby not straitjacketing the state of widowhood into a singular version.

Widowhood: A Curriculum of Forbidden Foods

Eating is a deeply personal act. But it is also a political affair in which “society, subjectivity and the body are interrelated” (Lupton, 1996, p. 6). Allowing particular food to go into one’s body involves taking into consideration a regimen of contexts, meanings, and socio-cultural codes. For Hindu upper caste widows, the codes and norms of widowhood are ingrained in their ways of eating as patriarchy finds women’s appetite and, by extension, their bodies “the locus of social control” (Sceats, 2004, p. 63). *Saying It with Cauliflowers*, the preface story to the collection *The Anger of Aubergines*, captures the personalized story of her Dida, the widowed grandmother of the writer whom she describes as an orthodox Brahmin widow following the rules of widowhood in the realm of culinary rituals. The writer describes her grandmother’s usual culinary practices in the following way:

Dida sits and cooks on the floor of the kitchen. I see her chopping vegetables into tiny pieces, cleaning rice, kneading dough or washing spinach leaves all through the day,

although she eats only once a day and fasts every other day like all orthodox Brahmin widows (Sharma, 2005, pp. iv-v).

The interesting aspect of this description is the sharp contrast between her grandmother's productive aspect of food and her consumptive behavior. The sharp contrast in her culinary behavior is hinged on the notion that a widow should eat a "bland vegetarian diet and on some days be denied food altogether" (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 219). In this way, she resembles the prototype of a Hindu widow whose appetite is constructed by the patriarchal mores of widowhood. Her appetite is not a biological one but a social one which is formed by the subjectivity of an upper-caste Brahmin widow. Hence, Dida's demeanor has been described as one "who has always been frail and dressed in a widow's white sari ever since I can remember, cooks and eats before the other members of the family" (Sharma, 2005, p. v). Her eating behavior is a "microcosm of wider social structures and boundary definitions" (Lupton, 1996, p. 7). It is also significant to point out here that the aged grandmother constantly remains anxious about maintaining the pure status of her expiating widowhood. Hence, in the story, there is "the invisible line that divides my grandmother's kitchen from the rest of the house" where "no one is allowed into this tiny, dark room which is swabbed and cleaned four times a day by Dida" (Sharma, 2005, p. iv). The grandmother's kitchen acts as the "symbolic borderland" (Maji, 2019, p. 8), where the culinary rituals of widowhood can be followed. Hence, the non-vegetarian and pungent-smelling items like onions, garlic, and meat are entirely forbidden into her kitchen. Her culinary curriculum can be viewed as the ritual of penance, since widows are believed to be the reason for the death of their husbands due to their lack of *stridharma*. But by undergoing her ritual of penance in the symbolic borderland, she can still fulfill her wanting *stridharma* by ensuring her husband's salvation. Further, the kitchen in its spatial geography can be understood as the oppressive structure of the patriarchal society that has formed Dida's consciousness of becoming an atoning widow. In the story, Dida's culinary curriculum is not only spatial and material but also becomes very symbolic. It can be assessed from her utter repulsiveness to even touch the dining table which has stains of "rich, red meat curries lashed with onions and garlic" (Sharma, 2005, p. v). The "polluted" dining table induces apprehension to the extent of fear of getting contaminated in her subjectivity as an upper-caste Hindu widow that she creates her own space of penance in the form of her kitchen. Deborah Lupton argues that "subjectivity is not linked solely to the organic constituents of food, but also to its symbolic meaning" (Lupton, 1996, p. 17).

Apart from observing the ritual of penance, the dietary ordinances on widows take up a different dimension of meaning, especially in the case of non-elderly Hindu widows. Sharma's story *Constant Craving* addresses this aspect of widowhood through the characters of Sumitra, a year-turn widow, and her widowed elderly mother-in-law. Sumitra's mother-in-law constantly exhorts her to keep fasts and remain steadfast to their dietary schedule based on the lunar cycle, "The moon, as it waxes and wanes, tells us when to fast. It protects the virtue of widows and keeps the souls of husbands at peace" (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). Like the grandmother in *Saying It with Cauliflowers*, Sumitra's mother-in-law, called in the story as Ma believes in the idea of ideal widowhood through the dietary form of atonement, but her exhortations of dietary deprivation mean much beyond that. Her insistence on Sumitra's alimentary

deprivation can be read as a preventive measure to keep in check her widowed body after the death of her husband, since the widowed bodies can destabilize the socio-moral order of the society. Hence, Sumitra's mother-in-law sermonizes her, “You are not old like me as yet...but try to be pale and thin as if the blood has drained from your veins. It is safer...no man will look at you” (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). So, the food injunctions on non-elderly Hindu widows like Sumitra call into question the material and cultural apparatus of patriarchy which causes alarmist fear and apprehension around widows. In this regard, Uma Chakravarti (1995) states that “the widow of the dead husband is the object of real moral panic” (p. 2250). Hence, the strictures on the Hindu widow’s diet are nothing but the physio-cultural apparatus to establish control over the widow’s body so that she does not cause moral dyspepsia in the society.

Patriarchy demands not only control over the body of the widows but also their prospective desires. Feminist Scholar Tanika Sarkar (2017) corroborates this notion by stating, “widow’s life was circumscribed by Hindu ritual injunctions, which insisted on the self-abnegation of their body and desire” (Sarkar qtd. in Shandilya, p. 21). In order to bring into action the control of a widow’s desires, food taboos become one of the potent sites of patriarchal hegemony. Sarah Lamb (2000), in her work *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes*, observes that:

The most common rationale as to why widows were pressed to eat vegetarian diets and rice only once a day, and fast on the eleventh day of the lunar month... was that these were defensive measures aimed at controlling a widow’s sexuality. The widow’s diet was said to ‘reduce sexual desire (kāma),’ ‘decrease blood (rakta),’ make the body ‘cool (thāṇḍā),’ make the widow ‘thin and ugly,’ to keep her from ‘wanting any man.’ (p. 220)

Hence, in the story, the dietary dictates of Sumitra's mother-in-law are not only predicated on keeping an emaciated body through food deprivation but also on creating a “desireless body” through food abnegation. She instructs Sumitra, “Fast, Sumitra, fast when the moon tells you. Your body should not be warm and plump, smelling of rich food, onions and garlic” (Sharma, 2005, p. 87). The mentioned foods inhibited by Sumitra’s mother-in-law are categorized as *rajasik* and *tamasik* in Hindu belief and are believed to produce heat in the bodies of those who consume them. They are further believed to excite sexual desires and worldly passion in the consumers. Then, the dietary proscriptions on the rich, spicy and odorous food by Sumitra’s mother-in-law in the case of Sumitra can be located within the regimen of physio-sexual ordinances of patriarchy that is contingent on the view that women’s sexuality after the death of the husband is ineffectual and should be curbed at all limits. The culinary curriculum of food taboos aims at this transformation of widows into sexual non-beings, resulting widowhood into the sexual death of widows.

“Constant Craving”: Appetite as Subversion

The dietary practices in Sharma’s short stories are not only used as a medium to establish and symbolize control over widows’ bodies and desires, but they also become an arena for positing subversion and harboring resistance. Thus, in her stories, the widow’s consumptive practices

“participate in a complicated relationship between power structures and human agency” (Malhotra et al., 2021, p. xvii). In *Constant Craving*, Sumitra’s life of widowhood is marked by the strict abstinence from all kinds of foods to bring her into the religio-cultural framework of renunciation, discipline, and salvation, but her frank appetite for forbidden foods defies such patriarchal underpinnings of widowhood. Hence, she thinks to herself:

What she found bewildering was that, instead of getting used to the strict regime of fasting and eating less and less food, her body had turned defiant and decided to rebel. It craved foods she had never tasted even as a young girl. For the last one month, on Monday fasts she had dreamt of choley, paneer tikka, dahi kachori and even tandoori chicken – which she had never eaten in her life (Sharma, 2005, p. 88).

Sumitra’s appetite for these foods stands sacrilegious to the dietary code of Hindu widowhood which bans all kinds of non-vegetarian, hot, and spicy foods. But at the same time, Sumitra’s appetite can be seen as a stark defiance of the religio-cultural order of widowhood which tries to essentialize her as a model of patriarchal subservience. But through her appetite for tabooed foods, she contrives to subvert the gender structure as “food acts as an agent of political and cultural resistance against the dominant social order” (Malhotra et al., 2021, p. xiv).

Speaking on the politics of eating, Margret Atwood suggests that “consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (Parker, 1995, p. 349). In the story, Sumitra constantly ruminates about foods that are prohibited to her as a widow, since widowhood entails a set of food taboos and consumptive prohibitions to bring widows under the patriarchal yoke, leaving them no sense of agency. But food in itself is power and can allow “the possibility of challenge and therefore of shifts in overall power relations” (Sceats, 2004, p. 142). Sumitra’s unabashed appetite for tabooed foods throughout the story foils the social and cultural expectations of widowhood. Hence, at one time, she imagines a tantalizingly creamy and sweet jam sandwich and on the other, she dreams about sumptuous *chole* with crushed *samosa*. Her culinary ruminations are so graphic that they propel her to act on her proclivities. Thus, she schemes to send the houseboy, Raghu to the confectioner’s shop and bring one plate of *choley* with two *samosas*. The idea in itself was so scandalizing to her that “she was so shocked by it that she had to hold the tap for support” (Sharma, 2005, p. 90). The trepidation can be located at all the mores and codes of the socio-religious discourses of widowhood and her own temerity in violating it. But at the same time, her anticipation for consuming the forbidden food is very telling:

She would eat very slowly, nibbling at the hot green chilli which always came with the chole. She would savour the slightly sour and spicy grains of choley and then bite into the crisp pastry of the samosa, letting the potato filling melt slowly in her mouth. She would not swallow quickly but allow only tiny morsels to go down the throat, bit by bit, so that the delicious, hot, spicy, sour and salty flavour would linger (Sharma, 2005, p. 92).

Sumitra's description of consuming the desired food almost reaches an orgasmic expression in its details. In her mental process of relishing the dish, food almost becomes tantamount to sexuality. A.K Ramanujan (1999), in his essay *Food for Thought*, writes that food in Indian culture is often associated with the "metaphor for sex" (p. 88). Thus, food here can be read as a "metaphoric expression of displaced desire" (Raja, 2005, p. 75). Further, in a vindictive patriarchal culture that forbids and punishes widows for expressing their desires conspicuously, the desire for tabooed food is nothing less than an act of subversion.

In Sharma's story, Sumitra's aberrant appetite ends in her unmaterialized desire of having the longed chole with samosa, as her mother-in-law arrives at the crunch moment of Raghu delivering the food parcel to her and she kicks it away, thinking it to be garbage brought through the misgivings of the crows. Though her appetite does not come about to be fulfilled within the story, through her simple act of desiring forbidden foods, she de-essentializes her subjectivity as a desireless non-social being. Further, through her non-abiding appetite, she poses an actual threat (though temporary) to the normative socio-cultural codes of widowhood. Hence, Sumitra's act of transgression in the culinary realm offers possibilities of reclaiming subjectivity and gaining personal agency for the widows.

Conclusion

By reading the consumptive practices of the widowed characters in Sharma's short stories, the paper staunchly argues that widowhood is a performance scripted by patriarchy to hand over social and sexual death to women so that they can be brought into the normative gender structures. Despite having centuries elapsed and the laws like The Widow Remarriage Act, The Widow Property Act, and The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act being passed, widows still reel under the socio-religious regime of patriarchy. Martha Chen (2000), who conducted wide-scale research on the condition of widows in India, writes that "The orthodox ideology... continues to remain quite powerful in women's lives, conditioning their identity, behavior, and perspectives" (p. 11). Similarly, a recent study by Rituparna Bhattacharya and Suman Singh also indicates that the lives of Hindu widows are "tangential upon an assemblage of structural, cultural, spatial, and familial violence" (2018, p. 770). In spite of such orthodoxy and vulnerability, widows still manage to carve out spaces and ways of surviving and resisting the patriarchal structures in Hindu tradition through different mediums (Bhattacharya & Singh, 2018). Hence, the paper proposes the simple act of eating as a site of micro power to resist the subservience to patriarchy and subvert the gender structures, which primarily actuate the state of widowhood. Further, through the analysis of Sumitra's subversive appetite, the paper also debunks the notion that widows are entirely desireless or non-agentic beings. But they are fully embodied beings, grappling with the ways and routes to assert their "real" selves and desires.

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Coronavirus: A Literary Perspective from the Arab World

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Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of human life, including the way we experience and represent reality. One of the most striking aspects of the pandemic has been the widespread documentation of scenes of chaos and suffering. These scenes have been captured on news footage and social media posts and have been shared widely around the world. While these images provide a glimpse into the reality of the pandemic, they often fail to capture the full emotional and psychological impact of the experience. In contrast, literature has a long history of representing the hidden impact of pandemics and catastrophes on the psyche of individuals and communities. From Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) to Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), the novel, in particular, has offered a valuable and perceptive understanding of the pandemic experience. In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, a surge of literary responses emerged from novelists around the world. This paper aims to map how the pandemic outbreak unfolds in the Arabic novel. It investigates how Arab novelists make meaning of COVID-19 by examining prevalent themes and recurrent structures in their works. The focus is on four major Arab novels: Muhamad bin Muhamad Salem's *Ala'ib Khalid ma' Korona* (*Khalid's Games with Corona*, 2020); Wasini Alaraj's *Layliat Ramada* (*Ramada's Nights*, 2021); Jasem Salman's *Korona: Alhub wa Alharb* (*Corona: Love and War*, 2021); Sakina Aldakhil's *Nawbet Amal* (*A Fit of Hope*, 2021).

Keywords: Arabic novel, pandemic fiction, pandemic literature, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives in a rapid and unpredictable way. It is “a paradigm-shifting event that divides lives and cultures into a before and after” (Outka, 2020, para. 2). The pandemic outbreak has led to a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety. This uncertainty is represented in literature and the writings about the pandemic. There are many novels and stories that have been written about the pandemic, and each one offers a unique perspective on this global event. However, writing about pandemics in literature is somewhat akin to writing about wars and natural disasters: writers often need the tragedies to end before they can fully explore them in a literary way that is both profound and meaningful.¹ This is especially true for novels, which often deal with topics at length and in detail, and which require more time to convey human emotions during such turbulent times. Likewise, great authors have written about pandemics and used them as symbols in their novels. Yet, the most interesting literature about them has only emerged years after the end of crisis. According to Elizabeth Outka, in her study of the novels written about 1918-1919 influenza, “as the pandemic became less of an immediate threat and fears of its return started to recede, authors seemed more willing to resurrect it: to represent its damage directly, to process its meaning, and to assess its lingering effects” (Outka, 2019, p. 4). An example of this is the Great Plague of London of 1665 which was revisited many decades later in works like Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Similarly, the deadly Spanish Flu of 1918-1919 found its way into literature years later in works such as William Maxwell’s *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) and Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a wave of public introspection among poets and novelists in the Arab world, as well as in other parts of the globe. A survey of Arabic pandemic fiction suggests that, amid the initial outbreak of Coronavirus, there has been a rush to publish novels that explicitly put “Corona” on their cover pages – *Running Away from Corona* (2021), *The Illusion of Corona* (2021), *The Judgment of Corona* (2021) – or use it as a backdrop to already known and familiar narratives – *Love in the Time of Corona* (2021) (Naef, 2020, p. 11). While some novelists were able to capture the chaos and uncertainty of the pandemic in their work, the majority of fiction published during that time was lacking in depth (Ismail, 2021; Naef, 2020). However, the novels that have been published to date suggest that the pandemic has had a significant impact on Arabic literature and culture, and it is likely that this impact will continue to be seen in the years to come. Moreover, the full extent of the COVID-19’s impact on the Arabic novel is not yet well-documented in the literary criticism (Alsabt, 2022, p. 273). The current study aims to fill the gap in the research on post-Corona Arabic novels by offering a nuanced paradigm for analyzing them. The study will explore how post-Corona Arabic fiction makes meaning of the pandemic and how it has shaped the novels’ themes, characters, and structures. To this end, textual analysis and close reading will be used as the primary methodology to analyze both content and form of the selected works. Given the limited scope

¹ The impact of World War I (1914-1918) on Anglo-American fiction is just one example of the ways in which literature responded to war. There was relatively little fiction written about the dark side of the war during the war itself and the immediate aftermath (Hynes, 1990, p. 424). However, in the 1930s, a new wave of novels began to emerge, exploring the psychological and social impact of the war. The 1930s saw a publication of some of the most important and influential works of Anglo-American fiction about World War I, including Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) (Peters, 2012, p. 34).

of the study, the focus will be on four Arabic novels that were published shortly after the pandemic began and that offer a unique artistic perspective on this global crisis: Muhammad bin Muhammad Salem's novel *Ala'ib Khalid ma' Korona* (Khalid's Games with Corona, 2020), Wasini Alaraj's *Layliat Ramada* (*Ramada's Nights*, 2021), Jasem Salman's *Korona alhub wa alharb* (*Corona: Love and War*, 2021), Sakina Aldakhil's *Nawbet Amal* (*A Fit of Hope*, 2021). This way the study will examine how the parameters of assessing the nature of the pandemic are similar or different from one novelist to the other. By examining the diverse perspectives of post-Corona Arabic novelists, the study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the pandemic and its impact on the Arabic literature.

Coronavirus Between Myth and Reality

Pandemics and the plague have been a recurring theme in literature for centuries (Girard, 1974). Pandemic in literature is not just a medical phenomenon, but also a powerful symbol that has been used to explore complex themes like fear, isolation, solidarity, and resilience in the face of death. In the Arabic novel, the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic takes two distinct forms: mythical and realist. In mythical representations of COVID-19, the pandemic is seen as a manifestation of a deeper moral or social crisis. Through such representations the pandemic is used as a metaphor for the challenges of modern life, such as capitalism, political corruption, and social alienation. Both Wasini Alaraj and Jasim Salman imagine a world in their novels in which the COVID-19 pandemic is just one of many catastrophes that have befallen humanity. These novels explore the ways in which the pandemic has exposed the fragility of our world and the need for new ways of thinking about our relationship to each other and to the world. In realist representations, the pandemic is depicted as a natural disaster that has devastating consequences for human society. These novels often focus on the physical and emotional impact of the pandemic, as well as the social and political challenges it creates. Good examples of such realist representations are Salem's *Khaled's Games with Corona* and Aldakil's *A Fit of Hope*. Both texts follow the lives of their central characters as they grapple with the effects of the pandemic. The novels vividly depict the chaos and fear that the pandemic unleashed, as well as the resilience and compassion of the human spirit.

The Mythical Plague

Myth is a recurrent theme in much modern literature (Gentile, 2011). It can assume many shapes, and the term "mythical" may conceal a variety of cultural phenomena (White, 1971, p. 3). James W. Menzies notes that there is no single form of myth and that it is constantly being reinterpreted and reinvented in literature (2014, p. 23). However, there are some common qualities that constitute the mythical attribute. Mythical literature often features mythical characters, such as gods, epic heroes, demons, and monsters. These characters are often used to explore themes of good and evil. There is also the mythical setting, such as lost cities, ancient forests, and magical realms. These settings can provide a symbolic perception of reality and the different aspect of human society. However, this study will apply a specific understanding of myth that combines an approach of myth as reception (White, 1971) and the myth and ritual school.

Pandemic fiction often features a sense of mystery, in which the disease is given some supernatural power (Girard, 1989). In literature the plague is often portrayed as a mythical or supernatural force that brings about death and destruction. This is because the cause of the pandemic is often unknown, the speed with which it spreads is unbelievable, and the power with which it destroys is unprecedented (More, 2021, p. 3857). In *Corona: Love and War*, Salman's narrator reflects on the mysterious influence of Corona pandemic: "Corona, the disease that baffled humanity with its tyranny [...] is just like the Nimrod's fly² – its origins, departure, and potential consequences for humanity remain shrouded in uncertainty." (Salman, 2021, p. 231). The novel draws a parallel between the mysterious and perplexing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enigmatic quality of Nimrod's fly. By making this comparison, the author highlights the sense of mystery and unpredictability surrounding the pandemic, emphasizing that it has left humanity grappling with many unanswered questions and uncertainties. Moreover, the plague is often seen as a symbol of the dark side of human nature and the destructive power of evil (Schmitz, 2021). Thus, the mythical plague can be used to explore different social, political, and psychological crises, reflecting the fear and uncertainty experienced during epidemics. This section will examine how mythical literary representations of COVID-19 in the Arabic novel reveal the complex social, political, and psychological dynamics that both shape and are shaped by this unprecedented global crisis.

The mythical representation of the pandemic is evident in both Alaraj's novel *Ramada's Nights* and Salman's novel *Corona: Love and War*. Both texts imbue the virus with mythical power, depicting it as a force that destroys all aspects of life in a way that transcends scientific understanding. Additionally, both novels utilize imaginative and mysterious settings, as well as recurring mythical motifs such as the "conjunction between the plague and the sacrificial rituals in mythology" (Girard, 1974, p. 19). While Salman invokes mythical characters such as jinn, devils, and demons, Alaraj draws on religious mythology. Despite their apparent differences, both novels share these elements, which contribute to their respective representations of the pandemic as a mythical phenomenon. The mythical portrayal of the pandemic in these two novels transcends mere incorporation of magical or supernatural elements; it serves as a lens through which to delve into the pandemic's profound meaning. Within Alaraj's *Ramada's Nights* and Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, COVID-19 emerges as a manifestation of systemic societal issues. This section aims to elucidate how such narrative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the pandemic's societal and political ramifications and how it is employed to reveal the vulnerabilities inherent in civil and societal structures.

In *Ramada's Nights*, the author conjures up an imaginative city to serve as the backdrop of the outbreak of the pandemic in the novel. The name of the city is Coviland which is derived from the name of the virus itself, Covid. The city, which lies on the coast of an unnamed sea in an unnamed country, is represented as a land with a long history of diseases, droughts, and wars

² In Jewish and Islamic mythology, Nimrod is depicted as a powerful tyrant who incurred divine punishment leading to his death. This punishment is said to have resulted from a tiny fly entering his nose, causing him to fall ill and ultimately killing him (Furayhah, 1992, p.174).

and is dominated by anarchy and corruption. Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, on the other hand, features an unnamed city which is also dominated by anarchy and corruption. Salman's city is described as a land of "fear", "wars" and "arm trade" where people are constantly "looking over their shoulders" (Salman, 2021, p. 13). The virus is seen as a punishment from God, and the people of the city are in a state of constant restlessness and anxiety. Such unexplained, excessive forces at work in both cities suggest a mythological approach. The utilization of unnamed settings in the novels can be interpreted in two ways. First, the location may be irrelevant in itself but rather a symbol of places in which inequalities and injustice prevail. By avoiding naming specific places, the writers are able to make their criticisms of such injustices more universal and gives the place a wide symbolism as if talking about the world. Second, in their critique of such injustices – whether political, capitalist, religious, or social – the writers may be avoiding pointing the finger at a particular place in order to avoid censorship or persecution. This allows them to express their criticism of these powers without directly implicating any specific individuals or institutions. For example, the unnamed coastal city in *Corona: Love and War* has a lot in common with the planned city of NEOM built on the Red Sea in northwest Saudi Arabia. Salman's novel describes a city that rises economically in record time for unclear reasons, as if it was chosen by hidden forces to be a site for larger and wider works than its inhabitants could imagine. This suggests that the city, according to the author, is controlled by capitalism, which grows and controls everything, becoming monolithic and unstoppable. However, the pandemic interrupts the progress of this grand plan, and the city and its neighboring towns and villages are hit by a sudden stoppage of life and work. Eventually, the economic inflation that affected the place comes to an end.

