ISSN 2516-869X (PRINT)
ISSN 2516-8703 (ONLINE)

BROLLY

VOLUME 6. NUMBER 3

DECEMBER 2025

AI. ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPLEMENTATION

RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND DIGITALISATION

Journal of Social Sciences

DOMENICO BARBUTO

DEPT. OF TOURISM SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF CALABRIA

ITALY

journals.

ISSN 2516-8703

9 772516 870002

LONDON ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

Brolly

Journal of Social Sciences

Brolly

Journal of Social Sciences

Vol. 6, No. 3 (December 2025)

London
Academic Publishing

ISSN 2516-869X (Print)
ISSN 2516-8703 (Online)

First printing: January 2026

London Academic Publishing Ltd.
27 Old Gloucester Street
WC1N 3AX
Bloomsbury, London
United Kingdom

www.london-ap.uk
www.lapub.co.uk
www.journals.lapub.co.uk

Company Reg. No. 10941794
Registered in England and Wales

contact@lapub.co.uk
brolly@journals.lapub.co.uk

Ordering Information:
Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, educators and others. For details, contact the publisher at the above listed address.

Contents

(BIO)POLITICS & (BIO)POWER: RECONFIGURING MICHEL FOUCAULT'S "DISPOSITIFS" FOR CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Tomás David Rocha Correia

Department of Communication,
Philosophy and Politics
University of Beira Interior
Covilhã, PORTUGAL

tomas.correia@ubi.pt

Abstract: The term "biopolitics" exemplifies the fluidity of scientific concepts when granted epistemic autonomy, adapting to diverse academic and public discourses. It has been widely—often imprecisely—employed across disciplines such as philosophy, political science, sociology, history, medicine, and gender studies, leading to a fragmented and highly contested conceptual landscape. This paper seeks to recover Michel Foucault's original articulation of biopolitics, focusing on his dispersed and indirect treatment of the term. Foucault's work serves as the foundation for applying the prefix "bio" to notions of politics and power, though his archaeological and genealogical approach has since been appropriated across various fields. The interdisciplinary expansion of biopolitics has necessitated a hermeneutical reassessment of its role within Foucault's broader theoretical project, particularly in relation to biopower. This study aims to clarify these concepts and their epistemic significance.

Keywords: biopolitics, biopower, control, Foucault, normalization, population

INTRODUCTION

In *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* (1976), Michel Foucault approached, for the first time, "biopolitics"[1] as a technique of power. In the premodern era, the main privilege of the sovereign was the right to decide between the life and the death of its subjects, although this privilege was restricted to the instances where the

sovereign itself (or its power) was under threat. As Rabinow and Rose (2006, 196) suggest, "This was the juridical form of sovereign power—the right of a ruler to seize things, time, bodies, ultimately the life of subjects". This modality of power remained mainly unchanged when the object of sovereignty shifted from the head of state (usually the monarch or a similar title) to the state as an institution. However, Foucault also argued that this specific exercise of power became merely one among various mechanisms and techniques to discipline, control, monitor, organise, and optimise the social body underneath the sovereign entity. As wars (especially external wars) became more common and bloody, they were no longer waged in the name of the sovereign, but in the name of the social body and its survival:

> Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilised for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival.[2] (Foucault, 1976)

For Foucault, power is now being exercised at the level of life under a bipolar technology. One pole of (bio)power[3] mainly focuses on the anatomo-politics of human life (especially the body), intending to maximise its productivity and enhance the efficiency of the body. The other pole is composed of regulatory controls focused on a human body imbued with the mechanisms of life such as birth, mortality and longevity (Rabinow & Rose 2006).

The concept of "biopolitics" acquired a fluid character that forces any research carried out under its label to encompass a varied range of topics in different scientific areas. Foucault himself is somewhat vague and imprecise in the employment of the term. Foucault first introduced the term in *Il faut défendre la société* (1975-6),

where he addresses issues such as birth rate and the policies which intervene upon it, the illnesses that are prevalent in a given population (which require measures and intervention to minimise their consequences), the problems of old age, among other issues. As such, "biopolitics" is usually understood as an umbrella-term to identify all strategies and technologies over the problematizations of collective human life, types of knowledge and regimes of authority, while also addressing their desirability, legitimacy and efficiency.

As a new form of government composed of a novel set of power relations, biopolitics expresses dynamics of forces that are far different from those encountered in the premodern era. Foucault described this specific dynamic as the surfacing of multiple and heterogeneous powers of resistance and creation that question all exogenous regulatory mechanisms, technologies and institutions (Lazaratto 2002, 3). The new biopolitical *dispositifs*[4] are created once we begin asking ourselves:

> What is the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper? How are we to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the State? (Foucault 1991, 92)

Biopolitics in Contemporary Research

Authors such as Rabinow and Rose (2006) propose that any discourse on biopolitics must address three main elements. Firstly, there must be at least one truth discourse about the vital character of the human body and an authority considered competent enough to create that discourse. These discourses are not necessarily biological *stricto sensu*, as they may hybridise with fields such as demographics and sociology. Secondly, it is necessary to portray different strategies for intervention upon the collective body (usually in the name of "health"), addressed to the population and, most times, with specific technologies that subdivide the population

into categories of gender, ethnicity, sex, among other criteria. Finally, biopolitics should approach modalities of subjectification, where the individual body (as a part of a collective entity) is brought to work on himself, scrutinised by authority and truth-discourses. This work is usually implemented with practices that focus on the "self", in the name of self-improvement, or in the name of collective health and survivability.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that Foucault's analysis is mainly historical. He approached the creation of new forms of power in the eighteenth century, how they transformed in the nineteenth century, and how different contemporary socio-political structures and institutions began to take shape at the end of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, strategies, technologies and rationalities of (bio)power deeply changed, as collective life (and its management) became the main focus of the state, leading to different configurations of power and truth regarding welfare, security and health (Donzelot 1979; Ewald 1986).

In research focused on historical-social issues, biopolitics has been used as an epistemic framework for the principles and methods of management of the human population in areas such as public health and hygiene, sexuality, gender, birth and death rates, etc. (Rose, 2007). In political science and analysis, the concept provided experts with another tool to grasp how power has been reconceptualised as the *de facto* form of control over bodies in contemporary societies, something which can be seen in the works of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2009). In (bio)life and (bio)medical sciences, biopolitics has frequently been praised for its potential to unshackle bioethical discourses from their decision-oriented essence and contextualise them under a larger historical, contingent, and epistemological *milieu* (Lenke 2011). Finally, in the field of philosophy, Foucauldian biopolitics has exponentiated the possibilities for new discourses and analyses on the human condition, especially the ones that address the questions of sociality, human agency, morality and behaviour regarding the physical and mental vulnerability of the human being, as well as its bodily

constitution, which one can observe in Agamben's works (1998, 2005).

There are legitimate questions that one can ask regarding the potential over- stretching of the use of "biopolitics" as an epistemic approach, undermining its descriptive, analytical and explanatory abilities. It is not far-fetched to argue that, when a given concept is presented under varying (and, occasionally, somewhat contradictory) meanings, its instrumental use as a powerful analytical tool diminishes. In the instance of the use of the term "biopolitics", the vast appeal for an interdisciplinary use can overextend the epistemic value of the concept, leading to an emptying of its meaning. In Esposito's book *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008, 13-14), he argued that (biopolitics) "has opened a completely new phase in contemporary thought (…) and [made] the entire frame political philosophy emerge as profoundly modified", but also warned that "Far from having acquired a definitive order, the concept of biopolitics appears to be traversed by an uncertainty, by an uneasiness that impedes every stable connotation".

But how should one react to the warnings posed by Esposito? First of all, it is important to take note that most academic debates on the subject of biopolitics can trace back its origins to the Foucauldian project (even though the term was originally coined in 1905, but under a very different use[5]). However, Foucault's importance mainly lies in the influence that his historically contingent approach had on current biopolitical theories and approaches, where (radical) contingency and ahistoricism became commonplace in biopolitically inclined academics.

Beyond merely considering the Foucauldian project as a sort of unquestioned authority over the subject, one should face Foucault's project as a heuristic gateway to demonstrate how historically informed research, within which biopolitical analyses can be used, should be employed as an epistemic approach to reinterpret and reconstruct a given phenomenon. The Foucauldian approach proposes more than a standardised definition of the "biopolitical"; it has the potential to present how the concept of "biopolitics" can

be drawn upon in academic discourse (while avoiding loose and/or extrapolated meanings) and be instrumentalised as a fundamental part of a multiscopic analysis under the framework of a genealogically-focused problematization of current phenomena.