In Salman's and Alaraj's novels, the mythical plague is never present alone. It is part of a "thematic cluster" (Girard, 1974, p. 840–1) that includes the motif of ritual sacrifice, which is a significant element of mythological narratives. This element is present in both texts, but it is depicted more explicitly in Salman's novel. In *Corona: Love and War*, there is a clear interweaving of reality with "ancient Arab mythology" of *jinn*, lost treasures of Aladdin, and stories of the sudden rise from rags to riches (Salman, 2021, p. 73). The story of Amer, a poor shepherd from the village, who meets the *jinn* during his regular trips to the desert while tending to his flock of goats evokes stories of fantasy and allegory (Menzies, 2014, p. 33). Amer is represented as meager, mean man who is determined to rid himself of his "bitter poverty" in any way possible (Salman, 2021, p. 31). He finds in the *jinn*'s fantastic power and knowledge an opportunity to escape his reality. Amer approaches the *jinn* and makes a contract with their leader, "a half-human-half-demon creature" (Salman, 2021, p. 36), in which he agrees to sacrifice the body of a young girl and present it to the *jinn* in return for power, wealth, and the marriage to the most beautiful girl in the village, Layla. Amer's wish is granted and in no time, he becomes the wealthiest, most powerful man, not only in his village, but in the whole country. However, this prosperity is interrupted with the spread of the pandemic, which takes the life of Amer's young bride as well.

While there are no ritual sacrifices explicitly made in Alaraj's novel, there is a similar representation of the trope of ritual sacrifice in the death of Ramada's mother, Zahra.. Her illness is initially approached with superstitious and religious treatments by the father, who

keeps her locked in and refuses to allow her to be hospitalized or receive any medical treatment. His resources in this approach are what Ramada calls “the superstitions of the Imam, Shamsuddin” whom the father considers as “the savior of all humanity” (Alaraj, 2021, p. 17). The father’s superstitious and religious treatments for Zahra’s illness indicate a belief in the power of these rituals to heal or protect. On the other hand, the mother, who is depicted as having made all sorts of sacrifices throughout her life, adheres to her husband’s wish as if making her final sacrifice to both patriarchal figures, the father and the Imam. The narrator declares that the reason behind the father’s sacrifice of Zahra is “his fear of the death devils” (Alaraj, 2021, p. 14), which once again emphasizes the role of superstitious beliefs in addressing the illness. This portrayal suggests that the father is giving away Zahra as a scapegoat in an attempt to save his own life. Immediately after Zahra’s death, his fear of death disappears, and he starts a new life. He marries a woman half his age and revives his business, which has temporarily collapsed during quarantine.

Examining the ritual sacrifices depicted in the selected novels provides valuable insight into how certain individuals’ deaths, as Judith Butler has argued, are considered less “grievable” than others (2022, p. 4). Pandemic fiction has consistently uncovered the unequal impact of crises on marginalized and oppressed groups revealing the harsh reality that those who are already disadvantaged face heightened challenges during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Burkert, 2021, p. 39). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the high rates of death among marginalized groups, such as disabled individuals and people from racial minorities and ethnic communities, can be attributed to several factors, including structural racism and disparities in healthcare access (Krishnadas and Taha, 2020, p. 50). Their death is not perceived as important or worthy of grieving because they are considered as *others* (Butler, 2022, p. 4). Butler’s concept of “grievability” can be extended to show that the deaths of women, in the novels under discussion, are also considered less “grievable” than those of other groups. In both Salem’s and Alaraj’s novels, only women are sacrificed not as an inevitable tragic consequence of the pandemic, but because their lives are devalued within the patriarchal societies depicted in both works. The representations of the sacrificial acts of women characters by men are used to explore and expose the gendered inequalities pervasive in society. The sacrifices of the young girl and Zahra, the mother, are ultimately futile, as they do not prevent the spread of the pandemic or bring about any lasting happiness for the survivors. However, these sacrifices do serve to highlight the vulnerability of women’s lives in communities controlled by gender inequalities.

The mythical representation of the pandemic in these two novels is not simply a matter of adding magical or supernatural elements to the story. Rather, it is a way of exploring the deeper meaning of the pandemic. It provides a framework for understanding the pandemic and its social and political implications. COVID-19 in Alaraj’s novel *Ramada’s Nights* and Salman’s novel *Corona: Love and War* is seen as a manifestation of the underlying problems in society. The prevailing inequalities and injustices that are present in the depicted cities are seen as equally significant, if not more so, than the pandemic itself. The pandemic is used to reveal the fragility of civil, societal, and humanitarian structures as a whole.

Realist Representation of the Pandemic

Realist representations of the pandemic typically focus on the physical and emotional effects of the pandemic. In such representations, the narratives often draw on deep research and the author's reporting skills to create a vivid and realistic depiction of the pandemic. Both Salem's *Games with Corona* and Aldakhil's *A Fit of Hope* represent the epidemic in a matter-of-fact way, drawing on facts and scientific evidence in an attempt to bring to life a contemporary world of pestilence and death. The notion of what constitutes real evidence both scientific and social in both works is fundamental. They emulate genres of factual reports of the pandemic based on available data, epidemiological variables, and the reports from the World Health Organization.

Khaled's *Games with Corona* by Salem tells the story of a Mauritanian child who is displaced from his home country due to his father's work. Khaled is forced to adapt to his new life in the United Arab Emirates, where he cautiously makes new friends and tries to enjoy the city atmosphere. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forces Khaled to stay indoors and limits his social interactions. Khaled finds it difficult to adjust to these restrictions, and he begins to devise plans to go against the rules. The novel chronicles Khaled's daily efforts to circumvent the quarantine rules, and it explores the psychological and emotional toll that the pandemic takes on Khaled and his family. The novel is divided into four chapters, each of which corresponds to one week of full quarantine. The chapters are written in a simple and direct style, and they provide a clear and concise account of the outbreak of the pandemic, the government precautions against its spreading and the way people reacted to these precautions. The following passage is a clear example of this:

That night, Khaled learned that the Emirate's government had implemented a number of measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures included the closure of mosques and the suspension of *jama'ah* prayers. The number of confirmed cases had reached 93, and it was likely that more measures would be implemented soon. Social gatherings of all types would be banned, and stores and shopping areas would be required to enforce strict social distancing measures (Salem, 2020, pp. 45–46).

The narrative style here provides a detailed perspective of the early measures taken in response to the spread of COVID-19 by the Emirate's government. These measures are listed in a matter-of-fact way, and they are followed by the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. The use of statistical facts in this passage serves to create a sense of reality and provides a clear perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 on contemporary life in that particular moment of history.

In her novel *Fit of Hope*, Aldakhil tells the story of a nurse who must choose between quitting her job to care for her sick newborn daughter or returning to work to save lives. The novel explores the challenges faced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the personal and professional sacrifices that they make. The novel's protagonist, Dalilah, is a dedicated nurse who is passionate about her work. However, when she gives birth to her sick

daughter, she stays at home to attend to her. With the outbreak of the pandemic, Dalilah is forced to make the difficult decision of going back to work, but she does so with great reluctance. She knows that she is putting her daughter and her family at risk, but she also knows that she will be saving other people's lives. The novel follows Dalilah as she struggles to balance her personal and professional obligations, and it explores the emotional and physical toll that the pandemic takes on her. In her daily interaction with the sick and ill, Dalilah reports, almost in a scientific matter-of-fact way, the signs, symptoms, and consequences of getting infected with COVID-19: "The symptoms were similar, almost identical: high temperature, difficult breathing, pain in the chest, severe headache, lack of oxygen and signs of delirium" (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 47). This vivid description becomes even clearer when the narrator gets infected with the virus herself: "Her breath becomes erratic, her chest muscles fatigue, her heart rate quickens, her blood oxygen levels drop, and she teeters on the edge of fainting" (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 93). The narrative focuses on the observable and tangible aspects of the pandemic. Furthermore, it depicts how it is even more challenging for emotional and mental health. The following passage creates an intense sense of claustrophobia and despair:

She had lost track of time in that small, suffocating room, in which she was trapped. The ceiling was her only companion, and she had come to know its every crack and crevice. She learnt by heart which lights go on first before the others (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 146).

Having submitted to medical isolation care, Dalilah cannot see her family anymore. The passage effectively conveys her emotional state in the small isolation room. Dalilah, who has previously nursed so many infected patients and attended to them in their time of isolation, now knows for real what it is like to be sick, isolated and separated from her loved ones in the time she needs them the most.

Both realist and mythical representations of the COVID-19 pandemic offer valuable insights into the human experience of this global crisis. Realist representations help us to understand the physical and emotional impact of the pandemic, while mythical representations help us to see the pandemic as a symbol of deeper moral and social challenges. By exploring these different perspectives, the selected novels help us to reflect on how individuals navigate a profound reevaluation of their self-conceptions and interpersonal dynamics within the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the central theme of the following section.

Social Lockdown: Rethinking Self and Others

The social lockdown imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a central theme in much of the pandemic-related fiction. It is impossible to discuss the pandemic in fiction without discussing the social lockdown, as it is one of the most defining features of the pandemic and a powerful metaphor that runs through the post-Coronavirus novels. The social lockdown has a profound impact not only on society and life but also on the literature and culture of the time. This period exposes the vulnerability of individuals to social and economic consequences, while also prompting a reevaluation of how individuals relate to themselves and

each other in the context of illness and death. These themes are particularly relevant given the various forms of social lockdowns – such as isolation, quarantine, curfew, and social distancing – that test the inherent sociability of human beings. The novels under discussion delve deeply into these overarching themes. They serve as powerful metaphors, intricately woven into the post-Coronavirus narratives, symbolizing the profound societal shifts and personal transformations brought about by the pandemic. This section explores ideas of social lockdown, quarantine, isolation, and social distancing as narrative tools used to represent the impact of the pandemic on notions of individuality, community and belonging.

In *Khaled's Games with Corona*, the author explores the impact of social distancing on Khaled, who is already familiar with social isolation. As mentioned previously, Khaled is displaced from his home country of Mauritania and he experiences social isolation in the city where his family settled. The few friends he made were merely distractions, as the dream of returning home to his old friends and extended family has always been with him. In the wake of the COVID-19 quarantine, Khaled's limited social life comes to a halt, and his feeling of estrangement is further intensified. The lockdown causes him to reconsider his place in this alien community. In one scene, Khaled packs his bags and tells his parents that he is going to flee the country exclaiming: "I'm basically jailed in the house here. I can't go out, I can't play ... I'm suffocating and I will die" (Salem, 2020, p. 84). This childish idea of fleeing the country in a time of lockdown and air travel curfew shows how social distancing can be more challenging for people who are already alienated and displaced. Furthermore, the novel also explores the impact of social distancing on different individuals and in various geographic contexts, providing an insightful understanding of this issue. Khaled's experience in the United Arab Emirates differs from his cousins' experience in Mauritania. In the crowded cities of the United Arab Emirates, social distancing is strictly enforced, and Khaled is warned that he could be arrested if he violates the rules. In his hometown, a village south of Mauritania, social distancing and the government's precautionary measures are not strictly enforced or followed. Khaled makes video calls to his cousins back home, where they mockingly assert their freedom to wander the streets and visit each other without any concerns about Corona; they insist, "there's no Corona here!" (Salem, 2020, p. 85). This illustrates the notion that in some regions, Corona is seen as an illusion imposed by lockdown. These geographic disparities in the enforcement of social distancing measures not only contribute to diverse pandemic experiences but also present distinct challenges and opportunities.

In *Khaled's Games with Corona*, the narrative centers around Khaled's experience of social lockdown while placing those of his mother and sisters in the background, despite them sharing the same challenging circumstances. Unlike Khaled, his sister does not exhibit any resistance to the lockdown. She is depicted spending her time locked in her room "as usual" (Salem, 2020, p. 13), as if the lockdown has had no discernible impact on her, except for Khaled's increased presence at home, which occasionally leads to more annoyance than before. The mother's response to the lockdown receives minimal mention, with her main concern being Khaled's potential rule-breaking and venturing out onto the street. The author's deliberate omission of the mother's and sister's experiences may convey the notion that in certain Arab countries, women already contend with various forms of confinement, rendering the concept of social

distancing relatively inconsequential for them. This perspective sheds light on the complex interplay between gender roles and societal norms during the pandemic. It highlights how gender dynamics can shape individuals' responses to crises like the pandemic, influencing their perceptions of what constitutes confinement and the impact it has on their lives.

In *Ramada's Nights*, the narrator declares in the opening chapter, "lockdown has exposed us all [...] our secrets, ailments, and human frailties" (Alaraj, 2021, p. 21). This quotation sets the tone for exploring the impact of lockdown on the main characters' lives. It indicates that lockdowns have forced individuals to confront hidden aspects of themselves or their lives that they may not have previously acknowledged. This could refer to personal struggles, familial issues or psychological problems that have come to the forefront due to isolation. Alaraj's central character, Ramada, who is unhappily married to a mentally abusive husband, finds solace in her relationship with Shadi, a middle-aged musician who constantly travels between countries to perform. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forces the two lovers to separate, as Shadi is unable to travel back to Coviland. When the government of Coviland imposes full lockdown measures and sends people back to the safety of their homes, Ramada is frightened by the idea of being locked in at home with her abusive husband. Alaraj's narrative is a thought-provoking exploration of the ways in which homes are not always safe spaces for women. For many women, homes can be sites of violence, abuse, and control. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this issue even more pressing and has exposed how "home is not, and has never been, a place of safety" (Krishnadas and Taha, 2020, p. 47). According to a report from UN Women, the global lockdowns implemented in response to the pandemic led to a surge in domestic violence targeting women. The lockdown orders aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 inadvertently trapped women in close spaces with their abusers, creating perilous conditions that often resulted in violence against women, sometimes with tragic consequences (UN Women, 2021).

Before the quarantine, Ramada struggles against the cruelty of traditional patriarchy, personified in two main characters: her selfish father and her unbalanced husband. Ramada's father, who names her after the year of the great drought when the land turns to ash in the thirteenth century AH, is disappointed that his firstborn is a female. He expresses his disappointment by giving her a name that means ashes. Ramada's husband is described as infected with an inferiority complex, and he takes revenge by torturing Ramada and trying to enslave her. Ramada is not able to resist either of them. She submits to her father's will to get married to Karem and later submits to Karem's violent subjugation, continuing in a hopeless marriage. The social lockdown is depicted as threatening, not only for Ramada's safety but also for her husband's mental stability. During quarantine, he becomes paranoid and increasingly hostile towards Ramada, beating and violating her in every way possible. The escalating violence that Karem inflicts on her leads Ramada to rethink the whole idea of her situation and reevaluate her priorities. Ramada confronts the cruelty and violence of her husband and her place as subservient to abusive patriarchy. During quarantine the proximity between Ramada and Karem becomes suffocating, and she eventually pushes him off the balcony of their seventh-floor apartment to his death.

I took a deep breath and held it in as I ran towards him with all my strength. In that moment, I felt like a lioness attacking its prey. I was powerful. I was a beast. I didn't hear anything. I threw myself at him with all my weight and pushed him off the seventh floor. All I remember is the sound of his body hitting the ground and exploding like a trash bag. I couldn't tell if I was awake or if it was all just a nightmare (Alaraj, 2021, p. 299).

In the above passage, Ramada describes herself in terms like “lioness”, “powerful” and a “beast”, all of which have connotations of empowerment, strength, and autonomy. This phrasing avoids the negative connotations of the murder and leaves the interpretation of Ramada's self-descriptions up to the reader. The novel suggests that quarantine can be a catalyst for change, as it can force people to confront difficult truths about themselves and their relationships. This is also true about Ramada's prodigal brother, who starts to distance himself from the family during social distancing. He becomes involved in criminal activities, smuggling medicines and pain killers. Eventually, he becomes a prominent figure in the neighborhood, providing people with essential goods and services, albeit through illicit means. Clearly, the quarantine is also giving him a new sense of power and authority which he could not experience before when he was overshadowed by his father's authority.

In Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, the chapter titled “Quarantine” opens as follows: “Days went slowly; everything was locked down. People were imprisoned in life's large prison, not knowing what to do. Problems and social issues escalated” (Salman, 2021, p. 278). While the opening of Salman's chapter sets the stage for the atmosphere of confinement and uncertainty during the pandemic, the novel as a whole delves deeper into the impact of social distancing on relationships. The novel examines the impact of social distancing on the young lovers Gibran and Layla, illustrating how quarantine and social distancing leads to the reevaluation of relationships and fundamentally reshapes the very nature of physical intimacy. This transformation can also give rise to new desires and needs. Gibran, the son of the coastal city, is in a long-distance relationship with Layla, who lives in the village. Prior to the pandemic, Gibran seems content with this type of relationship, spending his time in prolonged conversations with Layla on the phone, with whom he shares interests in literature, poetry, and art. However, with the implementation of social distancing, Gibran, who is already distant from his beloved, becomes terrified by the idea of distance and runs to Zeina, his neighbor, because she is more easily accessible. The novel suggests that social distancing can awaken in people the urgent desire for physical intimacy. Moreover, it underscores the irreplaceable significance of physical presence and touch in human interaction, echoing Julia Obermayr's insightful observation that virtual connections, while helpful, cannot substitute for the value that physical presence and touch hold for humans (Obermayr, 2023, p. 278). Obermayr's insights into the effects of isolation highlight that the most profound form of loneliness arises from the absence of physical touch, which cannot be adequately addressed through the “virtualization of our relationship with the world via technological media” (2011, p. 278). This observation sheds light on the complex interplay between physical and emotional intimacy during times of social distancing, showing how human beings yearn for physical closeness as a means of combating the emotional challenges of isolation and the virtualization of relationships. In Salman's novel,

the pandemic has made Gibran feel more isolated and alone, which has led to a greater need for intimacy and connection.

In the final novel of this study, *A Fit of Hope*, Aldakhil titles the opening chapter “Curfew”. This chapter examines the repercussions of social distancing on the central character, Dalilah. Her unique situation as a new mother to a baby girl born with a congenital heart defect compels her to adopt a rigorous form of self-imposed quarantine and social distancing, effectively confining herself to what the narrator describes as “a jail-like existence, where she simultaneously takes on the roles of both the jailed and the jailer” (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 15). This cautious approach arises from her profound concern for the health of her new-born, as she fears that any infection could endanger her child’s life. However, shortly after the government-imposed lockdown, the protagonist’s self-imposed quarantine becomes part of a broader, enforced isolation experienced by the entire community. At this point, Dalilah disregards her self-imposed quarantine and returns to her work as a nurse due to her sense of responsibility toward the broader community. In a desperate effort to save lives, Dalilah ultimately loses her own life. She is portrayed grappling with isolation as she lies dying in the intensive care ward, lonely and separated from her family. However, she finds comfort in the knowledge that her daughter’s heart condition has been cured. The ending of the novel suggests that even in the midst of pain and loss, there is always hope for new beginnings. Dalilah’s death and her daughter’s healing at the same time can be seen as a symbolic representation of the cyclical nature of life. The pain of the pandemic is often followed by hope, and new beginnings can emerge even in the wake of tragedy.

Conclusion

In mapping the representations of the pandemic in the Arabic novel, this paper offers insight into how authors respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. The selected novels offer a range of perspectives on how the pandemic challenges traditional notions of community and belonging, as well as how characters view themselves and the world in the wake of lockdown, isolation, quarantine, and social distancing. It is noteworthy that the use of different narrative modes, including the mythical and the realistic, allows authors to provide diverse perspectives on the pandemic’s impact. In some novels, the pandemic is seen as a symbol of social inequalities and economic discrepancies that already exist in society. In other novels, the pandemic is viewed as a global health crisis that claims the lives of so many people and divides and isolates many others. Moreover, some novels regard the pandemic as a reminder of the fragility of human existence and of social and political systems. Others argue that the pandemic can also be a catalyst for positive change, as it forces people to re-evaluate their priorities and re-think their situations. Overall, these novels offer a rich tapestry of responses to this unprecedented event and underscore the significance of narrative choices in conveying the complexities of the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent and ongoing event that continues to shape the literary landscape. As a result, the representation of the pandemic in Arabic fiction is still evolving. Writers are still in the process of interpreting and representing this

transformative experience. Through various narrative modes, such as the mythical and the realistic, they offer diverse perspectives on the current state of the world. We are only starting to see the first wave of pandemic-themed novels, and it is likely that we will encounter a broader array of narratives exploring the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways in the future, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of this global crisis in Arabic fiction.

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**Cultural Implications of Nature and Eco-Consciousness in Select 21st
Century Indian Retellings of the *Mahabharata***

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Abstract

Ecology and environmental catastrophes have found an immense place in Indian classical literature. As Indian mythology shapes the culture of the country, worshipping nature remains an intrinsic part of it. The great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, is one of the earliest Sanskrit literary texts that lay a platform to edify people about the value and importance of ecological equilibrium. This paper aims at studying the relationship between nature, humans, and culture through select 21st-century Indian mythological retellings. For this purpose, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's retellings titled *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* (2017) and *The One Who Had Two Lives* (2018) from her *Girls of the Mahabharata* series have been taken as the primary texts. Primarily, it examines the role played by Nature in the lives of the protagonists as an important character. Theologically, in the Hindu culture, nature is venerated for possessing mythical supremacy. The present article reflects this supremacy of nature celebrated through the character of Yaksha. While investigating the employment of various techniques to illuminate nature's unpredictable qualities such as soothing, nurturing, aesthetic, ethereal, powerful, destructive and alive, the study focuses on looking at how the characters are highly influenced by nature and on understanding the character of human influence on nature centralizing the idea that human existence is possible only if there is a harmonious coexistence with nature. Ecocriticism has been applied as a theoretical framework in the paper for critical analysis of human-nature interaction and the cultural implications of it reflected in select novels.

Keywords: Mahabharata, myths, retellings, human-nature, ecocriticism

Mythology remains the cornerstone of shaping the cultural fabric of any society. Hence, establishing a connection with one's cultural roots becomes a fundamental human requirement. In this context, re-evaluating and re-interpreting mythology within diverse cultural frameworks would bring newness into age-old myths in a profound manner and also result in renewed interests, novel ideas and alternative viewpoints. This, in turn, inspires people to engage with them in innovative and intellectual manners because mythology offers versatile canvas for re-interpretation across various mediums, such as literature, fine arts, and film, providing a vivid platform for creative exploration. Since India is rich with its own mythological heritage, Indian writers, therefore, profoundly draw inspiration from the vibrant cultural and religious narratives like the *Puranas*, epics and folklore, and actively engage themselves in the process of re-exploring this intricate mythological tapestry in diverse and creative ways. In modern times, the practice of re-telling myths and epic narratives has emerged as a means to set forth divergent attitudes towards mythical or epic characters, plots, and incidents, with the intention of addressing a range of contemporary issues. Re-telling is necessary for the re-exploration of various intricate areas of Indian mythology as it has played a crucial role in shaping Indian culture while becoming an integral part of it. With growing involvement in Indian epics and interest in literary retellings, 21st-century Indian writers have facilitated a more profound comprehension of culture and they picture the present-day reality through their re-exploration of these classical texts. This practice of re-interpreting and re-fashioning Indian mythology in contemporary literature mostly springs from individual ideas, experiences, emotions, and intentions to address a range of current issues because, literature, as claimed by Cheryll Glotfelty in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, "... does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (1996, p. xix). The many styles and genres of literature always serve as a channel for transmission of the culture of the human race through successive generations. In essence, through the use of literary retellings of myths, especially within the realm of fiction, Indian writers provide the readers an opportunity to re-visit classical texts with contemporary sensibilities, rendering a deeper understanding of culture and its persisting relevance.

Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan is one among such writers whose retellings of women characters of the *Mahabharata* titled *Girls of the Mahabharata: The One Who Swam with the Fishes* (2017) and *Girls of the Mahabharata: The One Who Had Two Lives* (2018) offer unique feminine perspectives on the epic legends Satyawati and Amba, and delve into their life stories, foregrounding their own viewpoints. Madhavan's ideology and concerns find ample space to be woven into the expansive tapestry of these mythical characters. Both novels provide scope for readers to critically address and explore various areas of the epic. One such intrinsic element is the relationship between nature, humans, and culture celebrated in these mythological novels. In the novels, by employing various techniques, Madhavan presents how her characters' self-realization and deeper understanding of life become possible only through acceptance and direct interaction with nature. In other words, the novels depict the evolving process of the protagonists amidst nature and while doing so, the novelist further concentrates to look into the adverse effects of nature on humans as a result of their interference in natural world, and thereby, providing her readers a wider scope for ecocritical investigation.

In the case of Madhavan's aforementioned retellings, all the critical evaluation is mostly centred around gender, patriarchy and women's identity assertion. The article by Indrani, Das Gupta and Sashi Prava Tigga, titled "Woman and Statecraft: Reading Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's Novels in the Series 'Girls of the Mahabharata'" (2021), focuses on examining sexuality, gender and desire within the confined order of patriarchy, power politics, and statecraft. On the other hand, Preeti Patanjali and Dr D. Uma Devi's work, "A Re-understanding of Female Identity through Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *Mahabharata* Novels *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* and *The One Who Had Two Lives* (2022), explores the deliberation and identity of women, providing a nuanced perspective on female insights into sexuality. Due to limited access to prior research on Madhavan's retellings, it is presumed that the selected novels remain relatively unexplored. On such, the focus shifts towards deciphering the treatment of nature in Madhavan's *Mahabharata* novels, as there is a notable absence of scholarly studies examining Indian mythological retellings from ecocritical perspective. Thus, the current study offers significant potential for exploring the texts through the lens of ecocriticism.

As Madhavan's retellings immensely deal with the aspects of nature in plot development, therefore, this paper focuses on looking at the relationship between the cultural involvement of nature and the reflection of human-nature interaction in the select novels, and thereby, trying to connect to the cultural roots. With these objectives, the research article employs Deep Ecology, a sub-approach of Ecocriticism to analyse Madhavan's retellings of the epic women characters from the *Mahabharata*. For this purpose, Arne Naess, Satish Kumar, and Swarnalatha Rangarajan's critical works on ecology, nature, and Hindu culture are used as the theoretical basis.

Before delving into further discussion, a brief aside is required to know the connection between Indian Hindu culture and nature. Worshipping nature has always been fundamental to Indian Hindu culture. This concept of worshipping nature has its roots in Indian mythology. Therefore, the act of worshipping all the entities that exist in nature, such as, animals, birds, snakes, rivers, plants, wind, sun, moon, ocean, and mountain, as gods has become an inevitable part of Indian Hindu culture as it seeds deep ecological wisdom which makes nature the external source of inspiration for people. Indian classical literature and mythology always lay the platform for nature-worshipping in educating people about the value and importance of nature and the environment. Klaus K. Klostermaier, a scholar of Hinduism, Indian culture, and history, emphasizes worshipping natural elements as gods because "humans are to meet nature with reverence as something divine, and doing harm to nature is equivalent to sacrilege" (1995, pp. 146–47). There is also the concept of *Pancha Maha-Bhoota*, five great elements, in Hindu philosophy which is believed to be the basis of all cosmic creation – Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space of which the human body is made. In this context, the Indian ecocritic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan aptly states that "... the balance of the five primary elements was considered indispensable for maintaining ecological balance" (2014, p. 528). In Indian religious culture, planting trees is an act of pleasing God. It is "an activity that is meritorious as well as useful. [*Puranas*] teach the sacredness of nature not only as creation of God but as God's own body" (Klostermaier, 1995, p. 146). At this point, we can claim that the teaching of nature-

worshipping and preservation is an indispensable part of Indian Hindu culture and mythological literature.

On this very premise, the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* also lays a platform for the study of this omnipresent equilibrium between humans and nature, as well as the worshipping of nature as God in Indian culture. The human-nature continuum and environmental crises find an immense place in this great epic because the epic reciprocates the interaction between humans and nature significantly. Addressing the ethical considerations related to nature, it advocates for the protection of natural environment. For instance, there is often interaction between the Pandavas and the natural world during their exile. Their peaceful and harmonious coexistence with animals, forests, mountains and rivers reflects the deeper meanings of life. The epic also contains various instances that highlight the relationship between women and the natural world. For example, we find the hermit Shakuntala who enjoys a close association with nature, particularly forests because of her upbringing in sage Kanva's secluded hermitage amidst nature. Again, Krishna's teachings in *The Bhagavad Gita*, an important part of the epic, talk about the principles of environment and interrelation of all living beings. While reflecting on nature-culture dualism, Chapter 3, Verse 27 of *The Bhagavad Gita* underlines humans' selfish attitude towards nature: "All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the forces of Nature; but the man lost in selfish delusion thinks that he himself is the actor" (Mascaro, 1992). It should be noted that the *Mahabharata* significantly depicts the interconnectedness of ecology, culture and ethics as well as reflects on natural degradation and preservation to teach about sustainable future. Here, the episode of the weeklong burning of the great forest Khandava must be taken into consideration which offers an insight into ecology in relation to Dharma. The Pandavas' act of burning Khandava forest was so cruel that they even forgot to follow the conduct of Kshatriya rules. With the aim of consolidating the Pandava kingdom, the forest was burnt while "butchering its inhabitants" (Karve, 1967/2023, p. 119). Subhash Anand, for example, in his critical essay on the same episode, titled "Khandavadaha: A Lesson on Ecology", reflects on uplifting of man's ethical values in relation to ecology and argues that, in the modern context, merely acquiring knowledge through education is not efficacious but acquiring wisdom. He says, "Ecology can only be safeguarded if it is situated in a context wider than the merely socio-economic" (1990, p. 56) and the episode of *Khandavadaha* is "an ever relevant warning of a wise ancient seer to modern selfish and narrow-minded man in his ecological apathy" (p. 56). This implies that ecology should be kept in some aesthetic ether that provides sublimity to man and this sublimation can never be possible with a selfish, anthropocentric attitude towards nature. In the same context, a pioneering Indian sociologist, educationist and anthropologist, Irawati Karve also claims, in her book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* that, "The sole aim was the acquisition of land and the liquidation of the Nagas... [however,] all they gained through this cruelty were the curses of hundreds of victims, and three generations of enmity" (1967/2023, p. 118). Thus, providing a thoughtful perspective on ecological balance through this episode, the epic makes us recognize and understand the importance of ecology in relation to Dharma, which highlights the interrelation of human actions and their consequences on both nature as well as on our own well-being. This has been well reflected in Narayan Bahadur Magar's scholarly work, "Environmental Awareness: An Advocacy of *The Mahabharat*", when he writes, "The natural world was revered as godly

image with the faith of having soul in them. Though modern people with materialistic concept see the natural world from anthropocentric view, the spiritual ecologists accept the presence of soul in nature” (2020, p. 71). Again, Dr. Rajani Jairam’s article “Ecological Concerns in Mahabharata” further offers valuable insights into how ecological awareness helps in cultural survival and practice. The emphasis is laid on the relevance and importance of ecological concerns while discussing various incidents of the epic to ground ecology as a “strong catalyst for the sustenance of Dharma” (Jairam, 2016, p. 63). Therefore, it becomes necessary to balance ethical acquisition and sustainable practices to achieve long-term harmony and prosperity. Thus, the notion of “Dharmic living” invoked in the epic emphasizes respect for all living beings and ecology. Overall, the epic’s exploration of the interaction between humans and nature gives insight into timeless lessons about deep reverence for nature along with its philosophical, spiritual and moral teachings. Keeping this ethos, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, also attempts to impart this teaching through her modern reinterpretations of the epical female legends and reflects on human-nature relation in a positive way, embracing an eco-centric attitude and embarking on the journey to explore cultural roots, and thereby, enriching the narrative.

Theoretical Background

Today, as the planet is suffering from excessive exploitation of natural elements, a threat to humanity has caught the attention of writers globally. Professor Pramod K. Nayar has well explained the need for the emergence of environmental concern in his book *Contemporary Literary Theory* when he writes, “... mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any mankind” (2018, p. 241). The sense of environmental concern of writers and its reflection in literature give rise to a new branch of literary theory in the late 20th century known as Ecocriticism, which emphasizes not only the harmony with the physical world but also deals with the destruction caused to it by humans because of progressive thoughts and actions. According to Glotfelty, “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” and she defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (1996, p. xviii). It mainly tries to examine the representation of the environment and nature in literary and cultural texts. Glotfelty views the connection between nature and culture in the following way: “Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premises that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (1996, p. xix). Ecocritics emphasize the need for the conservation of the environment and encourage people to think about nature’s aesthetic and ethical values and environmental cries transmitted through literary and cultural texts. It scrutinizes the representation of human life and nature in literature. In other words, it foregrounds ecology, nature, and environmental aspects in literary texts and attempts to observe environmental concerns raised by writers in literature. The same has been discussed in Kumari Shikha’s critical essay “Ecocriticism in Indian Fiction” in which she provides an insight into ecocriticism and its representation in Indian English fiction. She argues:

... as a distinctive approach to the practice of literary criticism, ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representations of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in natural system. This

approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem (2022, p. 10).

Thus, it is the criticism of the environment represented in literature. For literary and cultural scholars, ecocriticism is a tool to investigate ecological crises through the convergence of literature, culture, and nature. It was William Rueckert who first used the term *ecocriticism* in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. Ecocriticism has many sub-approaches among which the concept of Deep Ecology has to be taken into consideration for the preferred study. Deep Ecology is an ecological philosophy that promotes the fundamental interconnection of all living beings and natural features, challenging the human need to exploit and dominate nature. It was Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher who formulated this philosophy and coined the phrase in 1973. Naess created the principle of biocentrism which claimed the interrelation of humans and the environment. This refers that if humans cause harm to nature, they inevitably cause harm to themselves. In other words, deep ecology “refers to deep questioning about environmental ethics and causes of environmental problems” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p. 5). Prof. Nayar considers deep ecology as “the single most influential philosophy for environmental activism worldwide” and while describing its central premise he comments, “Our world view, thinking, responses and action are human-centric (technically called “anthropocentrism”), but in order to ensure a safer planet we need to become eco- or biocentric” (2018, p. 246). Deep ecology has been predominant in Indian classical texts and scriptures because “Hinduism and ecological issues are connected and inter-related” (Kumar, 2019, p. x).

Treatment of Nature in Madhavan’s Novels

Madhavan in her *Girls of the Mahabharata* series depicts harmony, peace, and serenity between her characters and environment. Natural degradation, destruction, and exploitation do not find much place in the novels, rather, plots are thematically interwoven with the mutual interaction between nature and human. Satish Kumar, an Indian-British activist in his “Three Dimensions of Hindu Ecology: Soil, Soul and Society” (2016), writes,

There is a great deal of difference between learning ‘from’ nature and learning ‘about’ nature. When we learn about nature she becomes an object of study, leading to her exploitation... When we learn ‘from’ nature we establish a close relationship with her. Then there is implicit humility and reverence towards the mystery of her natural processes (p. 142).

In most of the ecologically conscious literary works, nature is presented as a source of knowledge to lead humans on the right path as humans can never be separated from nature. There is no denying that human life and progress are interlinked with nature. It must be acknowledged that human existence cannot be claimed without any influence of the natural universe as both human behaviour and personality are affected by nature. However, due to human’s irresponsible behaviour and action towards nature, it is suffering and as a result, many environmental problems have arisen. In this sense, Madhavan has chiefly intended to lay

ground for her readers to explore the sublimity and reverence that humans can achieve by maintaining an interrelation with nature.

Nature and its Cultural Value

Madhavan has applied the flashback technique and first-person narrative to tell the story of Matsyagandhi, later named Satyavati, and Amba who becomes Shikhandini in her next birth in *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* and *The One Who Had Two Lives* respectively. The story of Matsyagandhi's birth from a Seer fish, the cursed apsara named Adrika, and being brought up in the fisherman community amidst nature depict the harmonious relation of the community with the natural world. The naming of her Matsyagandhi is also connected to nature, namely, fish and river. Due to the fish stink that her body constantly releases she is named "Fish Smell Girl" by her step-mother who said, "*Chee, she smells like a fish, call her that, call her fish-smell girl*" (Madhavan, 2017, p. 8). The stink, according to Dvipaa-ma, is the result of a divine curse that she bears perhaps as a punishment for the sins of a parent.

In the novel, the fisherman tribe takes from nature what they need and not more without dehiscing their ecology. They thrive upon the nature they have been living in. Thus, they invalidate the notion of human superiority and emphasize the equilibrium between humans and nature. The respect that the tribe shows towards nature is clear from the prohibition of eating seer fish at the fisher king's home. He tells Matsyagandhi the reason behind it: "That's because it was a seer who was your mother" (p. 11). While discussing land and sea ethics, Arne Naess, through a deep approach, claims that "Humans only inhabit the lands, using resources to satisfy vital needs. And if their nonvital needs come in conflict with the vital needs of nonhumans, then humans should defer to the latter" (p. 408). Matsyagandhi's community is seen following this approach of Naess as they do not harm or exploit nature but rather maintain a harmonious coexistence with it. The tribe lives perfectly in their small abode, the fishing village near the dense woods with "all sorts of animals that growl and pounce and rip and rend" (p. 2) with their customs, rituals, culture, myths, and belief system which help to protect their sacred environment from outside influences. The collective consciousness and community feeling they have among themselves reflect their shared human-nature cohesion and love for their land on the outskirts of the river Yamuna. In this context, Swarnalatha Rangarajan aptly claims that the "creation of myths and way of life of tribal cultures also emphasize human-nature continuum" (2014, p. 530). The sense of collective conscience is evident from the 'sing-song' which is a story-telling tradition among the people of the tribe. This sing-song takes place weekly where all gather around a fire to have "a large feast to celebrate the best catch where everyone tells a story" (Madhavan, 2017, p. 4). Stories "about gods coming to earth to grant boons", and "about magical animals — usually fish — that give [one] wishes if [they] catch them" (p. 4). It is noticeable that their belief system is rooted in ecology. Although Matsyagandhi seems reluctant to remain hungry and perform a fasting ritual "for a good catch" (p. 34) or "to appease the river goddess" (p. 35), it reflects the ongoing rituals of worshipping nature by women of the community in the novel.

Women-Nature Association

The imagery used by Madhavan in the novels parallels two different worldviews – one is the visual of pristine nature and the other is the feminization of nature. Women and nature are culturally seen as possessing the same qualities and therefore, nature is feminized. In both novels, Madhavan sets a strong bondage of her protagonists with nature and endorses a deep association of her female characters with nature. The imagery describing the peacefulness of the magical island of Matsyagandhi's Dvipaa-Ma and her husband, Parashara is indicative of the setting of undefiled, pristine nature:

... the bank of the island, which was almost eerily quiet except for the sounds of a few birds calling *trrrroooo-trooooo*. It smelled quiet and grave and peaceful, the rain seemingly not touching it all except for a few dappled puddles here and there (pp. 39–40).

It is only after her banishment from her home by her stepmother and taking shelter on the magical island, Matyagandhi realizes her true self. It is nature that soothed her when she was grief-stricken: “I was somewhere where no one cared about the way I smelled *and* — I sniffed my arm — it seemed like it was already subsiding” (p. 66). Her deep association with nature further gets reflected in the following manner:

Something was niggling at the back of my mind, some observation, although I couldn't put my finger on it. Then it came to me as I looked at a sunbird dipping its beak into pretty white and yellow flowers that we sometimes used for worship. While my surroundings had a feel of serendipity, as though it was sheer luck, it definitely had been cultivated (p. 67).

Not only Matyagandhi but Amba, the princess of Kashi is also seen sharing a close affinity with nature in *The One Who Had Two Lives*. For her, nature becomes the healer of her pain of abduction for a moment. This is evident from the song Amba sings taught by her maid Lalita, the eunuch in the chariot on their way to Hastinapura after being abducted by Bheeshma. Amba finds serenity in the lap of nature and sings:

*I am green-oh
I am the new thresher,
My father-in-law put me to work,
My mother-in-law is dead-dead-dead
My husband is an as-ur-aaa
I have no family!
I am green-oh!
I am the new thresher in the fields!* (Madhavan, 2018, p. 105)

This bond with nature is further investigated by Amba's contract with Bhumi Devi that she made by digging the knife she kept with the intention to attack Bheeshma during her abduction.

As Bhumi Devi is considered to be the “Goddess of Earth, and the fertility form of *Lakshmi*” (Kumar, 2019, p. 41), therefore, by doing so, Amba vowed to take rebirth as a warrior and take revenge on Bheeshma as he “*stole her life*” (Madhavan, 2018, p. 147). Satish Kumar opines that the Hindu’s way of revering nature is deeply rooted in the religious context. They contextualize nature as the supreme power and each element of it is represented by different gods. He writes,

... according to Hindu philosophy, nature is intelligent and conscious. The elements earth, air, fire and water have divinity intrinsic to them. Hindus talk about the rain god Indra, the wind god Vayu, the fire goddess Agni and the earth goddess Bhumi... In essence god or gods are not separate from nature (2016, p.140).

The presence of spirituality, sacredness, and venerability in natural phenomena has been described in a visionary way in both novels through the personification of natural elements. The tree in the wood in *The One Who Had Two Lives* gives shelter to both Amba and Lalita as a mother during Amba’s last hours in one birth, whereas the same tree is seen as Shikhandi and Utsarg’s only companion when they were trapped in the forest of the yaksha¹ called Sthunakarna, in their next birth. Shikhandi feels the tree as their old friend against which they have been sitting for so long which shows nature’s nurturing and healing quality. He feels the only tree’s trunk “seems to be made for [their] bodies, it embraces [them] like [they] are old friends” (Madhavan, 2018, p. 176). The natural elements have been used in a metaphorical way to personify nature as a divine spirit: “a thunderstorm clapped across the sky” (p. 130), “blue light washing over everything” (p. 169). Nature’s nurturing characteristic is also vividly pictured in *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* by the way Matyagandhi describes the sublimation she felt when she reached the island:

The moonlight lit up a snaking path that wound its way in front of me, strange flowers dipped their cups over my head as though in benediction, and a cool breeze lifted strands of my hair playfully, as though it was stroking my head and saying, ‘Welcome, sister’ (Madhavan, 2017, p. 59).

Throughout her narration, Madhavan has attempted to depict Nature as “kind, compassionate and generous;” that is “filled with unconditional love” (Kumar, 2016, p. 141). There is a beautiful description of Matsyagandhi’s dwelling in the wilderness with various components of nature in a gracious atmosphere which shows positive concerns for ecology:

As time went on, I grew wiser about my searches and learned to sniff at fruit, may be take a little nibble and see if it reacted in my mouth, scratch the surface of a leaf and dab it on the underside of my wrist to see if it tingled, watch birds and squirrels looking particularly industrious and follow them to see what seeds they were eating. (Madhavan, 2017, p. 82)

¹ In Indian mythology, yaksha is believed to be a nature spirit who is usually benevolent but sometimes acts mischievously. The female form of it is known as yakshi or yakshini.

Reflection on Nature-culture Dualism through Symbolism

Ecological concerns find little place in the second novel through Shikhandini's embarkment on a journey to the yaksha's forest in the quest for identity. Symbolism has been very tactfully employed to indicate the outcomes of destruction and damage caused to nature by humans. The spirituality of nature presented through the yaksha symbolically qualifies him as the supreme soul of nature bearing the characteristics of sustainer and destroyer as well. Shikhandi's intrusion into the yaksha's forest can be related to human's progressive attitude against nature. And despite being a great warrior his inability to do anything against Sthunakarna clearly validates this. Shikhandi could do nothing but bow and beg for what he required from the yaksha as his powerful arrows were of no use in the forest. In the same way, human's treatment towards nature and his use of natural resources determines the level of reverence and threat upon humanity because natural disasters like climate change, global warming, droughts, and deluge are the outcomes of materialistic worldview and scientific prudence of humans without proper care of the environment. Such supremacy of nature is celebrated in the novel through the character of Sthunakarna. Furthermore, Shikhandi's act of killing the birds with his arrows can symbolically be considered interference in the ecology. After eating the cooked flesh of the birds both Utsarg and Shikhandi slept on the glade, and upon waking up found themselves entrapped in a circle of thick, horny vines where their horses had disappeared. This can be taken as a reward for one's own acts. It suggests if humans continue to disturb and destroy ecology, they will face adverse impacts in return. Again, the way Shikhandi loses his patience in the trap and he slashed the vines with a deep breath, which started spurting immediately deep white sap making his fingers weltered, symbolizes the destruction caused to nature. Being frightened and angry when he stabbed for the second time, the vines began to grow so fast before his eyes that his feet were tangled, and he was falling toward them. For the first time, he saw magic in his life and felt the presence and power of Sthunakarna. Madhavan describes the ascendancy of nature in the following way:

The dust begins to swirl, and then it all moves as though it is being pulled into the air, so [they] are standing outside of the cloud that forms and watching it. It grows, so it is bigger than the tree [they] are underneath... (Madhavan, 2018, p. 203).

The yaksha, being connected with the trees, forest, fertility, and wilderness, possesses the power of creation and destruction as well. Therefore, he provides Shikhandini the boon she requires to assert and understand her true self which implies that valuing and praying nature can only make harmonious co-existence of humans with nature. Similarly, Matyagandhi's close affinity with nature is possible only because of Dvipaa-ma and sage Parashara which later helps her to attain self-realization to create her destiny. It should be realized that "harmony is the most fundamental principle of ecology. Wherever there is a break-down in harmony there is discord and conflict" (Kumar, 2016, p. 143).

In the Hindu tradition, human is believed to be the product of the main elements of nature. All the main characters and their emergence in the novels are directly linked to nature. In the second novel, Bheeshma's close relationship with nature is because of his mother, Ganga who

is a river goddess. Nature is the cure for all pain and constraints of life for Bheeshma and Amba. River Ganga is worshipped and is a symbol of holiness in the Hindu culture, however, infanticide can be seen as an act of damaging nature. Ganga's act of killing her seven sons in the first novel symbolically lays a foundation for apocalyptic destruction. Matsyagandhi's birth is also directly connected to nature and her involvement with nature helps her to achieve her true self. Amba, who is reborn as Shikhandini, transforms into Shikhandi to fulfil his destiny only because of the nature-spirit, Sthunakarna. This transformation of Shikhandini can be viewed as the bliss of nature upon human beings. Satish Kumar's statement is suggestive enough in this context when he says, "Love and reverence for the earth will automatically result in sustainability, harmony and coherence" (2016, p. 143).

Conclusion

In summation, it must be admitted that the novelist, while dealing with the beauty and power of nature, has bolstered environmental conservation in her novels which is possible in the form of harmony with the river, forest, land, and ecology. Madhavan has envisioned the interrelationship and interdependence of humans and nature in her novels, foregrounding that it is humans' spirit of cooperation which only makes ecology possible. By employing various techniques, especially by making Nature an important character throughout the narration in both novels, she appositely advocated for treating nature as a living entity with reverence and respect. Today, because of humans' mindless mechanization and capitalist exploitation of nature, the need for environmental conservation and awareness highly rises. But Madhavan's treatment of nature does not primarily focus on apocalyptic disasters due to excessive use of land, water, or other resources, rather it has intended to explore the natural world and human position in it. Thus, she has fulfilled Naess' third principle that "Human beings have no right to reduce [the] richness and diversity [of life-forms] except to satisfy vital needs" (p. 405). The female protagonists' vision of life and self-realization is projected through the interaction between nature and the characters. Nature has become that source to them which brought the ideas of freedom from all the hindrances to their development process, to find their true self. Nature, as a great healer, has rejuvenated the life of the protagonists in the novels. Both novels thus reflect issues of nature and spiritual and cultural values of it. Much of the storyline draws upon imagination that is situated in the undergrowth of the natural world where the forest and natural landscapes are inherent parts and the encircling entity that carries meaning for human life which works as the spirit in the novels. In essence, Madhavan's efforts in imparting the teachings of the *Mahabharata* through her reinterpretations bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern perception to it, which further manifest her adherence to keeping the epic's ethos appurtenant and accessible to contemporary readers.