BIOPOLITICS AND BIOPOWER APPLIED

The subject of biopolitics emerged during Foucault's more genealogically-oriented work in the 1970s as a complementary analytical tool for theoretical and historical analysis, particularly on topics such as power relations and social power. Foucault's research, however, only indirectly approaches a definitive description of biopolitics.

Power grasps human life as the object of its manifestations; as such, Foucault focuses on determining how life resists it. If life can resist (bio)power, then it can also create modes of subjectification and practices/technologies in order to escape from its control (Lazzarato 2002, 1). Consequently, Foucault proposes a new ontology based on the introduction of the role of life in history, one that focuses on the body and how it can be controlled, shaped and improved. This proposal portrays the political subject as a deeply ethical one, in sharp contrast with Western tradition that portrays it as a subject of law and as a citizen.

Instead of starting from the ramifications of obedience and its legitimating structures, institutions and practices, Foucault approaches the question of power through its relationship with freedom and possibilities of transformation within every exercise of power. Powered by a new ontology, Foucault is able to provide a project which protects the subject's freedom to establish a deep connection with itself and others – something that, for him, constitutes the elemental feature of ethics (Lazzarato 2002, 2).

In *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975), Foucault approached the reorganisation of the mechanisms and institutions of imprisonment in the modern age. But more than simply

providing a socio-historical theoretical analysis of the massive changes that occurred in penal systems throughout Europe, Foucault focused on illustrating how the significant rational and cultural shifts initiated the rise of the prison as the paradigmatic institution of imprisonment. This rise was, as Foucault pointed out, catalysed by the shifting nature of the relationship between power and the human body (Takács 2017). Prisons, as the quintessential institutions of the penal system, were the representatives of a new technology of power, with the explicit aim of disciplining and "correcting" the mental and physical behaviour of "deviant" subjects, under a new organisation of rationality and power that had the human body as its main locus. Foucault then traced parallelisms between prisons and other places: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"[6] (Foucault 1975). The major conclusion of his research was to address the emergence of "discipline" as the fundamental form of power and subjectification in modern societies.

One should note, however, that this analysis of a new manifestation of power does not necessarily address the topics of domination, oppression or political rule enacted via legislation, coercion or manipulation. For Foucault, there is more to power than for it to be a simple instrument of the ruling class in a given society. Power manifests itself "(…) in terms of normalisation, rationalisation, institutionalisation, control, subjectivation and embodiment connected to the social life of concrete individuals and communities. (Takácsn2017, 6). As such, Foucault approached power as a way of rationalising, shaping and, more importantly, he identified its use as a powerful tool to discipline the human body and mind, which find themselves deeply entrenched in the socio-political relations of production, administration and organisation, family ties and their structure, sexual and emotional relations, etc. The Foucauldian concept of power goes beyond what is understood as the orthodox sphere of the political; power is, instead, fluid, institutionalized and socialised.

Under this Foucauldian framework, the concept of biopolitics is intrinsically related to that of "biopower" – a specific setup for power relations. In *Sécurité, territoire, population* (1978), Foucault defined the concept as:

> (…) the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called bio-power[7].

The implementation of new forms of power and knowledge was not, however, a mere consequence of an unprompted historical reconfiguration, nor something that merely happened in a given society. Biopower was a product of society itself, not just an unguided social process. For Foucault (2003, 2007), "biopower" addresses a new type of rationality – composed of different calculations, conceptualisations, and decisions – which target the biological aspects of a given society. The primacy of this type of power in eighteenth-century Europe led to a substantial shift in how knowledge was constituted and operated. To Foucault (1976):

> Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space in which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence[8].