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Apotheosizing Rain: An Eco-Critical Reading of Select Indian Folktales

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Folktales are a source of enlightenment and amusement for the teller and the listener. Folk tales, before the advent of media and communication systems, served as vital sources of information that helped in acquainting people with their origins, and aided them in the preservation of their traditional practices. Folk tales are told as bed-time stories to children, and for educating the young members of a group, tribe or community. Mishra (2015) writes that story-telling by farmers¹ at the threshing floors at night kept the harvested paddy from being stolen. Tales are narrated in accordance with the circumstances, and they vary based on the narrator's intention (Thundy, 1983). In spite of the modern-day obsession with umpteen gadgets of technology, the folktale continues to amuse, educate and spark the interest of researchers worldwide.

The paper titled “Apotheosizing Rain: An Eco-critical Reading of Select Indian Folktales” explores rain in its various facades, as a natural source, as ² God's gift for humans and their survival, and the deification of rain. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how rain is presented through oral literature, its personification through deification, its association with human beings, and how myth and folklore are fused for the sake of ecological awareness and the importance of human affinity with nature.

The tales selected for the present study are “Kadavul's Wedding” and “The Rain King's Wife”. “Kadavul's Wedding” is taken from *Speaking to an Elephant and Other Folktales from the Kadars*, which is a collection of oral tales told to Manish Chandi and Madhuri Ramesh by the Kadars of the Anamalai and Parambikulam³ hills that run along the borders of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in southern India. The second folktale “The Rain King's Wife” is taken from *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*, a collection of tales told by the Kannada-speaking natives of Karnataka compiled by the late poet and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan. The tales are chosen owing to their function in educating listeners (and readers) on the importance of rain.

History and Significance of the Select Folktales

The events and characters in “Kadavul's Wedding”⁴ can be traced to an earlier anthology titled *Speaking to an Elephant and Other Tales from the Kadars* compiled by Thundy (1983) which is the first book on Kadar folklore. Thundy attributes all the collected tales to the Kadars. In Thundy's collection, “Turtles”⁵ is a tale about the wedding⁶ of the Sun⁷ God and the Moon goddess, although it is not associated with rain. The final section of the tale mentioned is similar to the events described in “Kadavul's Wedding”. *Speaking to an Elephant and Other Tales from the Kadars* is the only collection available on Kadar folklore since Thundy. “Kadavul's Wedding” and the other tales in *Speaking to an Elephant* were told to Chandi and Ramesh by

¹ From *Folktales of Odisha* (Mishra, 2015).

² The Universal Creator or Supreme Being.

³ A section of the Western Ghats.

⁴ Tamil word for God.

⁵ Tale no. 7 in Thundy's compilation which gives a mythical account of why turtle-shells have suture designs.

⁶ The marriage of sun and moon, irrespective of their relationships is a common folklore motif (A164.1, A222.0.2, A735, A736.1.3).

⁷ “God” as mentioned by Thundy.

Kadars from various settlements⁸ by the hills. “The Rain-King’s Wife” from *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* was told to Ramanujan by a Ms. Shanta in the year 1968 at Dharwar⁹ (Ramanujan, 1997). The theme of the tale is based on the¹⁰ rain god-human conflict (Madeleine, 2019; Mishra, 2015).

Rain in Literature

The Tamil saying “Maatham mumaari” which translates to “raining thrice a month” in *Viveka Cintamani* (n.d./2023) which is an anonymous work¹¹, associates rain with morality in the society. The author writes: “Rain pours three times a month, one time for the Brahmins who recite the Vedas, one time for a just king and one time for chaste women” (*Viveka Cintamani*, p. 8). However, it rains only thrice a year when people live immoral lives. The author of *Viveka Cintamani* implies that the reason behind lack of rain is a nation’s immorality. Thiruvalluvar writes in the second chapter of his *Tirukkural*, “The Excellence of Rain”: “When water fails, functions of nature cease, you say; Thus when rain fails, no men can walk in ‘duty’s ordered way” (Pope et al., 2002, p. 4). The world cannot exist without water for which the source is rain. Moreover, it is inevitable to perceive rain as separate from the divine. Christ, in “The Sermon on the Mount” says, “for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (*The King James Version Reference Bible*, 1994, Matthew 5: 45). The Prologue to the play *The Fire and the Rain* states that “a seven-year long fire sacrifice... is being held to propitiate Indra, the god of rains” (Karnad, 1998, p. 1). Evidences from the above quoted literature illustrate the significance of rain. However only Christ’s stand on rain and Karnad’s mentions show how natural resources are attributed to God¹² or gods¹³ respectively, which the present study analyses through the selected tales.

Myths on Rain Gods

Hamilton (1942) states that myths show how the human race thought and felt ages ago. Myths helped mankind live in close companionship with nature. Frazer (1926) on the worship of the sky states that the sky as a universal and impressive natural phenomenon found a place in men’s religion. Prior to the discovery of the weather phenomenon, people of ancient cultures sensed that the periodical showers from the sky saved them from droughts, dryness and starvation, which caused the apotheosizing of rain resulting in myths.

In Greek mythology, Zeus was the sky god who controlled rain, thunder and lightning. His counterparts in Indian Hindu mythology are Varuna and Indra (Dowson, 1903; Frazer, 1926).

⁸ The tellers are from Erumaparai, Nedunkundru, Kavarkal, Eethukuzhi, and Udumanparai settlements in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu, India.

⁹ A city in North-Western Karnataka, South India.

¹⁰ Rain caused to fall in certain place by rain god, a common folklore motif (D 2143.1.0.1).

¹¹ There is more than one edition of *Viveka Cintamani* available in the Tamil language. Neither edition mentions the author. The 1914 edition is referenced.

¹² The Judeo-Christian God.

¹³ Deities in polytheistic religions.

For the Vedic Indians, it was a symbiotic relationship in which the gods sent down rains to facilitate a good harvest which in turn helped them to perform sacrifices and make offerings of food to the gods (Jayaram, n.d.). Thor, in Norse mythology, is the wielder of lightning and the god who dealt out both sunshine and rain to men; the Anglo-Saxons worshipped Thunor, the thunder god (Davidson, 1990). According to the myths of the Namibian Herero Bushmen of Africa, Mukuru was the bringer of rain (Sherman, 2008).

Some of the origin tales of the Kadars mention Sun God, Moon goddess, Bhadrakali and Lord Siva¹⁴ as deities, of which the names “Lord Siva” and “Sun God” are used interchangeably (Thundy, 1983). Of the selected folktales for the present study, Kadavul, the prominent character, is the deity of the Kadars (Ramesh & Chandi, 2018). In “The Rain King’s Wife”, the identity of the rain god, one of the major characters, is obscure. The god might either be Indra or Varuna. The teller mentions two characters namely Gangakka and Gaurakka¹⁵ as the wives of the rain god. However, Ganga and Gowri are believed to be the consorts of Lord Shiva (Somayaji, 2018).

Rain Presented in Myth-Inspired Folklore

Tribal cultures across the world continue to recognise the divine in nature and its constituents; therefore, veneration and protection of nature is a practice among the indigenes. Manes (1996) writes that in animistic cultures, people who ignore nature’s voice are prone to peril. The various myths on rain, therefore, have remarkably shaped folklore. According to a Greek lore, Zeus is believed to have punished mortals with drought when they refused to pray to him (Madeleine, 2019). In Cambodia, “Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso” is a sacred dance performed annually by the Khmer people as they believe that the fight between Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso created the thunder, lightning, and rain (TED, 2018). “Tackling a Famine” is an Odia¹⁶ folktale in which the sky god Indra holds back rain for twelve years until he is deeply moved by the efforts of an old man teaching his sons to plough the river bed because of the parched condition of the fields (Mishra, 2015). Rural farmers in Japan believe that the villagers’ effort and concern about droughts result in the gods bringing rain which is a sustaining of myth in real life (DeCoker, 2017).

Analysis of the Select Folktales

Selection Criteria

“Kadavul’s Wedding” and “The Rain King’s Wife” are the only relevant rain tales from their respective collections. They are identical in the way they present ¹⁷ God’s union with mankind. Besides deeming rain as a natural source of food, the characters in the tales perceive rain as a

¹⁴ Mentioned by Thundy.

¹⁵ "Akka" means "elder sister" in both Tamil and Kannada

¹⁶ Language spoken in Odisha, a state in Eastern India.

¹⁷ Not pertaining to a specific religion.

source of life from their respective deities, inspired by their myths and beliefs. The principal difference between the two tales lies in the characters' varied responses towards rain. The characters in the Kadar tale have a sense of longing for rain, whereas the princess (one of the main characters in the Kannada tale) shows absolute rejection towards rain, in spite of her knowledge of the rain god's power and authority.

Depiction of Rain in the Select Folktales

In “Kadavul’s Wedding”, Kadavul¹⁸ celebrates his wedding by inviting every animal and bird in the forest and surrounding areas to gather on a sheet of rock on the tallest hill in the Anamalai region. The narrator says, “It [Kadavul’s wedding] was just Kadavul, announcing to all his creatures that the time had come for earth and sky, rain and soil, to mix” (Chandi & Ramesh, 2019, p. 26). The metaphor of Kadavul’s wedding as he connects with man through rain is perceived in the tale. The tale also depicts the Kadar belief that rain is Kadavul’s gift for their survival. The section of the tale in which Kadavul provides for Aamai¹⁹ who falls off mid-way while holding on to the Hornbill flying to attend Kadavul’s wedding, is associated with rain. As soon as the unfortunate Aamai falls down and breaks its shell, Kadavul stitches together the broken pieces of the shell, which according to the Kadars, explains the pattern on a tortoise shell. Kadavul provides for the Aamai by scattering a few left over rice grains from the wedding feast on the forest floor. The narrator says: “those grains of rice changed into the delicate white kumin mushrooms that all tortoises like to eat. And so is that in the Kadar forest, even now, the kumin mushrooms last just one day—the day of Kadavul’s wedding” (Chandi & Ramesh, 2019, p.32). The Hornbill in the tale represents rain and rain forests, which is a narrative strategy employed by the Kadar narrator for the conservation of the bird species (Bonta, 2011; Jagdeesh, 2020; Shaji, 2019). The Hornbills are also threatened by habitat loss caused by deforestation, government projects, poaching and climate change (Shaji, 2019). Thus, in the tale, the forest beings wait for rain and are satiated, and they acknowledge Kadavul’s gift.

On the contrary, the princess in “The Rain King’s Wife” is disappointed when she sees dark clouds gather during her play-time in the palace orchard. She does not want the rain to spoil her pleasure. With the knowledge that it is the rain god who sends showers, she prays: “O Rain King. ... Instead of now, couldn’t you come at night?” (Ramanujan, 1997, p. 145). The rain god answers her prayer, and his visit is portrayed as a romantic episode that affects the later events in the tale. The rain god as an immortal being connects with the mortal princess through rain. Following the trick²⁰ played by the rain god’s wives Gangakka and Gaurakka, the princess refuses to talk to the rain god, following which he turns into a jealous lover who is furious over the princess, which is interpreted here as the princess’ refusal to acknowledge the deity’s power over lightning, thunder and rain. He threatens the princess: “Look here, think carefully. If you do this to me, you’ll wander like a beggar and eat other people’s leftovers for food. Think about

¹⁸ “Kadavul” is the Tamil word for “God”.The Kadars (in *Speaking to an Elephant*) believe in Kadavul as their creator and provider. The use of the word “God” does not specifically refer to the Judeo-Christian God.

¹⁹ “Aamai” is the Tamil word for “Tortoise”.

²⁰ The jealousy of co-wives, a folklore motif (K 2222).

it” (Ramanujan, p. 146). Despite his forewarning, the princess remains firm in her decision to ignore him. The initial displeasure shown by the princess towards rainfall is understood as a common attitude of humans as it alters routine events. The continuous rejection by the princess is a metaphor for modern-day practices of clearing forest lands for material purposes. Deforestation causes greenhouse gas emissions, disruption of water cycles, soil erosion and disrupted livelihoods (WWF, n.d.). Regardless of the impacts of mutilating nature, such activities continue in the name of globalization and technological development. The tale thus projects how the rain god reacts to dishonor and rejection from humans.

Ecological Motive in Fusing Myth, Folklore and Reality

“Kadavul’s Wedding” is a narrative of a natural phenomenon called rain, but the indigenous teller associates reality with his/her deity, bringing in flora and fauna which is a characteristic of the indigenous folktale. “The Rain King’s Wife” also presents rain in its normality, and goes on to project rain in its mythical form as the rain god. The teller fuses both myth and reality through folklore. The amusing aspects of folklore such as jokes played on deities (Ramanujan, 1991) assist the teller in capturing the listener’s attention. By doing so, the listening group is informed, educated and entertained. The teller also succeeds in imparting to the listener/s the importance of rain, its life-sustaining nature, and the need for conserving natural components such as forests, and forest habitats that sustain the lives of animals and birds. Through narration, the teller puts forth the message that all natural resources that sustain humans and other living creatures are gifts of the divine, and its realization should lead to respect and reverence for nature so that it is not taken for granted.

Conclusion

The tales analyzed in this study take the listeners and readers back to a time when human beings lived in harmony with nature (Hamilton, 1942). The study brings out the ways in which elders might have appealed to their listeners to prefer earth-centeredness to human-centeredness. In the context of the tales, it is the need of the hour to invite rain into life’s routine by emulating the Kadars, and not hope for rain to go away, like the mortal princess in the Kannada tale who cites inconvenience as a reason (Nascimento, 2019). Human attitude towards rain varies according to its intensity. Rains are expected during their seasons and are yearned for and welcomed during unbearable periods of heat. People also get tired of continuous rain as it breaks regularity. Besides sustaining lives on earth, rain also becomes a type of natural disaster such as floods destroying crops, and causes the unfortunate loss of many lives. On a positive note, however, caring for the natural environment through eco-centric practices, and acknowledging nature’s part in the sustenance of human and animal lives are highly necessary and of great relevance in the present times.

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The Death of Fanny Godwin in Helen Edmundson's *Mary Shelley*

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Abstract

Fanny Godwin, as the daughter of renowned writer and activist Mary Wollstonecraft and stepdaughter of political philosopher William Godwin, has received relatively limited attention from literary scholars compared to the other eminent members of her family. Helen Edmundson's 2012 play *Mary Shelley* acknowledges the impacts that Fanny would have had on her half-sister Mary while depicting Mary's early life. This article is one of the first in-depth textual analyses of the play and examines Edmundson's portrayal of Fanny in the Godwin household. In particular, the article investigates the extent to which Edmundson renders familial relationships as the root cause of Fanny's suicide, scrutinising the relationships which Godwin and Mary have with Fanny alongside the influence of outside pressures. Drawing on psychoanalytic and family-systems psychotherapy approaches, the article contends that Edmundson places specific emphasis on dynamics within the Godwin family in contributing to Fanny's death, arguably more so than the few literary biographies that have explored this tragedy. To enrich the discussion, the researcher conducted a personal interview with Helen Edmundson, facilitating a comparison between reader interpretations with the playwright's intentions. Ultimately, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the Godwin family and their profound impacts on Fanny's life and death.

Keywords: Fanny Godwin, Mary Shelley, William Godwin, Helen Edmundson, historical drama, psychoanalysis

Mary Shelley is a play by British playwright Helen Edmundson, joining her growing repertoire of original works and adaptations in 2012 (Logan, 2012). The play explores some of the critical formative years of novelist Mary Shelley – author of *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. It spans Mary's return from Scotland in 1814 to her marriage to Percy Shelley in 1816, and, notably, ends two months after the suicide of her older half-sister, Fanny Imlay Godwin (Edmundson, 2012). Historically, Fanny Godwin¹ played a prominent role in Mary Shelley's childhood as her closest sister, and Edmundson continues to enrich Fanny's character after their separation in Act 2 despite the play's focus on Mary. This paper will hence focus on Fanny's characterisation and the causes of her suicide in *Mary Shelley*. It does not aim to consider all the potential historical causes, only those present in the play.

Fanny Godwin's death occurred while Mary Shelley was writing *Frankenstein* (Todd, 2007), hence it is hoped that considering the causes of her suicide may reinforce one's understanding of the themes explored within the renowned novel. There is also no consensus regarding the most prominent cause for Fanny Godwin's fateful decision – as Richard Holmes points out, her presence was too often overlooked in studies of the Godwin and Shelley circles (Wollstonecraft & W. Godwin, 1987) – which provides ample room for examination, interpretation, and evaluation. Moreover, a research gap persists surrounding the play *Mary Shelley* itself. While Mary Shelley as a novelist and her works are widely discussed in the scholarly world, the play featuring her early life did not invite much literary criticism despite Helen Edmundson's reputation as an award-winning playwright (Edmundson, 2012). The secondary sources that do exist predominantly take the form of reviews of the production of *Mary Shelley* (e.g., Gardner, 2012). These tend to comment on details such as set design, acting skills, and pace, in addition to making descriptive observations about the plot. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this essay provides the first in-depth textual analysis of the language and literary elements of the play.

Through analysing Edmundson's construction of character, this paper ultimately contends that Edmundson portrays Fanny's familial relationships as the integral cause of her suicide. This is evidenced by an examination of the Godwins' treatment of her in their household – a prominent component of the narrative throughout *Mary Shelley* – exacerbating the various psychological factors reflected in the play which contribute to her downfall. There will also be an exploration of the ways in which Edmundson represents Fanny's relationship with Mary and how she viewed her sisters' way of living, as well as the outside influences on the Godwin family.

To aid in evaluating the extent to which Edmundson renders familial relationships as the root cause, this paper employs aspects of psychoanalytic literary criticism (Freud, 1899/2010; Freud, 1997) and other psychological models to provide insight into how these causes may impact Fanny's state of mind. This process, whilst not systematically methodical, is inspired by techniques observed in various articles analysing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* using

¹ In an effort to distinguish between discussions of the historical versus fictional where needed, and to maintain consistency, this article will hereafter refer to the historical figures as "Mary Shelley" and "Fanny Godwin" and the characters of the play as "Mary" and "Fanny". The essay does not aim to extensively discuss the differences between the play and documented history, nor are there major discrepancies.

psychoanalysis (Hill, 1975; Veeder, 1986). By interpreting Fanny's character using these literary theories, this essay aims to clarify Edmundson's depiction of the underlying connection between the various stresses on Fanny and her death, compensating for the current lack of criticism of this modern work. The researcher also obtained a direct interview with the author to discuss her creation of character and narrative, as well as her intentions behind those choices (see appendix). This will be referenced to supplement the investigation in this essay, providing an authorial perspective on the characterisation of Fanny and her motivations.

Fanny's Relationship with Godwin

Fanny Godwin's mother Mary Wollstonecraft came into acquaintance with William Godwin when Fanny Godwin was two years old; she died a year later and left Fanny Godwin with her stepfather (Hindle, 2006). Although Fanny Godwin was given his last name, she was an illegitimate and adopted child nonetheless (Todd, 2007), likely causing her to develop an unstable sense of identity. Edmundson (2012) prominently conveys Fanny's uncertain identity in the play, notably establishing this at the end of Act 1 when Fanny remembers Godwin calling her the "barrier-child" (p. 55) and expresses that she "always thought it meant... that [she] had been in the way somehow" (p. 56), when in reality, it was a nickname her mother gave her. Fanny's matter-of-fact tone and intuitive gravitation towards a negative interpretation reflect her vulnerable sense of belonging with Godwin. Even as early as in Act 1 Scene 3, Edmundson (2012) briefly but deliberately calls attention to Fanny's precarious position in the family when Mrs Godwin refers to Mary as "[Godwin's] only daughter" (p. 19). Therefore, while Fanny's relationship with Godwin is of great importance to her, there are underlying rifts between them. The present section explores Edmundson's depiction of this relationship to determine its significance in leading to Fanny's suicide in the play.

The relationship further deteriorates after Mary and their stepsister, Jane Clairmont, leave the house with Percy Shelley,² rendering Fanny the only remaining child. Edmundson outlines Godwin's escalating level of control over the family since then, as he initially prohibits Fanny from going to see the runaways. In Act 3 Scene 4, Edmundson depicts Fanny meeting Shelley for the first time after they left and clearly underlines her unease at resisting Godwin. Her cautiousness, bordering on paranoia, is evident as she tells Shelley, "It took me an hour to walk here. He'll be wondering where I've gone" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 96). When Mary unexpectedly appears in the scene, Fanny says she "promised him [not to see her]," and "*rushes away*" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 99), apparently rejecting their sisterly bond to obey Godwin. With *Mary Shelley* being a performative work, this may be highlighted visually onstage as audiences see Fanny physically fleeing the scene, reflecting the turmoil brought about by Godwin's control and her conflicting loyalties.

Edmundson also demonstrates Godwin compounding the feelings of rejection which Fanny often experienced throughout her life. Embodying the role of the peacemaker in the family,

² To be consistent with the play, the literary characters based on William Godwin and Percy Shelley will hereafter be referred to as "Godwin" and "Shelley" respectively.

Fanny attempts to reconcile his relationship with Mary in Act 3 Scene 8, but Godwin “*walks out*” (Edmundson, 2012, p. 113) before she finishes. Although it is largely a symbolic rejection of Mary, who is the subject of the conversation, Godwin’s growing coldness towards Fanny leading to that moment is heightened by the brevity of the stage direction, therefore possibly creating the impression that Fanny also perceives it as a rejection of herself. Staging the play again accentuates Fanny’s feelings of isolation, as she is left alone on the stage following Godwin’s exit. Sampson (2018) makes a similar observation of William Godwin’s behavior towards Fanny Godwin in her literary biography of Mary Shelley, questioning whether their story could have resulted differently “had Godwin been... less stubborn [and] been able to put Fanny first” (p. 145). Although this is specifically relevant to the time of Fanny Godwin’s death, it could be generalised to support the interpretation of Godwin’s treatment of Fanny under Edmundson’s construction.

Perhaps the most consequential impact Godwin has on Fanny in the play is the instability brought about by his shift in character. This is exemplified in Act 3 Scene 10 when Godwin asserts, “The world does not stop turning because of the death of one child. Nor should it” (Edmundson, 2012, p. 115), after Mary’s infant daughter dies. Edmundson’s depiction of his lack of sympathy for Mary and his first grandchild is alarming, especially when contrasted with his loving attitude towards her in Act 1 and when perceived with today’s emerging norm of more nurturing parenting styles (Garcia et al., 2020). Fanny does not respond verbally, yet the impact this has on her is seen when Edmundson (2012) describes Fanny “*look[ing] at him in dismay*” (p. 115), followed immediately by Mrs Godwin’s entrance. Here, by interrupting the conversation with an entrance, Edmundson may be giving the actor playing Fanny time to visibly convey the shock of Godwin’s words, highlighting this effect to the audience.

Literary and psychological theories such as psychoanalysis and family-systems psychotherapy allow for further examination of Godwin and Fanny’s dynamic. American professor John V. Knapp (2004) draws parallels between the two theories, asserting that family-systems psychotherapy could form a useful component of psychoanalysis to compensate for the relatively outdated Freudian views upon which much of psychoanalysis is based. He argues for the importance of seeing characters “both alone *and*... in the context of the intimates surrounding that character” (Knapp, 2004, p. 158), which renders family-systems theory more constructive in examining Godwin’s influence on Fanny’s characterisation compared with the intrapsychic psychoanalysis. For example, Knapp (1997) discusses psychiatrist Murray Bowen’s model of the “solid” versus “pseudo-self” (Bowen, 1985, p. 228). Bowen (1985) suggests that the “solid self” is constructed from one’s own values and beliefs, while the “pseudo-self” emerges out of social pressure and feeds on the values and beliefs of another individual. In *Mary Shelley*, it could be argued that Fanny’s anxiousness causes her to present with a “pseudo-self” built upon Godwin’s “solid self”, therefore it is all the more destructive for her when Godwin’s character seems to transform throughout Act 3 and Act 4. This is further supported by the shift in dialogue patterns in the scene discussed above, where Fanny defends her opinions – such as by reminding Mrs Godwin that Mary and Shelley “have done so much to make amends” (Edmundson, 2012, p. 116) when Mrs Godwin speaks bitterly of them – which is unusual for her character. It may reflect an active, desperate attempt to preserve her

disintegrating “pseudo-self” brought about by her emerging discordance with Godwin. Using a family-systems approach on Fanny, one may conclude that Edmundson utilises dialogue and aspects of structure to suggest that Fanny’s superficial sense of self is dependent upon Godwin, reinforcing the extent of his influence on her.

In a personal interview with the researcher, Edmundson contends that her creation of Fanny was “profoundly disappointed in Godwin’s small-mindedness” about Mary and Shelley (personal communication, March 16, 2022). She believes Fanny would have “turned [these feelings] in on herself and felt... inherently bad for feeling them, and that would have led to a lot of confusion for her inwardly.” This remark reinforces the family-systems interpretation, underlining the twofold impact of Fanny’s relationship with Godwin. Not only would Fanny be hurt by Godwin’s volatile character and implicit rejection of her, but the resultant negative feelings towards her father may compound her own emotional struggles. Sigmund Freud’s (1997) psychoanalytical theory of the Oedipus complex extends this argument. He suggests that a child will experience sexual desires towards the parent of the opposite sex during early development (Freud, 1997), and Edmundson corroborates that these emotions could be present in her characterisation of Fanny (personal communication, March 16, 2022). Integrating Edmundson’s comments with these psychoanalytic readings reveals Fanny’s twin feelings of (filial) sexual desire and antipathy towards Godwin in the play, evoking an internal conflict which may be responsible for the emergence of suicidal thoughts.

William Godwin had written of himself and Fanny Godwin that there was “no friend upon whose heart she had so many claims as upon mine” (Philp, 1993, p. 92) to justify adopting her after Wollstonecraft’s death. Various critics imply that he then became Fanny Godwin’s primary parental figure (e.g., Hindle, 2006; St Clair, 1989; Todd, 2007). Todd (2007) recounts how William Godwin refused to give her up to her aunts and asserts that the different women who had attempted to take Wollstonecraft’s place were “no substitute for a beloved mother” (p. 43). Edmundson (2012) echoes this in *Mary Shelley*, communicating that, with a deceased mother, estranged father, and despised stepmother, Fanny likely built her ideology and identity predominantly on that of Godwin. Therefore, their dynamic will have profound impacts on Fanny. The extent of Godwin’s control over her, his symbolic rejection of her, and his instability in character all contribute significantly to Fanny’s suicide.

Fanny’s Relationship with Mary

In Victoria Shorr’s (2019) literary biography, she partially writes through Mary Shelley’s perspective and provides insight into the nature of her sororal relationship with Fanny Godwin. Shorr (2019) describes Mary Shelley as “Fanny’s closest living relative, her sister, half-sister,” and questions, through Mary Shelley’s voice, why people “kept that word, ‘half,’ between them” (p. 127). Hindle (2006) also indicates that Fanny Godwin was left with “a lack of companionship from any source other than her letters from Mary” (p. 335) after her sisters’ departure. They both point to Fanny Godwin’s intimate relationship with Mary Shelley and its great significance to her, therefore the ways in which this relationship progresses in *Mary*

Shelley will likely influence Fanny considerably. This section strives to examine Edmundson's depiction of such influences.

From the beginning of the play in Act 1 Scene 2, Edmundson establishes a strong sisterly bond between Mary and Fanny. The text vividly describes them meeting after Mary's return, especially in the stage directions: "*FANNY rushes to her. They embrace*" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 11). The loving relationship is signified visually by the liveliness of their embrace, and foregrounding this relationship from the beginning highlights its importance. Edmundson also achieves this by depicting the empathy they have for each other. For example, Mary asks if Fanny has been "lonely, with everyone away" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 14), and Fanny endearingly calls Mary "my poor cold girl" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 16) as she has just travelled by sea.

After Mary's elopement, however, many literary biographies underline the sense of distance between Mary Shelley and Fanny Godwin. Todd (2007) cites an argument that, historically, occurred a few months before Fanny Godwin's suicide; Mary Shelley blamed her for repeatedly asking them for money on William Godwin's behalf and thus apparently siding with him in this ongoing antithesis between their two households (Todd, 2007), while Fanny Godwin accused Mary and Percy Shelley of treating her as their "laughing-stock" and "constant beacon of [their] satire" (F. Godwin, 1816, as cited in Stocking, 1995, p. 49).

Conversely, Mary and Fanny's sisterly bond is maintained in *Mary Shelley*. Through the birth and death of Mary's first child, Edmundson continuously renders Fanny as a source of comfort for her. This is especially prominent in Act 3 Scene 7 when Mary says, "I wanted you to come. I kept asking for you" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 107), demonstrating that Fanny is still valued and needed by her. Structurally, Edmundson places this scene in close proximity to when she conveys Godwin's rejection of Fanny (as mentioned in the previous section), possibly heightening the contrast between Fanny's relationships with her two closest family members at that time. Later in Scene 10, after Mary's child dies, Fanny defends the necessity of visiting her by using the short declarative sentences: "She asked for me. She wanted me. I should have gone days ago" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 115). The anaphora aurally endows a rhythm to Fanny's speech, reinforcing the importance she holds in Mary's need of her. Edmundson's use of the mirrored linguistic structures in Mary and Fanny's respective dialogue, with both characters utilising the verbs "want" and "ask", further creates an echoing quality, and this symbolically emphasises their solidarity with each other.

Regardless, Edmundson goes on to depict a significant conflict between Mary and Fanny in Act 4, which may be considered the most consequential part of their relationship in leading to Fanny's death. In Scene 2, Fanny visits Mary, Jane, and Shelley and becomes distraught by their new way of life. Particularly after hearing of Jane's pregnancy with Lord Byron's child, Edmundson (2012) illustrates Fanny's uncertainty by conveying that "it was a mistake" for her to come (p. 129). Mary becomes defensive and asserts: "She clearly can't bear to spend another moment in this house of iniquity" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 129). Here, Edmundson directly establishes Mary's remoteness and indifference through the jarring third-person pronoun "she"

when they have all been speaking *to* Fanny. This shift in attitude seems to starkly disregard everything that Fanny has done for her throughout Act 3. What originates as a conflict in ideologies is made fatally personal by Mary's need to defend their lifestyle – a struggle likely internalised against the judgements of society – causing Fanny to feel ostracised and compounding the rejection she has endured from Godwin. When considering the gender roles typical of England during the Regency period (in which the play is set), women's reliance on their fathers and husbands points to the importance of familial support for them (Badinjki, 2019). At this point in the play, Mary and Fanny have both antagonised their father in some way; yet Mary is able to depend on Shelley while Fanny has no such figure, rendering their sororal relationship even more crucial and their disagreement more devastating for her.

Edmundson also highlights Mary's influence on Fanny's decision to take her life through the highly symbolic writing in Act 4. She devises a scene in which Mary dreams of Fanny committing suicide just before the actual incident is staged, amplifying the impression of Mary's underlying sense of guilt. Within the dream, Mary repeats, "Reach out to me!" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 133), which represents her desire to help and save her sister despite their disagreements. Returning to psychoanalysis, Freud's (1899/2010) *The Interpretation of Dreams* may illuminate Edmundson's authorial choices here. Freud suggests that dreams are a means through which an individual's unconscious desires and anxieties convey themselves, which corroborates an audience's likely interpretation of Mary's dream as indicative of her care towards Fanny and fear that she may lose her. This coincides with Edmundson's own intentions behind the writing of this scene. In a personal interview, she contends: "[Mary's] subconscious is trying to tell her that Fanny is in dire need of her and that she's failing her" (personal communication, March 16, 2022). The play recognises the function of dreams in expressing emotions concealed from conscious thought, as Freud (1899/2010) proposes, and utilises this as a device to communicate such emotions to the audience.

However, in Freud's (1899/2010) analysis of common categories of dreams, he also asserts that dreaming of a loved one's passing, specifically the death of a sibling, reflects "a wish that the person in question may die" (p. 267). To support this, Freud cites the hostility and rivalry experienced by young children towards their siblings and the resultant desire for them to die, which allegedly persists in the unconscious after the children's egos are tempered by more altruistic moral principles. While it is postulated that Fanny Godwin may have experienced such antagonism, as she "felt occasional hostility – especially to a sister who... bore her mother's name" (Todd, 2007, p. 43), others argue that Mary Shelley was, "in a significant sense... the only 'child'" (Hill, 1975, p. 344), and Sampson describes Fanny Godwin as "shy and loyal" from Mary Shelley's perspective (Sampson, 2018, p. 92). Hill and Sampson both highlight Fanny Godwin's lack of self-importance and visibility in the family, therefore her existence should not have posed a threat to Mary Shelley. This aligns with the limited impression of competition between Mary and Fanny in the play, hence this essay rejects this part of psychoanalysis as an interpretation of Edmundson's portrayal of Mary's dream. The dream underlines Mary's regret at contributing to Fanny's downfall, not her desire for it. The significance of their relationship then not only lies in their external conflict, but it is also

enhanced through the depiction of Mary's subconscious awareness of the impact she has had on Fanny.

Overall, Edmundson characterises Fanny and Mary's relationship as more loving and harmonious than in most literary biographies. Edmundson depicts Fanny grappling with an internal conflict between her loyalty to Mary and her judgement towards their way of living. Mary and Jane's unacceptance when she finally voices this judgement becomes an immediate trigger for her suicide; this is conveyed structurally, by placing the scenes in close succession of each other, and by appealing in part to a psychoanalytic reading of dreams. The dynamic between Fanny and Mary constitutes an additional element of Fanny's familial relationships, thereby further emphasising their significance in leading to her death.

Outside Pressures

While Edmundson depicts underlying sociocultural and psychological causes for Fanny's strained familial relationships, the various outside stresses leading up to her suicide should not be neglected. This section examines the impacts of the trying financial situation of the Godwin family and negative public opinion towards them as shown in the play; these are also aspects of the Godwins' and Shelleys' lives often explored in literary biographies. Ultimately, these outside stresses are exacerbated by the dynamic between Fanny and her family, in turn heightening the negative impact of her familial relationships.

Finances

The theme of finance is prominently established in *Mary Shelley* from Act 1 Scene 3, when Edmundson (2012) reveals that the purpose of Shelley's presence in the Godwin household has been to lend Godwin money to resolve some of their financial "difficulties" (p. 24). The idea of debt is also entwined with various plot details, for example when Mrs Godwin confesses to having been jailed for debt soon after Jane was born. Their economic struggles are most strikingly displayed in Act 3 Scene 3 when the family prepares to sell their bookshop. Edmundson (2012) utilises a semantic field of business such as "valuer," "capital," and "investment" (p. 92), which is uncommon to other sections of the play, highlighting the unusual situation they are in and the prevalence of money as a concern. When a knock sounds at the door, the stage direction "*they all stop dead*" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 93) directly indicates the pressure they are experiencing from creditors, as the idiom reflects the sense of impending danger in the household.

While this scene does not overtly underline the impact of these outside stresses on Fanny, as she appears relatively optimistic, the lens of family-systems psychotherapy may crystallize the dynamics existing within the Godwin family. Knapp (1997) makes note of Virginia Satir's (1988) theory in *The New Peoplemaking* of four distinct coping roles seen within families during adverse circumstances: the "placator," "blamer," "supereasonable," and "irrelevant" (Satir, 1988, as cited in Knapp, 1997, p. 230). Edmundson's depiction of the Godwins in this scene might be fitted to this model, where Fanny, Mrs Godwin, and Godwin each play one of

the first three roles respectively. Firstly, instead of countering Mrs Godwin's numerous condescending remarks, Fanny says, "Please don't upset yourself" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 93), exemplifying the placator "sooth[ing] everybody else... at the expense of or denial of self" (Satir, 1988, as cited in Knapp, 1997, p. 230). Moreover, Edmundson presents Mrs Godwin as the source of conflict as she antagonises both Godwin and Fanny, characteristic of the blamer role. Interestingly, Satir (1988) suggests that the behaviour of the blamer originates from a lack of self-worth. Edmundson (2012) uses a triadic structure of verbs when Mrs Godwin describes the effort she has put in for the bookshop, "running to and fro to the printers, standing behind that counter in the draughts, writing into the small hours" (p. 92), and audiences may interpret this as an example of Mrs Godwin trying to elevate her worth in the family. Finally, while one could only speculate as to whether Godwin is truly optimistic about their situation or "den[ying] his... feelings at all costs" (Satir, 1988, as cited in Knapp, 1997, p. 231), his hyperrational mindset is certainly set in stark contrast with Mrs Godwin's; a contrast which may manifest onstage through the actors' disparate uses of prosody, one restrained and the other fretful. Edmundson demonstrates Godwin frequently using fragmented declarative sentences, focusing on what Satir describes as the "context" of the situation (Satir, 1988, as cited in Knapp, 1997, p. 231). He dismisses his underlying concerns about selling the bookshop by emphasising that it is a "promising concern" for buyers and that the valuer is "thorough" (Edmundson, 2012, p.92), avoiding the root problem in their family – an example of focusing solely on the contextual and not personal elements.

The theory provides a framework for the Godwins' conflict in response to outside stresses, and Satir directly sets this model against "healthy, well-functioning families," suggesting that the former "[grows] out of low self-worth" (Satir, 1988, as cited in Knapp, 1997, p. 230). Therefore, Edmundson's linguistic crafting of this scene goes beyond portraying their financial pressures but additionally consolidates the problematic dynamics within Fanny's family. On the other hand, one might suggest that the reality is more nuanced, and certain characters actually embody multiple roles. For example, Edmundson (2012) characterises Fanny as employing mechanisms of the supereasonable whilst striving to make peace, also turning to context by contending that they have only been "a little unlucky with investment" (p. 92), and Godwin attempts at soothing Mrs Godwin as she worries about being arrested for debt. In this way, Edmundson creates a family dynamic of the Godwins which matches Satir's model in many aspects but is also more complex and multifaceted.

Reputation

Alongside financial concerns, the impacts and pressure of reputation are also prevalent in the play. In Act 3 Scene 8, Edmundson explicitly conveys the negative public opinion of Godwin after Mary and Jane's elopement. Mrs Godwin reminds him of the widespread rumours: "You sold your daughters—one for eight hundred and the other for seven" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 112). A modern audience may find the language of trade here particularly alarming, as the idea of trading one's children for profit is far beyond present society's moral standards. The impacts of a damaged reputation are also arguably more consequential than ever now with the rise of social media (Aon & Pentland Analytics, 2018). The influence of this stress on Fanny is

apparent in Act 4 Scene 1, in which Edmundson describes Fanny actively reacting against the public's accusations towards her sisters. She contends that it is "simply scurrilous gossip... it's nonsense. It must be" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 121). The series of short declarative sentences characterises Fanny as unusually assertive; Edmundson depicts Fanny's strident reactions to hostility from the public as determination to defend her sisters. This greatly amplifies the effect when she realises their real way of living later in the play, supporting the argument of the previous section that it becomes an immediate trigger for her suicide.

Finally, Edmundson echoes many literary biographies (e.g., Hindle, 2006; Sampson, 2018) in conveying that the ultimate consequence of their damaged reputation is Fanny's aunts rescinding their offer for her to go work in their school – though Pollin (1965) questions the historical accuracy of this event. Such a rejection denies Fanny the only chance she has at that point of escaping the Godwin household and finding a sense of purpose for herself. In a personal interview, Edmundson expresses her belief that Fanny might not have died if there was "some sort of opportunity for her... so that she could start to enrich her life and feel that she had somewhere to pour her energy" (personal communication, March 16, 2022). Thus, the family's shattered reputation is presented as another considerable factor leading to Fanny's suicide.

While the ideas of debt and reputation are commonly perceived as being separate from that of family in the typical dichotomy between the public and private spheres, this essay suggests that Edmundson entwines them to render the outside influences on Fanny as being predominantly *familial* pressures. This is evident as Edmundson places the public stresses and their impacts on Fanny exclusively in the context of the Godwin family. Money becomes a salient stress for her parents, and the "scurrilous gossip" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 121) in newspapers concerns her sisters' reputations. Fanny becomes tethered to the household as the only child remaining from Act 3 onwards, therefore there is naturally more emphasis on her familial interactions. Compared to literary biographies of Fanny Godwin (e.g., Hindle, 2006; Todd 2007), Edmundson prominently restricts the experiences of her creation with the constraints of familial relationships. Edmundson's depictions of outside stresses primarily affect Fanny through aggravating the problematic relationships between her and those closest to her, hence they may be seen as subsidiary to, instead of separate from, the influence of family as the root cause of her suicide.

Conclusion

The death of Fanny marks a significant turning point in *Mary Shelley*, and Edmundson portrays various factors contributing to her downfall. She expressed that, after Mary and Jane's escape, "it feels impossible for [Fanny] to go" (H. Edmundson, personal communication, March 16, 2022), as Fanny becomes bound to the household by her sense of duty to her stepparents and a tacit pressure from them to stay. As a result, her life as depicted in the play essentially revolves around her family. In particular, this essay contends that Fanny's relationships with Godwin and Mary respectively are rendered as the most prominent factors leading to her suicide. While both pose short-term stresses on her, the former carries more long-term impacts, as Fanny's precarious sense of identity stems from her childhood with Godwin, and the latter results in an

immediate trigger for her suicide (her conflicting moral principles with, and the rejection from, her sisters). Although pressures from the wider society – such as insurmountable debt and damage to their reputations – are certainly noteworthy, Edmundson ultimately depicts them as being familial in nature. Therefore, familial relationships are presented as the root cause of Fanny's suicide in *Mary Shelley* to a great extent.

This essay has seen a consideration of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1899/2010; Freud, 1997) and family-systems psychotherapy (Knapp, 1997; Knapp, 2004) as lenses through which to inspect the literary work. Freudian psychoanalysis offers some insights into Edmundson's rendering of Fanny's relationships with Godwin and Mary; however, a comparatively modern component is required for a more comprehensive examination beyond the typical interplay associated with the Oedipus complex. To this end, certain models of family-systems psychotherapy appear to be productive in clarifying the dynamics seen within the Godwin family and further underline their consequence to Fanny.

Regardless of the approach, the prominence Edmundson places on the Godwin family members' interactions with Fanny inevitably implicates them in the causes of this tragedy. Through Godwin's characterisation, Edmundson highlights the importance for children to be valued and given agency growing up; and through Mary, Edmundson questions the repercussions of pursuing a life of "freedom and free love" (personal communication, March 16, 2022), as Mary and Shelley do, on those around them. In Act 4, Fanny accuses Mary's way of life as making "children grow up feeling unloved, unvalued, out of place" (Edmundson, 2012, p. 32), which is reminiscent of how Fanny herself grew up and encapsulates the devastating impacts that her familial relationships have on her.

For those with an interest in Mary Shelley's early life and family of origin, Edmundson's play offers plentiful insights and successfully brings this significant part of the renowned author's history onto the stage. The present essay hopes to stimulate further literary analysis on *Mary Shelley* and its depiction of Fanny's suicide. Firstly, future studies may scrutinise how Edmundson presents Fanny's other familial relationships. For example, Mrs Godwin's thinly-veiled disdain towards Fanny is consistently evident in the play. Her view of Fanny as a burden on the family is particularly noteworthy, as the idea is even reflected in Fanny Godwin's suicide note, where she stated that her "life ha[d] only been a series of pain to those persons who ha[d] hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare" (F. Godwin, 1816, as cited in St Clair, 1989, p. 411). The character of Shelley may also be examined, as scholars have theorised that Fanny Godwin might have committed suicide due to her unrequited romantic feelings for Percy Shelley (Pollin, 1965). Hints of their connection are indeed seen in Act 1 of the play, particularly when Fanny and Shelley first meet. Alternatively, intrapsychic factors such as lacking a sense of purpose additionally impact Fanny's mental state and view towards life. Having a sense of purpose in life is commonly considered to be crucial for one's wellbeing (Kim et al., 2022), yet Fanny's search for her own purpose is only implicitly explored within *Mary Shelley* until nearer to her death, which reflects how her life has been spent prioritising others and neglecting herself. In the end, the inability to find or actualise a greater meaning in

her life when she is rejected by her aunts' school (as discussed in the previous section) acts as one of the immediate triggers for Fanny's suicide and warrants further exploration.

Fanny Godwin's life was lost during her prime years, and *Mary Shelley* provides much for contemporary audiences to reflect upon in its wake. This tragedy should not be simply swept away as an insignificant incident in the greater Godwin–Shelley story. After all, as Edmundson suggests, Fanny is like the “touchstone” in the play; realistically, “more of us would be a Fanny in that house than a Mary or a Jane” (personal communication, March 16, 2022).

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Appendix

Extracts from Transcript of Personal Communication with Helen Edmundson

Interviewee: Helen Edmundson.

Interviewer: Jessica Zhu [researcher].

Date: March 16th, 2022.

Location: Online.

RESEARCHER: To discuss your depiction of Fanny in the play, are there any devices that should be considered central to her characterisation?

EDMUNDSON: I would say that running through the whole play, in relation to Mary, but more so to Fanny, is water. That stemmed from the fact that, obviously, Mary Wollstonecraft tried to drown herself, famously, at one point. I think what Mary Wollstonecraft was budding up against, and it's just this that she was overflowing; she was so bright, she was so intelligent, she had such a life force, and sometimes, because she kept coming up against barriers, she would be forced into a different direction – sometimes directions which weren't very good for her – and I think that it had a bad effect on her mental health. It meant that she was constantly in a state of struggling and desperation, and even though she loved Fanny very much, obviously it got to a point where she tried to take her own life in water. I think that's very significant, and I think it's very significant that it's near the sea when [Fanny] does take her own life, that she's drawn to the sea as though she's being drawn back towards her mother and to the same struggle which she feels running through her, that ran through her mother. I think Fanny's tragedy is a difficult start in that sense in that not really belonging, and her past being so much of a mystery to her, and her never really knowing. I think the piece in the play where they read the mother's diaries and when they read Godwin's accounts of their mother and so on, I think that's the first time she begins to realise why there's these difficult blank areas around her past and where she came from. That very sad thing she says about when Godwin used to call her the barrier child, that she thought it meant she was in the way. I think that, for Fanny, if she had more space in the dynamic of the family, and if she'd been brought up to feel that she had more agency and importance, then it could have been the beginning of a real journey of discovery about herself, but because she doesn't have those things and she is psychologically damaged by the upbringing she's had and by losing her mother and so on, there's no way for those emotions to go.

RESEARCHER: There was a scene in which Mary dreams of Fanny attempting suicide, also in the water just like their mother; what would you say it reflects about Mary's feelings at that point in time?

EDMUNDSON: I think Mary knows that she's failing Fanny, and I think her subconscious is trying to tell her that Fanny is in dire need of her, and that she's failing her.

[.....]