Authors such as Tákacs (2017) identify three main scopes of problematisation in Foucault's approach to biopolitics: strategy, social rationality and political practice in modern societies. The first scope – strategy – pertains to a new type of body in which power operates. Starting in the premodern period, "*the anatomy politics of the human body*"[9] (Foucault 1976) shaped the nature of power over the biological in most societies. This type of politics had the explicit aim of disciplining, training and perfecting individual bodies to their maximum potential:

> (…) [anatomy politics] centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterised the disciplines[10]. (Foucault 1976, 187)

More often than not, bodily potential was equated to maximising productivity in various systems of social, cultural, economic and political control. In the modern era, another type of strategic power rose – the *"biopolitics of the population"*[11] (Foucault, 1976). Biopolitics abandoned the focus on the individual body as a living being; instead, it focused on incorporating the individual body as a member of a collective known as human society. Bodies became political subjects in a collective entity impacted by bio- social conditions of living, namely "(…) propagation, birth and mortality, level of health, life expectation and longevity, along with all the conditions that can cause these to vary."[12] (Foucault 1976). By analysing the specific conditions in which human societies exist, biopolitics conceived the (collective) human body as a *locus* of power relations that ought to be optimised.

The second scope of problematization – social rationality – portrays the "invention" of the notion of population as the object of political technologies that resulted in a brand-new way of exercising power over bodies. While the individual body was targeted by discipline, biopolitics targeted collective bodies at the social level through technologies of control. This "control" was not, however, necessarily oppressive. Foucault (2003) argued that the population, as a socio-political collective entity, was fundamentally incapable of being organised through disciplinary means, taking into consideration that conditions such as public hygiene, fertility or mortality depend on long- term policies enacted by political authorities or are mainly outside the scope of government (epidemics, famine, among others). Biopolitical control over a population requires the use of mechanisms "such as classification, regulation, prevention, provision, and maintenance of security" (Takács 2017, 8). However, these mechanisms are quite distinct

from the coercive policies used in the premodern era. Consequently, sovereign power was abandoned in favour of a new liberal form of "governmentality".

Lastly, the third scope of problematization – political practices – pertains to the constitution of knowledge under the framework of biopolitics. If the refocus on a new concept of "population" required tools to control it, then biopolitics, as a socio-political strategy, became dependent on novel techniques of social classification, calculation and organisation (Foucault 2007). It is important to note that the "population" only became a political issue once the techniques necessary to measure, calculate and control it were developed. This way, new knowledge - social, political, cultural and economic – emerged, with fields such as demography, statistics and political economy becoming commonplace in a government's efforts to control and manage their population (Takács 2017, 9). In order to prevent epidemics and famines, the fields of medicine and biomedical sciences experienced vast improvements, leading to an increase in the quality of life of the population. Nonetheless, contrary to the premodern era, where medicine was mainly focused on the individual body, the medical sciences of the modern biopolitical era focused mainly on the collective population, using techniques such as vaccination and birth control to become a vital modality of socio-political intervention.

Biopolitical Normalisation

The modern (and contemporary) status of biopolitics applied to the (collective) body is inseparable from the different manifestations of power within a given society. Integrative and symbiotic epistemic tendencies have become commonplace in the 21st century, aiming at normalising collective social subjects and the structures and institutions which surround and shape their lives. Rabinow and Rose (2006) argued that the tendencies associated with the contemporary understanding of biopower have manifested themselves in

normative mental and physical standards, backed up by the implementation of governmental policies addressing health, family affairs, gender, and consumption habits, among others. There is an argument to be made that the contemporary understanding of biopolitics and biopower is intrinsically connected to the role of power as a protective force for the population (Esposito 2011). The effects of biopower are also present in the various ways by which (political) authority, agency and legitimacy are intertwined in the current socio-political landscape (Agamben 1998).

For Lazaratto (2002), biopolitics can be understood as a trinity between government, population and political economy that refers to a novel dynamic of forces which creates a new dynamic between ontology and politics. This new political economy shares similarities with Marx's approach to the problem of how we should coordinate the relationships between men (since they are living beings), while also taking into consideration that this issue, more than a simple economic problem, is mainly an ontological one. Nonetheless, Foucault also clearly distances himself from Marx by faulting Marx and his political economy for reducing all relations between forces to mere relations between capital and labour (making them the source of all social dynamics and power relations), while also making these relations binary and symmetrical. In Foucauldian terms, political economy is:

> (…) the whole of a complex material field where not only are natural resources, the products of labour, their circulation and the scope of commerce engaged, but where the management of towns and routes, the conditions of life (habitat, diet, etc.), the number of inhabitants, their life span, their ability and fitness for work also come into play. (Lazaratto 2002, 4)

As such, political economy – as the syntagma of biopolitics – is composed of power *dispositifs* that catalyse the power relations between the forces that permeate the social body, as an opposition to the Marxist perspective of a relationship between capital and labour.

In contemporaneity, the main political problem is the decentralisation of sovereign power. Forces now create and repress each other, stemming from different sources and are constantly fighting for supremacy in an arena full of contestants. Every relation between human beings (master-student, employer-worker, doctor-patient, among others) is a relation between different forces that always involves a power relation. For Foucault, power is constituted from the bottom; as such, if we aim to understand the constitution of power *dispositifs,* then we must employ an ascending analysis of power. Biopolitics becomes, then, "(…) *strategic coordination of these power relations in order to extract a surplus of power from living beings.*" (Lazaratto 2002, 5). It becomes a strategic relation, much more than the simple act of legislating and legitimating sovereignty. Concurrently, biopower, as soon as it begins operating on the grounds of control and coordination, is not truly the source of power, but merely its manager.

Biopower targets a power that does not belong to it, taking into consideration that it is an externality. However, we should not interpret Foucault's analysis of power as a succession of different power *dispositifs*: the biopolitical approach is not a replacement for sovereignty; it merely displaces the function of the *dispositif* and questions its foundations:

> Accordingly, we need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality, one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the. population and as its essential mechanism, the apparatuses of security. (Foucault 1991, 102)

Normalization of bodies and the protection of (human) life propagated through the use of biopower, creating a separate element of its presence, which spreads through whole society, However, contrary to the disciplinary society, where the exercise of power usually had an exogenous origin, in biopolitical contemporaneity, power is exercised endogenously, with subjects

adopting behaviours of self-control and adherence to "normal" standards. The main element of the socio-political effect of current biopower is the predominance of the "self" as its primary target of control techniques (Rose, 2007). Some results of these new strategic exercises of power can be recognised, for example, by the growth of obsessions over the "healthy" body, the individualisation of mental issues encompassing non-normative subjects and the dissemination of biomedical inputs in socialised bodies and lives.

The "self" is presented as the *locus* where (bio)power acts, emanating a power from the body which is in a relationship with itself, leading to a specific interpretation of a way of living that must adhere to normatively established standards. Failing to comply with these standards leads to a self-modification of body and mind in order to return to the fold of the "normal". Nonetheless, the "self" does not act alone, as it is still necessary to deploy the socio-political strategies and techniques aimed at catalysing the change within the "self" (Takács 2017). More than simply reinforcing the dichotomy between "normal" and "abnormal", the operation of biopower - by making the "self" dependent on the evaluation of what it means to be "normal"- also interplays with the need for self-expression and self-repression.

It is important to note that bodies are now necessarily trapped in *dispositifs* of power; (bio)power is not a unilateral relation, nor the apex of domination over the body – it is a strategic relation. Every single actor in a given society exercises power, some of which courses through the living body, not because of its omnipotence, but because every force is constituted by a power within the body. Since power comes from below, then the forces that constitute it must be various and heterogeneous. Biopower is not coercion or oppression, but a coordination between a multitude of forces. But how can a body resist such a complex operation of power?

Under the restraints of this modality of power, the only way a subject can be said to be free is if there always exists the possibility of changing the situation. (Bio)Power relations do not mean that the subject is always trapped, but that he is always free, since the

possibility for change is ever-present. According to Foucault (1997, 167):

> (…) if there were no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to the situation where you're not doing what you want. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the main word, the key word, in this dynamic.

Concordantly, the subject who aims to resist (Foucault frequently labelled these subjects as minorities), to whom the relation between resistance and creation is a matter of political survival, must not only defend himself, but, more importantly, affirm himself by creating new forms of life, culture and political tools.

Concluding Remarks

Conceptually, "biopolitics" is a particularly plastic term that has been applied to a number of different theoretical approaches. The biopolitical framework opened a gateway for ground-breaking analyses in the socio-political manifestations of what can be described as the biological and bodily aspects of human societies. Michel Foucault's work allowed a multiplication of philosophical, empirical, historical, social and political research methods, approaches and theories, as it developed new tools to understand the socio-political reality of the human body and life.