RESEARCHER: What do you think was the extent of the emerging discordance between Fanny and Godwin's ideologies as the play progressed?

EDMUNDSON: I think Fanny was profoundly disappointed in Godwin's small-mindedness, or what she perceived as being small-mindedness, and the fact that he was clinging on to this resentment, I think that she felt that there was a degree of pride in that which wasn't useful pride or had anything to do with the good of mankind or, on a small level, the good of Mary and his relationship with Mary moving forwards. I think Fanny is constantly being disappointed by people; by Godwin, as she starts to see a side of him that doesn't live up to her expectations of him; by Mary, by Shelley; and I don't think she held Jane in great esteem, because they're so very very different.

[.....]

RESEARCHER: Within the field of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex has often been used to analyse Mary's *Frankenstein*. Would you consider this to be relevant to the characterisation in the play as well?

EDMUNDSON: I think it does make complete sense, certainly in terms of Mary, really, in terms of most children and their parents, I'm sure it's true that they go through that phase where they have to kill the father in order to feel they can thrive. But then Fanny is a different character; with Mary it's much more expressed, it's more overt, and she's felt powerful enough to be able to express it. Whereas I think, unfortunately, it won't have sat easily with Fanny when she had negative feelings towards Godwin, I think she would have turned them in on herself and felt that she should feel guilty about them and that she was inherently bad for feeling them, and that would have led to a lot of confusion for her inwardly. I think, if a child can't separate itself from its parent by going through these emotions, if they can't do that successfully and they become stuck, it can be quite damaging. Not only can she not physically separate herself from Godwin, but because Mary has done so so completely and devastatingly, and Jane has done the same to Mrs Godwin, I think, in a way, Fanny isn't really able to do what she ought to be able to, there's no space for her to do that, so I think that adds to her difficulties.

[.....]

RESEARCHER: Looking at Fanny's relationship with Mary and Shelley and her relationship with Godwin, do you think one had a greater, or more negative, influence on Fanny than the other?

EDMUNDSON: There's two different ways of going for Fanny, really. Personally, I don't think Fanny was psychologically suited to live the kind of life Mary and Shelley were embracing. I think she was too sensitive, too acutely aware of people's opinions, I don't

think she had the same solid sense of self that Mary and Shelley had, which is a sort of privilege to be raised with that kind of solid sense of self belief, and I don't think Fanny had those things, so I don't think she would have fared well at all in Mary and Shelley's world. Of course, we see as the play goes on that she does become stuck and stifled even more because Mary and Jane escapes. She's the one who's left, and it feels impossible for her to go. She can't carry on with that level of, this stuff that she has inside her, that power of those things that she's feeling, being so locked in with no sight of how she's going to find an outlet; it leads to her taking her own life, and I do find her incredibly tragic. But, having said that – obviously Godwin offers stability, to some extent, though he always had his debts, and they were always in danger of being tapped out of the house, but there was at least some sense of stability and being able to live within society. But I don't think Godwin understood Fanny, and I certainly don't think Mrs. Godwin understood Fanny or had much interest in her, and she was fairly friendless. I'd like to think that if she had gone back to Godwin that day and she had tried to move forward with her life, then at some point, something might have happened which would have opened up some sort of opportunity for her in a small way so that she could start to enrich her life and feel that she had somewhere to pour her energy. She was a sort of, girl in the wrong place, really.

RESEARCHER: Finally, what would you say is the overall message behind Fanny's characterisation – or how you decided to portray her story – in the play?

EDMUNDSON: I was very much thinking, when I was writing the play, about the fact that the victims in this pursuit of freedom and free love and living your life to the full, are nearly always the women almost exclusively. Because- It's a little bit like Shelley's wife in the way that she ends up drowning herself as well in the Hyde park, that in a way, Fanny encapsulates the female energy and the female dilemma in this mix. Because Mary is who she is, because of her talent and her strength of character and her confidence, and Shelley's great support of her and putting her forward and beyond, that works for Mary; but Fanny has a very particularly sensitive female sensibility. I wanted us to see, in this great debate and great question which a lot of us have to think at times about how we live our lives, and do we pursue what it is that we desire, do we make sure that we live every moment to the full no matter the cost – are we essentially, to some extent, hedonistic and selfish, but also striving for doing great things for the world and changing the world. On the other hand, do we simply try to live for other people as well as ourselves, etc., and that's a very female thing, I think, that we often have to answer those questions. Even now, I think women more often have to dig deep and think, should I pursue this, shall I follow this dream, or shall I be the one who's there to look after the children, or shall I be the one who's there to support my mom and dad as they're getting older, whatever it is, I think very often it's women who is still facing those questions. I think Fanny is like the touchstone, really; realistically, more of us would be a Fanny in that house than a Mary or a Jane.

The Quest for Ultimate Truth in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s “In a Grove”

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Akutagawa's story "In a Grove" and examines it through the framework of literary modernism and the concepts of traditional Japanese aesthetics such as traditional images of ghosts and women in tales and fables of old Japan. The paper studies the motif of ultimate truth and the search for it as well as the impossibility to find it as distinctive features of modernism. It analyzes compositional features of the story, examines the origins of the plot and the possible literary influences. The paper deals with the change in the situational and psychological roles of the main characters and addresses the use of the fantastic as a writing technique, proving that said elements underscore the sense of uncertainty in the unknowable world. A unique narrative is created, and it surpasses the modernist strategies, marked by epistemological uncertainty, which is simultaneously the characteristic feature of Japanese literature of the twentieth century, with its ambiguous attitude to truth, reality and fantasy.

Keywords: Akutagawa, final (ultimate) truth, modernism, unreliable narrator

The nature of truth, as well as our access to it, has been at the core of philosophical controversy for ages. Until late modernism,¹ though, the very possibility of truth has never been doubted. According to Jeff Malpas, “in this sense, the post-modern era is also post-truth” (Malpas 288). Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) way ahead of his time, ponders the nature of truth and questions its very possibility in his short story “In a Grove” (1922) which is in the center of this paper.

Akutagawa is known as one of the most prominent writers of the twentieth century. He is considered to be an innovator in literature, a master of the short story. Lippit underlines Akutagawa’s role in the modernist movement in Japan and outside of it that famously doubts the realist notion of a secure world constructed around a consolidated narrator (Lippit, 2014, p. 68). Even in his early works, Akutagawa presents outstanding features of his innovative manner – estranged and ironic position of the narrator, epenthetic humorous plots. These features are also revealed in his masterpiece “In a Grove”. Struhatsky in his research points out that Akutagawa’s stories are interesting not only because of their stylistic and language specificity but for creating bright, complex images with just a few words (Struhatsky, 1985, pp. 3–24). Akutagawa is well-known to as a critic of naturalism, though in the end of his life he used this particular narrative technique in his works.

Scholars like Hibbet (1970), Ueda (1976) and Keene (1998) have stressed out that Akutagawa’s writing deals with the depths of human personal existence. Thus, Hibbett claims that Akutagawa’s writings possess “an elaborately varied poetic vision of human frailty and suffering” (Hibbet, 1970, p. 427). In his short stories, existential problems and issues of human condition are represented as moral choice a person always faces. With the help of the quest motifs, Akutagawa addresses meaningful questions of life, and some of his characters (like those of “In a Grove”, “Cogwheels”, “Rashōmon” and so on) make their moral choices that require considerable courage and steadfastness. The fate of Akutagawa’s characters is connected to the quest of the earthly life mortality. The writer works with these categories in accordance with the centuries-old Zen traditions: unobtrusively, pathos without false, easily and subtly.

In his short stories, particularly in “In a Grove” and “Cogwheels”, Akutagawa captures the tragic and fractured nature of human being of the twentieth century. As Yoshida summarizes, “the process of modernization was in fact one of the key themes of Akutagawa’s fiction, although this was not always apparent on the surface. His early works were often set in premodern Japan, yet his concerns were ultimately contemporary” (Yoshida, 1958, p. 174). The author links such modernistic views (existential problems, human condition, fragmented sense of self, search for identity, problematic notion of truth) to historical and cultural counterparts from other geographical, historical and cultural layers, thus fitting it into a global cultural perspective of modernism.²

¹ A concept that originated in Western culture but was spread all over the globe, including Japan.

² For more detailed study of literary modernism, its origins, main concepts and significance see Mellors (2005), Gillies and Mahood (2007), Childs (2008), Hindrichs (2011).

While Akutagawa is generally accepted as a forerunner of Japanese literary modernism and clearly influenced by western literary tradition (H. G. Wells, E. A. Poe, J. Swift and so on), his stories are often based on distinctly Japanese material. Indeed, Akutagawa, in Keene's words, "was likened, even by admiring critics, to a mosaicist, piecing together fresh masterpieces out of the materials gleaned from many books" (Keene, 1998, p. 565). The Japanese material includes revised Japanese legends and ancient tales. With their help, Akutagawa creates fantastic, dark, funny and frightening stories. As it was pointed out, "while the Japanese fascination with tales of the grotesque is nothing new, Akutagawa was among the first to take ancient folklore and imbue it with a menace and uncertainty that resonated with a turn-of-the-century Japanese audience" (Henninger, 2009, par.1). At the same time, Akutagawa "is known in both Japan and the West for his imaginative and often surprising fantasies which incorporate both "impossible" situations with an attitude toward the real that is fascinatingly ambivalent" (Napier, 1996, p. 1–15), which is especially true for the story "In a Grove".

The story "In a Grove" written in 1922, is viewed by critics (Napier, 1996; Morrison, 2012 and so on) as a striking literary work that is unique in the history of literature, for it raises frank illogic to the highest artistic level. It is also known for exemplifying the concept of an unreliable narrator³, another distinct device of modernist literature.⁴ In Akutagawa's story, several people talk about the events of the murder, and every character has its own version of what happened, and it is hard to establish what really occurred in the forest, and, perhaps, that is exactly Akutagawa's goal here. Besides, the title of the story may also present itself a metaphor of the unknowability of human relationships and truths so deep and dark it resembles the dark woods hard to navigate.

Critics have always regarded the story very highly and much has been written on it.⁵ Being an example of virtuoso and innovating plot building, it made its way into various anthologies and was even turned into a movie by famous Kurosawa.⁶ Here I will focus on the author's problematic vision of truth and consider the peculiarity of the plot in regards to this issue. Morrison gives the opinion that "criticism focuses on the purported 'philosophical' message of the work, namely the idea that there is no ultimate reality or truth but only an irreducible multiplicity of subjective perspectives" (Morrison, 2012, par. 3). In this paper, I will take a

³ The term was used by Wayne C. Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961.

⁴ In his lecture in Oregon State University, Professor Neil Davison gives an exhaustive summary, history and examples of what an "unreliable narrator" is. Among other things, the researcher specifies the role of the device in Modernist literature:

This first-person unreliable narrator became popular in Western literature during the Modernist period from the end of the 19th (1890's) through the 20th century. An influential Modernist writer from Ireland, James Joyce, employed the technique in some of his earliest short stories. Later in his career, and along with other American Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison, he pushed the technique further into a different kind of first-person narration called Stream-of-Consciousness (Davison par. 7).

⁵ Among those, who thoroughly studied Akutagawa's work in general and "In a Grove" in particular, are Keene (1998), Makoto (1976), Lippit (2014), Hibbett (1970).

⁶ Kurosawa's award-winning work *Rashōmon* (1950) actually combined two of Akutagawa's stories, "In a Grove" and "Rashōmon".

closer look into modernist understanding of truth and Akutagawa's take on it in particular and analyze the story in accordance to this task.

Thus, this paper attempts the analysis of the main categories of modernism and traditional Japanese poetics embodied in Akutagawa's story "In a Grove". It highlights the way in which Akutagawa develops an experimental textual strategy in the story "In a Grove" in order to grapple more fully with the complexities of representing the quest for truth. In this paper, there are shown specific features of psychologism and quest for ultimate truth as well as impossibility to find it as distinctive items of literary modernism and the ways it was incorporated into the story.

This paper while arguing the irrepresentability of truth addressed by Akutagawa in his work, presents compositional features of the story, studies the origins of the plot and the possible literary influences to help understand the story and the author's message. The paper also examines the change in situational and psychological roles of the main characters, which can back up the idea of irrepresentability of truth. I also focus here on the use of the fantastic elements as writing technique, and prove that these elements underscore the attitude of uncertainty in the unknowable world, which expand the understanding (or rather its impossibility) of truth and how it is seen by Akutagawa. Furthermore, the work represents the influence of Zen philosophy, with its emphasis on the relativity of any truth. Combined, all these ideas and concepts, coming from different literary and cultural tradition, help us see how exactly Akutagawa addresses the concept of truth in all its cultural and epistemological complexity. In this paper, I attempt to interpret the concept of truth depicted in Akutagawa's story as an ambiguous reality, as a conflicting essence of a human being, as woman's nature, as a representation of guilt, as an ironic interpretation of the I-narrative technique in Japanese literature. Studying how the author depicts truth from all these perspectives allows us to see better how he finally denies its representability.

Origins of the Plot and Compositional Structure of Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

Compositionally, the story resembles dramatic poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) by Robert Browning, which gives three versions of the same events, but, unlike Akutagawa's work, it is known who committed the crime. A similar collision/conflict between spouses was described in Japanese family saga of the thirteenth century *Rise and Fall of Genji and Heike* (*Genpei Seisui Monogatari*) that allows us to speak about imitation of the ancient Japanese plots in which the writer often drew inspiration. This assumption can also be confirmed by the use of the name of Tajomaru, a mythical robber, famous in the past. This "gentleman of the road" becomes the hero of many medieval stories, and many of these narratives were altered into dramatic works and performed on the scene. Critics also consider that the plot of the story was adapted by the author from the Japanese collection of over a thousand *Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku-Monogatari*) written during the late Heian period (794-1185). In this book, one can find a small story which has a name that can be translated as "How a Man Who Was Accompanying His Wife to Tanba Province Got Trussed Up at Oeyama" (*Tales of Times Now Past*, 1993, pp. 184–185). It is an example of a traditional narrative prose. Its title almost totally

reveals the plot, except that the woman was raped and abandoned along with her husband. The plot of Akutagawa's story almost coincides with the story from *Tales of Times Now Past (Konjaku-Monogatari)*. Akutagawa does not introduce any change in its developments, except that in the story from *Konjaku-Monogatari* there is no plotline pertaining to murder.

According to the classification given in Veller's theoretical work *Technology of the Short Story*, Akutagawa's work has a composition determined as "a turret" or "revolver" (Veller, 1989). In the stories with this kind of plot, events are given from different perspectives through the eyes of several characters. This allows considering dialectically what is going on and showing the characters from both outside and inside perspectives. Veller identifies the following types of "revolver" stories: each of the characters repeats its own version of the same events; or, narrators are replaced as the events keep on developing (Veller, 1989). As one can see, Akutagawa builds his story by the former principle, so that from the confessions of the characters, like from a mosaic, it seems to be possible to reproduce the whole picture. However, in fact, it is not so. The genius of the writer is manifested in the fact that after reading the story there is no coherent picture of the said events. The story remains illogical and incomprehensible till the very end.

The plot of Akutagawa's story presents the murder and the rape that took place in a bamboo forest near Kyoto, and the story is based on setting the events in motion by questioning witnesses and participants and presenting their testimonies and confessions. The story consists of seven parts; the first four are testimonies of four witnesses: the woodcutter who found the body, the priest who saw the deceased and his wife on their way, the mother of a young woman and the guard who caught the robber Tajomaru. At this point, the plot develops quite traditionally and consistently according to the expectations of the reader: though the testimonies contradict each other, they do it not in an obvious way. In the last three parts of the story, the word is given to direct participants of the events, and Akutagawa presents: questioning of Tajomaru and his confession in the court; confession of the raped widow in the temple Kiyomidzu; and the story of the murdered samurai himself, whose spirit was called upon by a medium.

Thus, Akutagawa builds the plot in such a way that the answer to the question "Who is the killer?" is deliberately not given and the problem of whose account of events is the true one remains purposefully unsolved. By applying the principle of variability, the author addresses the problem of irrepresentability of truth. Koblenkova comments on this as follows: "As a result, the idea of the unknowability of man and the world, which has become one of the conceptual ideas in modernism, turns out to be enclosed, in essence, in a postmodern construction, since the text creates several realities independent of each other" (Koblenkova, 2003, p. 64).⁷ Everything which is considered as a reality or truth, becomes in Akutagawa's story nothing but a representation of it and depends on perspective which changes and shifts throughout the story.

⁷ Translation is mine. The original text is as follows: "В результате идея о непознаваемости человека и мира, ставшая в модернизме одной из концептуальных идей, оказывается заключённой, по существу, в постмодернистскую конструкцию, так как текст творит несколько реальностей, независимых друг от друга..." (Koblenkova 2003, p. 64).

To make it even more ambiguous, the author uses fantastic elements in his story, which I am going to address below.

Fantastic Elements of Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

Based on folktales of the past, "In a Grove" appears to contain a certain number of fantastic features. Presentation of the "content" already indicates its potential unreliability – judicial officials have interest only in the testimonies performed directly in the court. However, the writer is clearly interested in the concept of "truth" which he tries to reinvent and in the end of the story (as I will prove later) he shows the impossibility of such reinvention. Each participant of the unfortunate events making their respective confessions claims to be telling the truth. The robber appears in court and nobly confesses claiming he is the one to blame. The woman confesses in a temple (it seems to be unreasonable to tell lies in a holy place while talking only to a deity and herself with no witnesses around).

Confession of a samurai's ghost deserves a separate specification. In this regard the role of the fantastic elements of the story should be noted. According to the tradition of the stories of the miraculous and unbelievable, known in Japanese literary tradition as genre *kaidan*,⁸ the words of the spirit represent truth, by definition. Spirits in Japanese folklore (and other genres influenced by it) often serve to solve complex issues and find the final truth of what really happened.⁹ It is the ghost of the story according to all genre rules one would expect to be a bringer of a "traditional" truth and solve the puzzle. However, Akutagawa challenges this tradition providing a playful reinterpretation of it. Thus, the appearance of the spirit is presented as a fact in the title of the last part of the story and is only a means of conveying the story, which belongs to the deceased samurai. Thus, if in the traditional *kaidan* stories the appearance of the representative of another world usually puts everything in its place, because its version of events is treated as a kind of "ultimate truth", the testimony of the given spirit is even more confusing, because it is not less controversial or subjective than the confessions of a robber or a woman. In other words, the use of fantastic elements as writing technique only emphasizes the attitude of uncertainty in the unknowable world, so modernist in its essence.

Speaking of modernist understanding of truth, Karl Benesch, the researcher of Heidegger, a prominent modernist philosopher, summarizes Heidegger's views on the problem as follows: "to speak the truth can manifest itself in two, fundamentally opposite ways: for one, it can be an uncovering or dis-covering (ent-decken) and, for another, a covering-up, a "zu-decken" and "ver-decken" of Being" (Benesch, 2020, p. 4), and it seems, in Akutagawa's story, the difference between covering-up and discovering the truth is indistinct. None of the direct

⁸ *Kaidan* (怪談) literary means, if we take a look at the Chinese characters of the word, "the talk or narrative about mysterious, strange, or bewitching ghosts or apparitions", which is often referred to ghost stories or horror stories. Noriko T. Reider, who studies the genre, explains that the term is used in connection to Japanese literary and oral tradition specifically of Edo period (1600-1867) (266), and it has been already established that Akutagawa had no problem borrowing plots, characters, devices and atmosphere from the stories of the past.

⁹ For more information about the peculiarity of *kaidan* ghost stories of Edo period see Reider's works "The Appeal of 'Kaidan, Tales of the Strange'" and "The Emergence of 'Kaidan-Shū' the Collection of Tales of the Strange and Mysterious in the Edo Period" as well as *World within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600–1867* by Donald Keene (1999).

participants have any serious reasons to tell lies and invent things and yet everyone narrates his own version of “reality”. All of them talk with passion so it may seem they really believe in their own words. As Morrison outlines, “the reader wants to piece together the puzzle, but the pieces don’t fit. Without any omniscient narrator to tell us what actually happened, the story ends with the truth lost somewhere in the *yabu no naka*” (Morrison, 2012, par. 4). By doing so, Akutagawa denies the very possibility of the truth – in modern world there are as many “truths”, as there are perspectives and participants of a certain event, so there is no point figuring out whose story is the true one. Below, I look closely into each and every truth presented by the participants of the event.

The Plot: Common Facts and Differences in the Versions of What Happened

The plot of “In a Grove” revolves around a murder that takes place in a bamboo grove. The story is presented as a series of testimonies from various characters involved in or connected to the crime. Each character provides their perspective on the events transpired in the grove. In this section, I would like to look closely into the differences among the accounts of the events that happened in a grove. My goal here is by no means to reconstruct the plot but to show how Akutagawa addresses the idea of truth and its irrepresentability by offering multiple perspectives on the same events showing that truth stays beyond any representation.

There are a few facts that remain the same in each narrative: Tajomaru leads the spouse to the forest; Kanazawa no Takehiko (samurai) is dead; Tajomaru raped Masago (wife of the samurai); Tajomaru steals Takehiko’s bow, quiver and horse. In each of the testimonies, Masago wants Takehiko to be killed. Masago and Tajomaru do not end up together.

Differences between the stories of the characters vary from trivial to fundamental. Thus, the comb described by the woodcutter, is not brought up by any of the other characters. “Fierce fighting”, which results in the pile of trampled leaves which the woodcutter describes, is present only in version of Tajomaru. The woodman also argues that the samurai was killed with a sword but from the first attempt. According to versions of Masago and Takehiko, he was killed with a dagger not a sword. The woodman argues that Takehiko’s hat was a Kyoto-style *sabi-eboshi* however the woman’s mother insists that Takehiko has never been to Kyoto. Here the author obviously wants to draw attention to this point, and the investigator deliberately asks whether Takehiko is from Kyoto. Wandering priest says: “Well, the man was armed with a sword as well as a bow and arrows. And I remember that he carried some twenty odd arrows in his quiver” (Akutagawa, 1952, p. 19). The guard, who caught Tajomaru, argues that there were only seventeen arrows. The woodman says Takehiko was dressed in a blue kimono. Buddhist priest says Masago was wearing a purple kimono. But Masago herself says that it was her husband who was wearing purple kimono and Tajomaru was in a blue one. Tajomaru does not say anything about how the woman’s dagger disappears. In versions of Takehiko and Tajomaru, there is a description of a long conversation between a woman and a robber after the rape, during which she asks Tajomaru to take her with him. Masago in her confession chooses to miss the point completely. Additionally, Masago does not say how Takehiko’s sword disappears from the scene. It also seems unlikely that Masago fails to commit suicide so

many times in a row, especially considering the first attempt, when she cannot stick the dagger in her throat. Masago says that it was her who actually killed Takehiko after being raped. However, Takehiko says that he was not killed by her. On the contrary, she demanded that the robber kill him. According to the robber, samurai still loved his wife and was willing to fight for her. Samurai proves it when he says that his wife was never so beautiful as in the moment after the rape. Then Takehiko introduces a new character who never appears on a stage: this character takes the dagger from Takehiko's chest just a few seconds before his death. But woodcutter points out that all the blood had been dried up, when he came, while Takehiko says that when someone pulled out his dagger, blood was gushing to his mouth. Masago and Takehiko claim that he robber badly hit her after the rape, but the robber did not mention this.