As early as the 1970s, Foucault pointed out that the human body would be the epicentre of novel political battles and economic strategies (Lazzarato 2002), with new *dispositifs* of power and knowledge starting to grasp life and the self, while enabling the possibility of controlling and shaping them. In order to provide a diagnosis of a historical *dispositif,* one should remember that three key elements serve as the epistemic framework: knowledge of life processes, the subjectification of human beings by endemic power-

relations and the technologies of subjectification through which the subjects self-control themselves. The works of Foucault should be continued by modern academics with special emphasis on the fragmented line between forces which create and forces which resists. The Foucauldian approach allows us to conceive the reversal of (bio)power and the art of governing as a field of production of new forms of life and resistance.

NOTES

1. In French, *biopolitique*.
2. Original quote: "Les guerres ne se font plus au nom du souverain qu'il faut défendre; elles se font au nom de l'existence de tous; on dresse des populations entières à s'entre-tuer réciproquement au nom de la nécessité pour elles de vivre. Les massacres sont devenus vitaux C'est comme gestionnaire de la vie et de la survie, des corps et de la race que tant de régimes ont pu mener tant de guerres, en faisant tuer tant d'hommes. Et par un retournement qui permet de boucler le cercle, plus la technologie des guerres les a fait virer à la destruction exhaustive, plus en effet la décision qui les ouvre et celle qui vient les clore s'ordonnent à la question nue de la survie" (Foucault 1976, 180).
3. In French, *biopouvoir*.
4. To Foucault, a *"dispositif"* is defined by the multitude of institutional, administrative and knowledge structures which interact with the social body (presenting rules, norms and regulations) that should be followed by that social body.
5. The term biopolitics was first presented by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in his two-volume work *The Great Powers* (Gunneflo 2015). Under Kjellén, the term was used to study what he designated as "civil war between groups" (involving the state, which Kjellén considered to be a quasi- biological organism) from a biological perspective (Lenke 2011).
6. Original quote: "Quoi d'étonnant si la prison ressemble aux usines, aux écoles, aux casernes, aux hôpitaux, qui tous ressemblent aux prisons?" (Foucault 1975, 229).
7. Original quote*:* "(…) l'ensemble des mécanismes par lesquels ce qui, dans l'espèce humaine, constitue ses traits biologiques fondamentaux va pouvoir entrer à l' intérieur d'une politique, d 'une stratégie politique, d 'une stratégie

générale de pouvoir, autrement dit comment la société, les sociétés occidentales modernes, à partir du XVIII" siècle, ont repris en compte le fait biologique fondamental que l'être humain constitue une espèce humaine. C'est en gros ça que j'appelle, que j'ai appelé, comme ça, le bio-pouvoir" (Foucault 1978, 1).

8. Original quote: "L'homme occidental apprend peu à peu ce que c'est que d'être une espèce vivante dans un monde vivant, d'avoir un corps, des conditions d'existence, des probabilités de vie, une santé individuelle et collective, des forces qu'on peut modifier et un espace où on peut les répartir de façon optimale. Pour la première fois sans doute dans l'histoire, le biologique se réfléchit dans le politique" (Foucault 1978, 187).
9. Original quote: "(…) anatomo-politique du corps humain" (Foucault 1976, 183).
10. Original quote: "(…) a été centré sur le corps comme machine: son dressage, la majoration de ses aptitudes, l'extorsion de ses forces, la croissance parallèle de son utilité et de sa docilité, son intégration à des systèmes de contrôle efficaces et économiques, tout cela a été assuré par des procédures de pouvoir qui caractérisent les disciplines" (Foucault 1976, 182-183).
11. Original quote: "(…) une bio-politique de la population" (Foucault 1976, 183).
12. Original quote: "(…) la prolifération, les naissances et la mortalité, le niveau de santé, la durée de vie, la longévité avec toutes les conditions qui peuvent les faire varier" (Foucault 1976, 183).

REFERENCES

Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life.* Trans. D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. 2005. *State of Exception.* Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago University Press.

Donzelot, J. 1979. *The Policing of Families*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Ewald, F. 1986. *L'Etat providence*. Paris: Grasset.