To summarize, every testimony contains at least one thing that contradicts the statements of the others which underlines the impossibility to find universal truth. The author does not make any comments upon characters' narrations and versions of the mentioned events, he takes the neutral position, leaving it to the reader to recognize the futility of the quest for truth. The striking feature of Akutagawa's work is the shifting nature of subjectivity: situational and psychological roles constantly change in the story. One can say that Akutagawa reveals to the reader the secret corners of the inner world of a human being, and in this the purpose of the writer is also fulfilled. Akutagawa uses the story from *Tales of Times Now Past (Konjaku Monogatari)* only as a basis to show the inner life of each of the characters, exposing their substance that motivated their actions. Akutagawa developed three versions of the description of events in order to present psychological background of characters' actions, creating three-dimensional picture of the characters and their social relations. In all three cases, the woman, one way or another, was ready to abandon her husband but she never abandons demonic Tajomaru, showing thereby the downside of obedience and chastity of Japanese samurai's wife. Takehiko (samurai) and Tajomaru (the robber) also behave differently than one would assume according to their assigned traditional models of behaviour: the first one who is supposed to be the sample of valour and honour, is greedy and weak in battle, another one, the carrier of immoral qualities, however, shows nobleness: he is not willing to kill Takehiko (according not only to his own words but to Takehiko's testimony as well) and is forced to fight with him, and in the version where he kills him (his own version) he kills him in a fair fight. In general, it seems that an external appearance of the characters is completely opposite to their essence.

As my purpose here is not to reconstruct what actually transpired in Akutagawa's story, I would like to underline once again the importance of how each narrative varies from one another. It is clear that by introducing small and much bigger differences in every conflicting testimony, Akutagawa reflects on human subjectivity and questions the possibility of existence of one objective truth, leaving, instead, more room for the ambiguity of any human experience. Not only does the author demonstrate the problematic nature of truth but shows in a creative and culturally specific manner the unknowability of human nature.

The Shifting Role of a Woman

Another aspect of the story has been pointed out by researchers: the change of situational and psychological roles of the protagonists (Koblenkova, 2003, pp. 62–67), and perhaps the most striking shift happens to the female character. Thus, the woman first appears as a victim, but in the course of the situation she turns into opposite – the one who wants the samurai dead. Morrison focuses his only on the woman’s role and considers the story “a meditation on the question: what is woman?” The researcher points out that “in each of the seven testimonies Masago embodies a different aspect or archetype of woman” (Morrison, 2012, par. 7). Following his analysis of the changes in woman’s role, we can see yet again the relativity of truth.

In the woodcutter’s testimony there is no mention of the woman and it presents Masago as absence. The testimony given by the wandering priest presents her as enigma. The priest narrates “catching a glimpse of Masago, whose face is veiled in a dark red and blue cloth” (Morrison, 2012, par. 11) – an image, as Morrison claims, evoking a mood of mystery and exoticism. Morrison underlines that in priest’s narrative “she is the enigmatic noblewoman behind the screen, much like that female archetype that appears in so many of Tanizaki’s works. The fact that he is a Buddhist priest may also explain why he refers to her only indirectly, as women are generally regarded as impure in Buddhist teachings. A woman as a nameless object of male desire appears in the fourth testimony of the magistrate who describes Tajomaru as a “lustful *onnazuki* (fancier of women)” (Morrison, 2012, par. 13), alluding that Masago was his target. The next statement given by the woman’s mother presents her as the obedient daughter and faithful wife. Tajomaru’s confession shows Masago as a “modern woman” (*kindai jousei*). Masago’s testimony presents herself as *yamato nadeshiko*, the traditional ideal in Japan.¹⁰ Thus, as Morrison underlines, “Masago has tried to present herself as a devout, principled (as defined by the male-dominated order), self-sacrificing, but ultimately weak woman” (Morrison, 2012, par. 23).

The last narration given by the spirit of the dead samurai presents Masago as “pure, unbridled feminine desire or will” (Morrison, 2012, par. 7). Interestingly, Takehiko’s ghost notices that it is precisely at the moment of being with another man she looks to her husband more perfect than ever before: “While the criminal talked, my wife raised her face as if in a trance. She had never looked so beautiful as at that moment” (Akutagawa, 1952, p. 27). But when he realizes

¹⁰ *Yamato nadeshiko* (大和撫子), as it is stated in *Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* 5th edition, is “personification of an idealized Japanese woman”. Tamura in her book *Michi's Memories. The Story of a Japanese War Bride*, analyzes the meaning of the term and the concept as follows:

“Yamato means ‘pure Japanese’” without any foreign influence. *Nadeshiko* is a type of plant which belongs to the *dianthus* genus and has pink flowers in early autumn. Although this term was traditionally used to describe the delicate beauty of Japanese women, in contemporary Japan, “Yamato nadeshiko” is generally regarded as old-fashioned and rarely used to praise the virtues of Japanese women” (Tamura, 2001, pp. 93-94).

Tamura also claims that the term does not only describe the physical ideal, and may refer to Japanese women being “flexible but resilient in change, just as the flower might sway in a strong wind but never break” (Tamura, 2001, p. 94).

her truly self, “he is so horrified by her that he plunges the dagger into his breast and kills himself” (Morrison, 2012, par. 25).

Such interpretation leaves other characters beyond the critic’s attention which makes the study incomplete. Besides, Morrison claims that the most trustful testimony is the one by Takehiko but it is more likely that the whole traditional concept of wise spirit revealing all the truth is reconsidered in Akutagawa’s masterpiece. My argument here is that trying to prove the impossibility of any truth, Akutagawa offers the figure of the spirit in an ironic way representing unreliability of all subjective narratives. In the next section, I attempt to show how the spirit’s testimony, while being the key here, is not the key to understanding the truth, but that truth is no longer possible in this ever so changing and complex world of constantly conflicting subjectivities.

Narrating Guilt, I-*Novel* Critique and Zen Motifs

As mentioned above, while Morrison states that the whole concept of truth in the story is concealed in the woman’s role: “she is a beautiful, wilful, vain, and ruthless femme fatale capable of anything, even matricide” (Morrison, 2012, par. 26), the supporters of traditional *kaidan* genre (see section 2) would expect the spirit of the dead to deliver the ultimate truth from behind the grave. However, I am going to risk arguing against such interpretation because of the permutations in the versions of what happened that do not necessarily have anything to do either with the woman or with the spirit. For instance, the role of the robber also changes: being the culprit and the master of the situation eventually he becomes a murder weapon; moreover, he refuses to kill as well as participate in further events at all. However, it might be easy to fall under the impression that the key role is associated with the samurai himself. He is not directly involved in the confrontation and coming together of his wife and Tajomaru. He stands apart from the initial conflict but he is the one to be killed, while a woman and a robber are still alive. The only “key” he may present here, though, is to understanding of Akutagawa’s “new concept of truth” – there is no such thing, shows the writer in this story. However, apart from truth, though closely connected to it, there is another issue that needs addressing here, which is the concept of guilt, also widespread in modernist writing.

Akutagawa chooses the crime to be the story’s central event and it is represented in every narrative of the three characters. Moreover, all of them plead guilty. And in such a way author raises the philosophical problem of the story. Obviously, it is impossible to determine who is a real “criminal” here and which version of the events is truthful, if any. However, the fact that all of them confessed of a murder, indicates a shaped concept of a guilt / sin rooted in their confessions.

As Napier points out, “modern psychology with its new awareness of the self obviously stimulated a consciousness of the psyche’s complexities” (Napier, 1996, p. 112). Such modernistic tendency with its awareness of one’s guilt, representations of identity crisis and the complicated state of human’s mind can also be found in Akutagawa’s story. Motives of guilt create the concept of the crisis of faith and hint at the unknowability of ultimate truth.

It is also possible to regard Akutagawa's story as the representation of the critique of the naturalistic techniques which flourished in Japanese literature in the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Shiga Naoya, Tayama Katai, Kunikida Doppo, and so on). Not only does the short story question the essence of literary realism but also shows skepticism toward narrative strategies of naturalistic I-novels based on confessions and testimonies that constitute the long-lasting tradition of Japanese literature. Thus, the story is also an ironical interpretation of a Japanese I-novel technique.

Besides, the influence of Zen philosophy should not be unobserved, with its emphasis on the relativity of any truth. As Napier boldly (and justly) stated, "final truth is never discovered". She argues that it is "the unknowability of the truth" that is discovered by the author rather than "the end of all truth" (Napier, 1996, p. 112). However, there is another specificity of Akutagawa's short story that should be underlined. Rudnev claims that "In a Grove" represents the idea of the playful attitude of the author to its work that can be analysed in the framework of the philosophy of the event which is characteristic of the twentieth century art and literature (Rudnev). Thus, the short story can be considered in the following way: events represented in the story are not contradictory. All versions can be true, but the story cannot be reduced to a simple chronological sequence. The art of the twentieth century problematizes the idea of logocentrism, and Akutagawa turns his story into a kind of Dzen *koan* where all versions have equal standing and can be true and all the contradictions are not contradictory at all, and the search for truth itself is considered an illusion.

Koblenkova seems to have reached the similar opinion: "Akutagawa obviously admitted that the world is the coexistence of many subjective realities and that ultimate truth (...) is either unknowable or does not exist at all" (Koblenkova, 2003, p. 63).¹¹ It is worth mentioning that Akutagawa forestalls such views on truth and reality, since in modernist literature there will be later others examples of this idea of "parallel truths", the most vivid of which can be found in William Faulkner's works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). This puts Akutagawa's search for truth in a broader literary context.

Conclusion

The question of truth and its representability was at the core of modernist literary tradition, and Japanese literature of the time with its search for new modes of expression was not left behind. Akutagawa is now known for his nuanced and innovative short stories, which often draw upon traditional Japanese tales and legends but are written in a modern style that reflects the author's interest in Western literature and psychology. In the best tradition of western modernism (and often ahead of it), Akutagawa's stories are characterized by their psychological depth and complexity of characters. The writer often explores themes such as the nature of identity, the meaning of existence, and the conflict between traditional Japanese values and the influence of

¹¹ Translation of the author. The original text is as follows: "Акутагава, очевидно, допускал, что мир — это сосуществование множества субъективных реальностей и та конечная истина, которой одной ведомо, как сводятся в вечности концы с концами, или непознаваема, или не существует вовсе" (Koblenkova 2003, p. 63).

the West, and the problem of personal and objective truth is among them. Not only did Akutagawa inherit traditional traits of Japanese literature but also put them provocatively on display thus accentuating his new ideas about multivalence of artistic effects in approaching ultimate truth.

In this paper I attempted to analyze Akutagawa's "In a Grove" from the thematic point of view showing the motif of searching and ultimately not finding the final truth – the task that the author completed by using a "revolver" compositional structure (by the definition of Veller, 1989) and a number of unreliable narrators, neither of whom seems to have had the reason to lie and yet all the accounts ended up different. The paper offered a brief list literary pieces of the past that may have served as the basis of the story. Furthermore, the article addresses Morrison's model of shifting roles of a woman (Morrison, 2012) in the story and argues that though she is certainly one of the central characters, she is not the main one, for, since the truth has never been discovered, there cannot be any main characters (nor their confessions) at all. The testimonies of every narrator here are equally contradicting and ambiguous. In this way, Akutagawa creates a peculiar narrative which demonstrates that the real account of events may never have existed and it is simply impossible to ever learn the "truth".

The idea of the unknowability of the world and a man in it has become one of the leading concepts in modernism. Akutagawa's "In a Grove" incorporates the modernist search for truth and intrinsic to it a multi-layered and often conflicting vision of events. The story questions the very ability to produce and accept the objective truth. However, Akutagawa's short story creates new realities, independent of each other. This strategy of narration is not limited to Akutagawa and Japanese literature but is explored more (though later) in the texts of western modernists, William Faulkner being the greatest example. Thus, Akutagawa's work can be placed into the worldwide modernist tradition since Akutagawa's stories often feature fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives, which reflect the modernist interest in subjectivity, complexity of human experience and unreliability of any ultimate truth.

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Awareness and Utilization of E-Resources to Support Academic and Research Activities

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Abstract

In the 21st century, the widespread adoption of ICT had a profound influence on every aspect of human life. The impact of modern technology has compelled libraries such as public, academic, research, and special to actively embrace the integration of new technologies for cost savings in operations and management of collections. In this era, Libraries are frequently using electronic resources to give teachers and students worldwide improved services for their research and educational activities. Basically, resources are electronic representations of information that are accessible through electronic systems and computer networks. Therefore, the current study needs to examine both students and faculty awareness and utilization towards E-resources. The quantitative research method was used, while using a closed-ended questionnaire. Moreover, for the collection of data a probability sampling method (random sampling method) was used. The data was examined using descriptive and inferential statistics to calculate frequencies and percentages and to discover correlations between variables. The findings revealed that the majority of the faculty demonstrated familiarity with E-resources, somehow, students' familiarity level is low. Several obstacles were also highlighted in this study that prevent teachers and students from effectively using E-resources. Such obstacles included energy crises, slow speed of internet, and lack of trainings /orientations while accessing and utilizing E-resources. Based on the findings, it is recommended that improvements should be made in the provision of internet facilities, proper power supply and provide trainings in the institutions, to aware about the use of E-resources. This will encourage the utilization of E-resources in the institutions.

Keywords: e-resources, awareness, utilization, faculty, students, University of Balochistan

The continuous advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is driving a revolution in the way information is shared and breaking free human endeavor from geographical constraints. Information digitalization and print media have brought drastic changes to all aspects of human experiences. Such electronic sources of information are commonly referred to as an E-resources, which the libraries are providing to their users for their research and academic activities (Alzahrani, 2019; Chanda, 2021).

E-resources are electronic representations of information that are accessible through electronic systems and computer networks. They encompass various forms of digital content that can be accessed and utilized by individuals (Bankole & Nasir, 2020; Sharma, 2009). E-resources are the most recent advancement in ICT and are available in many formats. Such resources encompass E-books, E-magazines, E-journals, E-learning tutors, E-libraries, and online assessment tests. Currently, all such formats have become reliable sources of generating and spreading information and are increasingly relied upon in academic settings (Egberongbe, 2011; Kimi & Abidi, 2019).

E-resources are widely used in a variety of fields, including government, industry business, libraries and education. Due to their enticing qualities, like real-time distribution, primarily remote access, simplicity of access, content, and flexibility E-resources have grown significantly in academic settings. Many academic, commercial, and governmental organizations now have electronic sources in their library collection for their users (Ganiyu et al., 2014).

Therefore, awareness regarding E-resources is necessary in this modern age. Awareness can be defined as the state of knowing something exists or having an understanding of a specific situation or issue at the present time (Ani & Ahiauzu, 2008). Thus, in the 21st century, having awareness of E-resources is essential for the progress of both libraries and the education system (Salman et al., 2020). In the present time, it is necessary for faculty and students to be aware about the importance and use of E-resources. Moreover, the students and faculty do not need any specialized ICT skills while utilizing E-resources efficiently and effectively for their academic and research activities (Balogun, 2008; Das & Maharana, 2013; Egberongbe, 2011; Panneerdas, 2022; Vandana et al., 2023).

E-resources brought easement in research and education; however, the advancement of technology has created problems too. Lack of awareness to access E-resources affected students and teachers learning progression. According to Ajuwon (2003) insufficient network devices, weak internet connections, unavailability of required materials, power failures, complexity in identifying relevant databases, limited or no access to certain data, prevalence of irrelevant information, and difficulties in filtering search results, lack of IL (Information Literacy) skill, retrieval of excessive amounts of information and the high cost of providing E-resources through subscriptions have been highlighted as an obstacle in many institutions, while accessing E-resources for academic and research activities (Amir et al., 2020; N. Sharma, 2019; Subaveerapandiyan & Nandhakumar, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

In the current era, an exponential rate of information is produced, and the urgency to ensure easy access to the information has become a problem for everyone. Before the development of information and communication technology, several attempts were made to resolve this issue, the search for alternative media for storing and disseminating information resources began. Researchers have emphasized that the manual system of searching for information resources cannot allow multiple users to access the same resources, unlike online services. Therefore, the availability of E-resources in various formats within the libraries is crucial to meet the academic and research requirements of both students and faculty members (Adenariwo, 2022). On this aspect numerous studies were conducted worldwide to investigate the availability, awareness and utilization of E-resources among the students and faculty (Haleem et al., 2022; Kuldeep, 2019; Kwafoa et al., 2014; Renwick, 2005; Soni et al., 2018; Yebowaah & Plockey, 2017). However, there are very few studies conducted on Pakistan's perspective, to investigate the awareness and usability of electronic resources among students and faculty. Whereas, no such studies witnessed in respect of Balochistan. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the level of awareness and utilization of E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan, which is located in the largest province of Pakistan. It is worth noting that the educational conditions and ICT facilities in this province are significantly poor as compare to other provinces of the country. Thus, the main objective of this study is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the awareness and utilization of E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan, which is the largest university in the province.

Objectives

The objectives of the study conducted at the University of Balochistan were as follows:

1. To assess the level of familiarity with E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan.
2. To determine the extent to which E-resources are utilized by students and faculty at the University of Balochistan.
3. To investigate the challenges faced by faculty and students when utilizing E-resources for academic and research purposes at the University of Balochistan.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study conducted at the University of Balochistan are as follows:

1. There is no significant relationship between the awareness of E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan.
2. There is no significant relationship between the utilization of E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan.
3. There is no significant variation in the mean level of challenges faced by faculty and students when using E-resources at the University of Balochistan.

Literature Review

Electronic resources of information, commonly known as information resources, are digital publications that can be easily accessed online from any location at any time. Such resources provide a wide range of information and content that can be accessed and utilized through electronic systems and computer networks. According to Obande et al. (2020) E-resources can be defined as information sources that are encoded and formatted in a manner that enables reading and processing by a computer's processor. These resources can be accessed with the help of peripheral devices directly connected to the computer, such as a CD-ROM drive, or remotely through a network like the internet. According to Baskar (2017) any resource requiring access to a processor or any other electronic device that offers published data collection for commercialization purposes is referred to as an E-resource. Moreover, electronic books, journals, reports, academic dissertations, theses, OPACs, and some other computer-related electronic networks, like E-newsletters, E-newspapers, E-magazines, videos and audio, among others, are all examples of E-resources (Ganiyu et al., 2014). Moreover, Okunoye (2021) elaborated that E-resources are academic resources, which are being used for teaching, learning, and research activities. Therefore, the understanding about E-resources is necessary for undergraduates and faculty for their academic development. In their empirical research, Basho run et al.(2011)investigated the utilization of Electronic Information Services (EIS) in the libraries of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Delhi, India. The study revealed that a significant majority of users (95%) were aware of the availability and usage of EIS provided by the libraries. It was found that only a small number of students were unaware of the utilization of E-resources. The study recommends that if the institution arrange some orientation sessions for those students who are unaware of the utilization of e-resources, they will be aware about it and it will boost-up their academic activities. Moreover, Egberongbe (2011) examined the use of E-resources and its impact on post-graduate students in University of Lagos. The findings revealed that a substantial number of students (71.4%) and research scholars (78.6%) were well aware of the availability and utilization of E-resources at their institution. The level of awareness indicated that users possessed knowledge about the availability of resources and the extent to which they were utilizing them for educational purposes, which was considered satisfactory. However, it was observed that a no significant percentage of instructors (28.6%) and research scholars (21.4%) were unaware of the extent of the E-resources that were available to them. Nonetheless, the high level of awareness and utilization among post-graduates is an encouraging sign of their engagement with e-resources. The findings of the instant study also describe that if the institutions make some strategy regarding the awareness of E-resources in their libraries. It will be very beneficial for them who are still unaware about the extent of the E-resources availability in their libraries.

In his study, Joel (2020) explored the awareness and purpose of electronic information resources among postgraduate students studying library and information science in Borno State. The findings indicated that the students in Borno State were well aware of various E-resources, including E-books, E-magazines, E-databases, E-journals, E-mails, E-serials, theses as well as e-dissertations, WWW, and CD-ROMs. The students actively utilized these E-

resources for their educational activities, highlighting their recognition and utilization of E-resources to support their academic pursuits.

Sharma et al. (2020) conducted a study at Panjab University in Chandigarh to assess the utilization of electronic resources by professors and research scholars. The study also investigated their motivations, preferred learning styles, and the challenges they faced while using E-resources. The results indicated a significant level of usage of E-resources, with E-journals being the most frequently accessed resource. Self-learning was found to be preferred mode of instruction, and search engines were the preferred method of searching for E-resources. The primary purpose of using E-resources was for research purposes, and article titles were the most preferred search option. Based on these findings, the study recommended that educational institutions should conduct more training sessions to enhance the utilization of E-resources among professors and research scholars.

Kaur & Kathuria (2016) found that respondents were well aware of web technologies like simple downloads and quick searching capabilities, which have made E-resources an essential component of their studies. Such electronic resources have undoubtedly made research easier by providing convenient access to a vast amount of information. However, despite the convenience and benefits of E-resources, respondents expressed a preference for both print and electronic formats to meet their academic needs. The results suggest that while E-resources are valued for their efficiency and accessibility, respondents still recognize the importance of traditional print resources and find value in utilizing both formats for their studies.

In Ukachi (2015) study, a strong positive correlation was found between the information literacy skills of undergraduate students and utilization of E-resources provided by their libraries. The finding highlighted the crucial role of information literacy in effectively accessing and making use of E-resources. Information literacy refers to the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively to address specific information needs. Students who possess better information literacy skills are more likely to navigate and utilize E-resources to their advantage.

In their study, Bhat & Mudhol (2014) emphasized the positive attitudes of medical faculty members and students towards E-resources for study and research. The participants recognized the value of libraries as gateways for accessing such resources, highlighting the role of academic libraries in facilitating access to E-resources. The finding suggested that libraries play a crucial role in supporting users' access to academic E-resources and meeting their information needs. Faculty members and students in the medical field expressed a preference for utilizing E-resources provided by libraries, further underscoring the importance of libraries in facilitating access to relevant and reliable information sources and pointing to their potential role in developing literacy skills.

In another study, Ansari (2020) examined the usage and acceptance of electronic library services in universities. The primary objective was to assess faculty of Arts awareness of E-library services and their availability. The study employed a questionnaire where respondents

indicated their level of awareness as “Yes,” “No,” or “To some extent.” The results showed that a majority of the faculty (57.97%) reported only partial awareness of the E-library’s existence in their daily life. The findings indicating a lack of comprehensive knowledge about available services. Notably, the study did not find a significant variation in E-library services unawareness among different Arts groups. The study recommends that there is need to plan awareness programs (IL) for faculty to improve the awareness toward the existence of E-library services in the library. Which will promote the utilization of E-library services among the faculty members, students and staff in the universities.

The existing literature also highlights several challenges faced by users while utilizing E-resources for their academic requirements. For instance, Habib et al. (2022) conducted an evaluation of medical college libraries in the Multan division, focusing on users’ awareness, utilization, satisfaction levels, and barriers related to E-resources, as well as gender characteristics of respondents. The study revealed that users in the medical colleges were partially satisfied with the available E-resource facilities in the libraries. The study also highlighted some major issues that the users face while using E-resources for their academic activities such as lack of training or orientation, slow internet speed, energy crises/load shedding, an absence of printing facilities in the institution, limited full-text access to journals, information overload, and inadequate IT infrastructure. In addition, Famous (2012) in a survey on the problems and prospects of E-resource usage in Nigerian academic libraries, expressed the challenges learners faced while utilizing E-resources for their educational activities. The findings revealed that a significant percentage of learners (57%) experienced difficulties due to a lack of awareness. A lack of awareness hindered students’ ability to effectively utilize E-resources and to fully benefit from their academic support. Such findings highlight the importance of addressing awareness issues, such as implementing measures to enhance awareness and provide necessary training and support for learners in utilizing E-resources effectively in academic settings. By addressing such challenges, educational institutions can optimize the usage and effectiveness of E-resources, so they become more efficient in, facilitating a comprehensive learning experience for students. Other researchers have identified limitations related to E-resource usage. For instance, Adeleke et al. (2017) found that an interrupted power supply, a lack of search and IT skills as major obstacles that prevented users from using E-resources. In addition, Lawal & Kannan (2020) identified various challenges including slow internet speed, difficulty in finding relevant material, information overload, inefficiency in downloading or viewing pages, outdated computer systems, shortage of ICT skills, power failures, limited access to business education databases, inadequate user skills for operating E-resources, expensive internet subscriptions, and poor network systems. Similarly, Murithi et al. (2020) noted that insufficient network devices, weak internet connections, unavailability of required materials, power failures, complexity in identifying relevant databases, limited or no access to certain data, prevalence of irrelevant information, and difficulties in filtering search results were major issues faced when using E-resources. More recently, Chanda (2021) study findings highlighted slow internet speed, interrupted electric supply, unfriendly user interface, deficiencies of computer-related skills, and excess of information that impacted the use of E-resources. Such limitations prevent users from harnessing the power of E-resources for their educational activities. To this effect, Bahader et

al. (2021) expressed that improper and poor IT infrastructure in the university libraries of Pakistan is an alarming situation. The study suggests that government should provide proper ICT facilities in libraries and train librarians as it will help librarians to guide the users properly about the use of E-resources.

Research Design

In this study, a structured (quantitative) approach was employed for gathering data and the gathered data from the field was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted the faculty and students of the University of Balochistan. The research included a total of 400 participants, consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as faculty members from different disciplines of the University. The researchers employed a random sampling technique to ensure an unbiased selection of participants. The distribution of questionnaires was carried out through both in-person interactions and email, allowing for flexibility and convenience for the respondents. There were no limitations based on factors such as gender, age, discipline, qualifications and experience. This approach aimed to gather a representative sample and obtain insights into the awareness and utilization of E-resources among the faculty and students of the University of Balochistan.

Instrument of the Study

The study utilized a survey questionnaire as the primary instrument to assess the awareness and utilization of E-resources among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan. The questionnaire consisted of 54 items and was designed to gather information on various aspects related to E-resource usage. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to the participants, who were instructed to respond to the statements using a 5-point Likert scale and 330 questionnaires were properly filled and returned. The questionnaire was divided into seven sections to cover different areas of interest. Section A focused on the demographic background of the respondents, including gender, age, and discipline. Section B explored the availability of E-resources and the respondents' awareness of these resources. Section C examined the utilization of E-resources and its impact on educational performance for both students and faculty. Section D investigated the perceived advantages of using E-resources. Section E explored the purposes of utilizing E-resources to enhance learning. Section F assessed the frequency of E-resource usage. Section G identify the percentage of faculty and student's awareness level. Lastly, Section H identified the challenges faced by participants when utilizing E-resources. By employing this questionnaire, the study aimed to collect comprehensive data on awareness, utilization, advantages, purposes, frequency, and challenges associated with E-resource usage among faculty and students at the University of Balochistan. The information gathered through the questionnaire would provide valuable insights into the current state of E-resource usage and help identify areas for improvement and intervention.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data was obtained in 9 weeks through the distributions of 400 questionnaires, 390 questionnaires were returned with 330 being properly filled and considered for the study. The questionnaires designed in this study are the foundation of the current study. The gathered data was analyzed using the (SPSS) statistical package for social sciences 23rd version. Furthermore, sample size was determined by employing Arkin and Colton formula (1963) with an error rate of 5 percent and with 95 percent level of confidence. Equation 1:

$$n = \frac{NZ^2P(1 - P)}{Ne^2 + Z^2P(1 - P)}$$

Study Limitations

The study encountered unexpected challenges. Due to limited resources and insufficient funds, this study is limited to University of Balochistan and its sub-campus located in Quetta. The current study consumed a good deal of time because of additional challenges. For instance, while conducting this study University of Balochistan remained closed for four continuous months. Another problem the researcher faced was the unresponsive behavior of the students and teachers when recording their views on the questionnaire that left many questionnaires incomplete and unable to be used in the analysis.

Results of the Study

Table 1
Respondents' Profile

Demographical details	Frequency (N=330)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	210	63.6
Female	120	36.3
Age		
20-25	50	15.1
25-30	60	18.1
30-35	100	30.3
35-40	50	15.1
40-45	50	15.1
45-50	20	6
Disciplines		
Natural Science	100	30.3
Social Science	130	39.3
Management Sciences	100	30.3
Number of Faculty and Students		
Faculty members	150	45.4
Students	180	54.5

Table 1 shows the demographic details of the respondents in the current study. The results indicate that out of 330 respondents, 220 (63.6%) were male, while 110 (36.3%) were female. The largest proportion of respondents, 100 (30.3%), fall within the age group of 30-35 years. Additionally, 60 (18.1%) participants belonged to the age group of 25-30 years, and 20 (6%) respondents were in the age group of 45-50 years. In terms of discipline, 100 (30.3%) respondents were from the natural sciences, 130 (39.3%) were from the social sciences, and 100 (30.3%) were from the management sciences. Regarding the status of the respondents, 150 (45.4%) were faculty members, and 180 (54.5%) were students. These demographic details provide an overview of the composition of the respondents in the study, considering factors such as gender, age, discipline, and status.

Table 2
Level of Awareness of Electronic Resources

Source	Yes		No	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Through Library Orientation	80	24.2	250	75.7
Through library staff	60	18.1	270	81.8
Through Faculty	230	69.6	100	30.3
University website	90	27.2	240	72.7
Library Email/circular	80	24.2	250	75.7
Self-Exposure	110	33.3	220	66.6
Through discussions with friends	210	63.6	120	36.3
Through seminars	230	69.6	100	30.3

Table 2 presents the methods through which respondents gained awareness of E-resources. 80 (24.2%) of the respondents attained awareness of E-resources through library orientation, with 250 (75.7%) respondents not supporting the above statement. 60 (18.1%) respondents attaining awareness of E-resources through library staff and 270 (81.8%) did not support the above statement. In terms of gaining awareness from faculty members, 230 (69.6%) respondents indicated that they acquired awareness through faculty members, while 100 (30.3%) did not support this statement. 90 (27.2%) respondents attained awareness through the university website and 240 (72.7%) did not agree with this statement. Moreover, 80 (24.2%) respondents mentioned that they gained awareness through library emails, while 250 (75.7%) disagreed with this statement. 110 (33.3%) attained awareness of E-resources by self-exposure and 220 (66.6%) disagreed and that without proper guidance it is very difficult for them to get awareness of E-resources and their usage. While 210 (63.6%) respondents attained awareness of E-resources through discussions with friends. It is a positive aspect of the academic setting that while sitting with friends the faculty and students utilize their time in a positive way and learn from each other's. Such learning behavior is being supported by university via central library and provision of spaces for open discussions. Another positive aspect is that 230 (69.6%) respondents attained awareness of E-resources through seminars. Such types of training seminars have a positive impact on their educational development.

Table 3
Respondents of Frequency of Usage of E-Resources

E-Resources	Frequently		Occasionally		Never	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
E-Journals	220	66.6	60	18.1	50	15.1
E- Books	150	45.4	120	36.3	60	18.1
Database	210	63.6	70	21.2	50	15.1
ETDs	150	45.4	110	33.3	70	21.2
E-Research	210	63.6	80	24.2	40	12.1
CDs/DVDs	150	45.4	120	36.3	60	18.1
E-Newspaper	210	63.6	70	21.2	50	15.1

Table 3 presents the frequency of E-resource usage among respondents for their research and academic activities. The results show that majority of respondents, 220 (66.6%), reported frequent usage of E-journals for their academic purposes. This was followed by 210 (63.6%) respondents who frequently used E-research papers and databases, indicating their reliance on these resources for research-related activities. Similarly, 210 (63.6%) respondents mentioned that they frequently used E-newspapers for their academic needs. Electronic thesis & dissertations (ETDs) and CDs/DVDs were frequently utilized by 150 (45.4%) respondents who were using E-resources for their academic and research activities. The findings demonstrate the significant usage of various E-resources, particularly E-journals, E-research papers and databases, E-newspapers, Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETDs), and CDs/DVDs, indicating their importance in supporting academic and research activities.

Table 4
Advantages of Utilizing E-resources

Advantages	Strongly Agree		Agree		Moderately		Strongly Disagree		Disagree	
	Agree						Disagree			
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Time-saving	60	18	180	54.5	50	15	10	3	30	9
Easy to use	10	3	200	60.6	40	12	10	3	70	21.2
More Informative	20	6	190	57.5	30	9	10	3	80	24
Cost saving	30	9	70	21	20	6	80	24	130	39

Table 4 presents the respondents' perceptions regarding the advantages of E-resources in their academic and research activities. The results show that the majority of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that E-resources save their time when they need to complete their academic projects, indicating that these resources are efficient that allow for quick access to information. Similarly, majority of the respondents were agreed that the usage of E-resources is as easy as accessing print sources, suggesting that they find it convenient to utilize these resources for their academic and research needs. But some respondents were disagreeing with the said statement according to them print media is easy to access and reliable. Furthermore, majority of the respondents were agreed that E-resources were more informative as compared to other resources available in the library, highlighting the richness and depth of information available through electronic platforms rather than print form in the current age. But some respondents were still disagreeing with this statement. According to them still print media is more informative and easy to access in the library. However, only 39% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that E-resources were cost-saving, indicating that they perceive these resources as not necessarily being more economical compared to alternatives.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics of Respondents for Purposes of Using E- Resources

Purpose	Yes		No	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Learning	250	75	80	24
To update knowledge	210	63.6	120	36.3
Research	300	90	30	9
Writing a Research Article	300	90	30	9
Research Supervision	150	45	180	54
Entertainment	50	15	280	84.8
Preparing Lectures	150	45	180	54
Social Networking	210	63.6	120	36
Writing a Book	100	30	230	69.6

Table 5 shows the usage of E-resources for various purposes among the faculty and students of the University of Balochistan. The results demonstrated that the majority of respondents, 300 (90%), utilized E-resources for writing research articles, indicating the significance of these resources in supporting scholarly publication and academic writing. Limits in information literacy may therefore negatively impact the generation of research articles, making E-resource awareness a priority in academic setting. Similarly, 300 (90%) respondents reported that they are using E-resources for research purposes, reflecting their reliance on these resources to gather information and conduct research activities in their institution. Furthermore, 150 (45%) respondents mentioned using E-resources while supervising their research scholars, highlighting the role of E-resources in supporting mentorship and guidance in research training endeavors. Additionally, 250 (75%) respondents utilized E-resources for learning purposes,

suggesting their use as educational tools to enhance knowledge and understanding. Moreover, 150 (45%) respondents reported using E-resources for preparing lectures, indicating their use as a valuable resource for teaching and instruction purposes. Last, 210 (63.6%) respondents mentioned they are using E-resources for social networking, highlighting the role of these resources in facilitating academic and professional connections. Overall, the findings indicate that students and faculty members at the University of Balochistan are utilizing E-resources for various purposes, including research, learning, teaching, and networking, showcasing awareness and effective utilization of such resources.

Table 6*Frequency of Usage of Electronic Resources*

I use the following electronic resources	Daily	weekly	Monthly	Occasionally	Never
Research for life	50 (15)	80 (24)	70 (21)	70 (21)	60 (18)
Science Direct	50 (15)	50 (15)	60 (18)	80 (24)	90 (27)
Academic Search Complete	10 (3)	10 (3)	20 (6)	80 (24)	210 (63)
APA PsycINFO	20 (6)	30 (9)	40 (12)	40 (12)	200 (60)
Education Research Complete	30 (9)	20 (6)	30 (9)	40 (12)	210 (63)
E-Library: Journals	20(6)	30 (9)	30 (9)	30 (9)	220 (66)
Science Tech Connect	10 (3)	20 (6)	10 (3)	10 (3)	280 (84)
Science by McGraw Hill	20 (6)	10 (3)	10 (3)	20 (6)	270 (81)
GALE SCIENCE	10 (3)	10 (3)	10 (3)	20 (6)	280 (84)
Astrophysics Data Sys					
EbscoHost	20 (6)	10 (3)	10 (3)	20 (6)	270 (81)
OER	20 (6)	10 (3)	10 (3)	20 (6)	270 (81)
Elsevier	90 (27)	80 (24)	80 (24)	60 (18)	20 (6)
Emerald insight	90 (27)	80 (24)	80 (24)	60 (18)	20 (6)
Others	90 (27)	80 (24)	80 (24)	60 (18)	20 (6)

Digits in parenthesis show percentage.

Table 6 documents the frequency of usage of E-resources by students and faculty at the University of Balochistan. Regarding Research for Life, the majority of respondents (42%) reported using it daily, followed by (15%) who used it weekly. Additionally, (24%) used it once a month, (21%) used it occasionally, and (18%) claimed to have never used it. For Science Direct, the specific frequencies are not provided in the response. For Elsevier, (27%) of respondents used it daily, (24%) used it weekly, (18%) used it once a month, (6%) used it occasionally, and (6%) claimed to have never used it. Similarly, the frequency of usage of Emerald Insight was rated high by the majority of the respondents. In contrast, other electronic

resources such as Academic Search Complete, APA PsycINFO, Education Research Complete, E-Library: Journals, Science Tech Connect, Science by McGraw Hill, Gale Science Astrophysics Data Sys, EbscoHost, and OER (Open Educational Resources) were reported to have low frequencies of usage by students and faculty at the University of Balochistan. Based on the above information, it can be concluded that the frequency of utilizing E-resources by students and faculty members at the University of Balochistan is moderate. Notably, certain resources like Research for Life, Science Direct, Elsevier, and Emerald Insight are used more frequently compared to other electronic resources.

Table 7

Challenges Faced while Using E-Resources

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Energy Crisis/Load shedding	330	100
Low speed of Internet	210	63
Lack of training/ orientation to access and utilize E-resources	200	60
Lack of Printing facility	200	60
Low speed of Internet	200	60
Lack of Information literacy instructions	200	60
Non-availability of full-text access to most journals	150	45
Lack of awareness of E-resources	150	45
Lack of Access to Internet facility	150	45
Information overload	100	30
Inadequate IT infrastructure of the Institute	100	30

Table 7 highlights the challenges faced by respondents while utilizing E-resources for their academic and research activities. The results indicate that the respondents identified several challenges. The most frequently mentioned challenges were the energy crisis/load shedding confronted by 100% respondents, low speed of internet faced by more than half 63% respondents, lack of training/orientation to access and utilize E-resources, lack of printing facility, low speed of internet and lack of information literacy instruction with each challenge being mentioned by 60% respondents. Other challenges mentioned by the respondents include information overload, inadequate IT infrastructure in the institute, unavailability of the latest computers in computer labs, lack of access to internet facility, non-availability of full-text access to most of the valuable journals, and lack of IT instructions. Each of the challenges was pointed out by 60% respondents in the study. Overall, the results highlight that respondents face various challenges while utilizing E-resources, particularly in terms of training, internet speed, printing facilities, and energy availability. Apart from infrastructure issues, literacy instructions and lack of training feature highly on the issues faced, meaning that even with an improvement in infrastructure, academic members would not be able to make full use of an available E-resource service that was reliable. Additionally, issues such as information overload, inadequate IT infrastructure, and lack of access to resources and instructions

contribute to the challenges faced. These findings emphasize the need for addressing these challenges and implementing measures to enhance the usability and accessibility of E-resources for respondents at the University of Balochistan.

Table 8

Faculty and Students Awareness and Utilization Level

Statement	Faculty	Percentage	Students	Percentage
Awareness	120	80	80	44
Utilization	130	86	90	50

Table 8 highlights the level of awareness and utilization by faculty and students. The data in relation to awareness and utilization of E-resources by the students and faculty show the difference as the faculty have the more awareness and utilization of E-resources than students having, the difference score of responses of both the faculty and students i.e. faculty awareness (80%) and students (44%). Moreover, utilization level among faculty is (86%) and students (50%).

Table 9

Mean Differences in E-Resources Awareness, Usage and Barriers

E-Resources	Faculty		Students		t-stats (df=330)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P-value	
Awareness	1.6502	.72736	1.5644	.69833	1.082	.270
Usage	1.6630	.76259	1.6409	.81208	.249	.802
Challenges	3.2184	.57659	3.1952	.56047	.366	.713

P-value (P>0.05).

Hypothesis H1: The analysis of the data suggests a significant relationship between awareness and electronic resources among faculty and students of the University of Balochistan. The significant value (P=.270) is greater than the predefined significance level (p-value >0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis (Ho) stating that there is no significant relationship between awareness and electronic resources is rejected. The alternative hypothesis (Ha) stating that there is a significant relationship between awareness and electronic resources among faculty and students is accepted. Hypothesis H2: The findings of the study indicate a significant relationship between utilization and electronic resources among faculty and students of the University of Balochistan. The significant value (P=.802) is greater than the predefined significance level (P>0.05). Thus, the null hypothesis (Ho) stating that there is no significant relationship between utilization and electronic resources is rejected, and the alternative

hypothesis (Ha) stating that there is a significant relationship between utilization and electronic resources is accepted. Hypothesis H3: The results demonstrate a no statistically significant mean variation in the challenges faced by faculty and students while using electronic resources at the University of Balochistan. The statistical value ($P=.713$) is greater than the predefined significance level ($P>0.05$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (Ha) is rejected and null hypothesis is accepted. The variation in relation to the awareness and utilization of E-resources are somewhat have no significant due the challenges the faculty and students are facing while utilizing E-resources for their research and academic activities. As in Balochistan province the ICT facilities are not sufficient and satisfactory. The internet and electricity facility is not available in some arears of the province. Therefore, the awareness and utilization level is not that much good that much in other provinces of the country. Although the facilities are limited but the faculty and students are trying their best to in-teach themselves with technology and compete with other institutions of the country.

Discussion

The discussion of the study highlights several key findings regarding the awareness, utilization, and challenges faced by students and faculty of the University of Balochistan. Firstly, the finding showed that even with the limited resources, the students and faculty of the University of Balochistan are aware of the importance and utilization of E-resources. As we know Balochistan is the largest province of the country, but by the means of resources its condition is worse. Although the other provinces of the country are also facing challenges while utilizing E-resources in their library. But Balochistan University faculty and students are optimistic. The faculty of Balochistan University trying their best to in-tech their students with modern technologies. This finding aligns with similar studies conducted by Humbhi et al. (2022) and Humbhi & Tareen (2021) which found that awareness and utilization of E-resources are prevalent in academic institutions. Although the respondents in this study do not have full access to all types of E-resources, they still make use of available resources for research and academic purposes. The findings also reveal that the respondents primarily utilize E-journals, E-research papers, E-databases, and E-newspapers for their educational activities. This reflects the understanding among students and academics about the benefits and convenience of utilizing E-resources for obtaining up-to-date and comprehensive information. Similar studies conducted by Okunoye (2021) and Pawar (2016) have also highlighted the advantages of E-resources in terms of faster browsing, comprehensive information coverage, and efficient retrieval of information. Moreover, the findings show that the respondents utilize E-resources not only for personal capacity building but also for writing research articles and supervising research scholars. The findings of the study demonstrate the significance of E-resources in facilitating academic activities research projects and scholarly activities. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Akuffo & Budu (2019) as well as Sharma (2019) which emphasize the growing popularity and integration of E-resources in academic institutions worldwide. However, the study also identifies challenges faced by students and faculty in utilizing E-resources. The major obstacles include energy crisis/load shedding, low internet speed, and a lack of training or orientation to access and use E-resources. These challenges hinder the seamless utilization of E-resources for academic development. Similar studies

conducted by Adenariwo (2022) and Jacob (2018) have also highlighted such challenges. Addressing infrastructure issues and providing adequate support and training can enhance the effective utilization of E-resources. Additionally, the findings of the study indicate that there is a significant difference between faculty and students in terms of awareness and utilization of E-resources in University of Balochistan. Both the faculty and students are facing similar challenges while utilizing E-resources for their academic and research activities. However, the level of awareness and utilization of E-resources is not similar between faculty and students. The faculty awareness and utilization level is higher than students. Nevertheless, both of them need more trainings and orientations regarding the utilization of E-resources. It will boost-up their academic and research activities.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the awareness and utilization of E-resources among students and faculty at the University of Balochistan. The findings indicate that with the limited resources both students and faculty have a good understanding of the importance and utilization of E-resources. They heavily rely on E-resources for various academic activities such as searching, retrieving, communicating, and conducting research. E-resources play a crucial role in accessing reliable, timely, and relevant information, thus improving their research output. However, the study also revealed that the University of Balochistan face challenges in terms of the none availability and accessibility of ICT equipment in the library and computer labs. The accessibility of E-resources in the library is comparatively limited compared to institutions in other provinces of the county. Despite the limitations, the library professionals at the University of Balochistan are making efforts to help users with the available resources. The study also identified several obstacles faced by faculty and students while accessing and using E-resources. These include energy crisis/load shedding, low internet speed, and a lack of training or orientation on how to effectively utilize E-resources. Inadequate IT infrastructure within the institute further adds to these challenges. To address these issues, the study suggests that the University of Balochistan should organize additional training programs to enhance users' ICT skills and knowledge in utilizing E-resources. Hiring experts with ICT skills can also contribute to improving the accessibility and utilization of E-resources. Additionally, seeking user feedback and considering their opinions in subscribing to new E-journals can help the academic growth of faculty and students all over the country.

Recommendations

The study suggests that institutions use more innovative marketing techniques to let people know about and raise awareness of the availability of E-resources. The University of Balochistan should provide additional funds for subscribing to more E-resources. Without sufficient funding, libraries cannot provide all subject materials. The price of E-journals is rising daily, and current issues are more expensive than older issues. Researchers are required to cite current studies. Whereas, having current copies of journals in the libraries of a third-world country like Pakistan is impossible; therefore, it is good to subscribe to more E-journals, E-books, and E-databases in order to satisfy all of the faculty and students' needs. The higher

authorities of the institution and the library should offer high-speed internet access for quick access and effective retrieval of E-resources. Furthermore, the higher authorities and government should provide proper electricity and artificial means of electricity facilities to all institutions of the provinces. Another positive strategy the library professionals and IT professionals of the university should be given skill-oriented training for their capacity building. They, in turn, provide orientation to users (faculty and students), and the higher authorities should issue notifications from time to time about available resources and about new arrivals for the successful retrieval and use of E-resources.

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- References should be single-spaced. Each reference should be indented after the first line with a 1-cm hanging indent.

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- Title of the paper.
- Author names and affiliations: Provide affiliations for all authors (where the work was done) including full institution name and country.
- Abstract: A concise and factual abstract not exceeding 250 words is required.
- Keywords: Immediately following the abstract provide a minimum of three keywords (alphabetical).

Additional Information

APA7 has changed its table style and no longer has side or upright lines.

Table 1 (bold, left justified)*Regular Demographic/Informational Table* (Title Case, italics, left justified)

Column Label	1 Column	2 Column	3 Column	4 Column
1 Row	x	x	x	x
2 Row	x	x	x	x
3 Row	x	x	x	x
4 Row	x	x	x	x
5 Row	x	x	x	x
6 Row	x	x	x	x
7 Row	x	x	x	x

Note. Any table note goes here (size 10 font)

All tables and figures are left justified (not centered).

APA7 does not use Latin terms unless in brackets (parenthetical). Instead, the style guide requires the follows:

cf.,	compare
e.g.,	for example,
etc.,	and so forth, and so on,
i.e.,	that is, that is to say,
viz.,	namely,
vs.,	versus or against.

However, “et al.” can be used in both narrative and parenthetical citations. “ibid” is never used in APA style. As per APA7, we don’t use superscript on things like dates (the 7th to 13th century). Instead, everything is normal sized (7th). Superscript is only used for math in APA. APA7 doesn't use single quotes unless it is quotes inside quotes. Here for example should be single quote: In ‘Origins of the Philippine Languages’, Cecilio Lopez mentions that...
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