Esposito, R. 2008. *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy.* Trans. T. Campbell. Minneapolis/London: Minnesota University Press.

Esposito, R. 2011. *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life.* Trans. Z. Hanafi. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Foucault, M. 1975. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard.

Foucault, M. 1976. *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir*. Gallimard.

Foucault, M. 1991. "Governmentality." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Burchell, Gordon and Miller. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. 1997. "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity." In *Essential Works of Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity*, *Truth,* Vol. I, ed. Rabinow P. New York: The New Press.

Foucault, M. 2000. "The Subject and Power." In *Essential Works of Foucault: Power,* Vol. III, ed. J.D. Faubion. New York: The New Press.

Foucault, M. 2003. "Society Must be Defended". In *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76*. Trans. D. Macey. New York: Picador.

Foucault, M. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*. Trans. G. Bucknell. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gunneflo, M. 2015. "Rudolf Kjellén: Nordic Biopolitics before the Welfare State". *Retfærd* 35 (3).

Hardt, M. and A. Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hardt, M. & A. Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lazzarato, M. 2002. "From Biopower to Biopolitics." *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 13 (8): 1-15.

Lemke, T. 2011. *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. Trans. E.F. Trump. New York/London: New York University Press.

Rabinow, P. and N. Rose. 2006. "Biopower Today." *BioSocieties* 1: 195–217.

Rose, N. 2007. *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Takács, Á. 2017. "Biopolitics and Biopower: The Foucauldian Approach and its Contemporary Relevance." *Bioethics and Biopolitics: Theories, Applications and Connections*: 3 (15).

PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTION AS ONTOLOGICAL REVELATION: ELENCTIC NORMATIVITY AND THE GROUNDS OF REASON AFTER DISCOURSE ETHICS

Antonio Pio De Mattia

University College Dublin,
IRELAND

antonio.demattia@ucdconnect.ie

Abstract: Discourse ethics promises universality without substantive metaphysics by grounding validity in the presuppositions of rational argumentation. Its familiar vulnerability is justificatory: the procedural norms that are meant to underwrite validity are presupposed whenever they are questioned. This paper argues that the aporia is best addressed by shifting the locus of 'unavoidability' from participation in a procedure to the conditions of determinate signification. I reconstrue performative contradiction as a failure of signification, not merely a pragmatic inconsistency, and retrieve Aristotle's elenctic defence of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) in *Metaphysics* Γ as a model of non-demonstrative grounding. Whoever denies non-contradiction must nonetheless mean something determinate, thereby relying on the differentiations their denial attempts to dissolve. On this basis, I propose 'elenctic normativity': a minimal criterion of rational answerability according to which claims, norms, and institutions are defective when they negate the conditions that make their own justificatory language intelligible. I then address the strongest contemporary challenge—paraconsistent logic, dialetheism, and logical pluralism—arguing that revising consequence relations does not eliminate the semantic role of negation required for determinate assertion. A worked application to 'transparency' in automated welfare administration, read alongside contemporary regulatory vocabulary, shows how elenctic critique can diagnose performative self-undermining without appeal to an external moral foundation.

Keywords: discourse ethics, performative contradiction, elenchus, principle of non-contradiction, normativity, logical pluralism, paraconsistency, institutional critique, AI governance

1. Introduction: The Procedural Aporia and The Question of Answerability

Post-metaphysical societies must justify norms and institutions without recourse to shared religious or metaphysical authority. In constitutional democracies, international law, and the governance of technical infrastructures, legitimacy is demanded in the register of reasons rather than revelation. The predicament is familiar: if legitimacy is grounded in a substantive worldview, it risks dogmatism; if it is reduced to contingency or power, it risks relativism and cynicism.

Discourse ethics, as developed by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, offers a canonical response. Validity depends not on metaphysical content but on the form of rational justification itself. Norms are legitimate if they can be justified in principle under conditions of free, inclusive, and uncoerced argumentation. Habermas's formulation is concise: only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the assent of all affected as participants in a practical discourse (Habermas 1990, 65–66; Habermas 1996, 107–10). The promise is universality without metaphysics. Yet discourse ethics inherits a justificatory aporia. The procedural norms invoked to ground validity—reciprocal recognition, sincerity, responsiveness to reasons, openness to critique—are presupposed as binding precisely when they become the object of justification. To ask, "Why should I recognise you as an equal participant?" already addresses the interlocutor as a participant whose answer counts. This is the circle of self-grounding: the norms of justification seem to be justified only by engaging in the practice whose norms are at issue.

Apel's appeal to performative contradiction is the most explicit attempt to halt regress. In broad terms, whoever denies the presuppositions of argumentation refutes themselves in the act of denial. Denial is itself a speech act that presupposes truth-claims, reciprocity, and justificatory uptake (Apel 1980, 225–300; Habermas 1990, 82–83). The move is powerful, but it leaves a

residue that becomes decisive in institutional settings. A strategic actor may concede that certain commitments are unavoidable if one wishes to argue, while insisting that those commitments are merely constraints of a practice, not norms with authority. The gap between "one cannot coherently deny these presuppositions while arguing" and "one is answerable to them" is where discourse ethics remains vulnerable.

This paper develops a stricter diagnosis and a different response. The diagnosis is that discourse ethics remains primarily procedural: its 'unavoidabilities' are framed as conditions of a practice (argumentation). That framing invites the thought that the norms are game-rules that can be simulated without endorsement. The response is a shift of register. Performative contradiction is treated here as a failure of signification: it discloses an attempted negation of the differentiations required for any utterance to mean something determinate. The relevant 'ground' is therefore not a self-justifying procedure but the minimal structure of determinacy enacted whenever one asserts.

To articulate this shift without retreating to substantive metaphysics, I retrieve Aristotle's elenctic defence of the PNC in *Metaphysics* Γ. Aristotle does not 'prove' the PNC. He offers an elenchus: a refutative demonstration that forces the opponent either to withdraw from meaningful assertion or to concede what their speech already enacts. The elenchus is methodologically apt for a problem of presuppositions: if what is at issue is the status of what is presupposed by justification, one should not expect a further justification in the same register, but an explication of the dependence.

The contribution is limited but consequential. The deepest normativity presupposed by discourse is not a substantive moral law, but minimal rational answerability internal to assertion. I call the criterion 'elenctic normativity': a claim, norm, or institution is defective when, under elenctic scrutiny, it collapses the conditions of its own intelligibility. This does not settle ethical questions; it

secures the space in which ethical and political claims can be demanded, contested, and revised.

2. Procedural Self-Grounding in Discourse Ethics

2.1. Habermas

Validity and the presuppositions of *Verständigung*

Habermas's discourse ethics begins from the thesis that modern societies cannot secure legitimacy through inherited metaphysical narratives. The remaining medium of legitimacy is justification among free and equal participants. The discourse principle (D) and the universalisation principle (U) articulate validity conditions for norms: only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the assent of all affected as participants in practical discourse (Habermas 1990, 65–66; Habermas 1996, 107). The formal-pragmatic analysis of communicative action identifies what speakers must presuppose when they coordinate action through mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) rather than through success-oriented influence.

A key distinction is between communicative and strategic action. Communicative action is oriented towards reaching understanding; strategic action is oriented towards success and may instrumentalise speech for ulterior ends. Habermas characterises strategic action as the instrumentalisation of speech acts "for purposes that are contingently related to the meaning of what is said" (Habermas 1984, 289). The distinction matters here because it exposes an internal tension: discourse ethics articulates the presuppositions of communicative action, but modern institutions often operate in a hybrid space where justificatory language is maintained while success-oriented imperatives structure actual procedures. Discourse can be mimicked.

Habermas treats the circularity of presuppositions as benign rather than vicious. Because argumentation presupposes truthfulness, reciprocity, and openness to reasons, anyone who

argues already commits themselves to those norms. The 'circle' is meant to reveal what is implicit in communicative competence. Yet two pressures remain.

First, the presuppositions are normative rather than merely descriptive: they are not offered as sociological regularities but as binding conditions of justification. Second, the communicative/strategic distinction leaves open a familiar pathological possibility: strategic actors can adopt justificatory language for legitimacy-effects while remaining indifferent to the authority of reasons. Even if discourse ethics correctly describes what communicative action presupposes, it still faces the question of what makes those presuppositions authoritative rather than merely unavoidable constraints for a particular practice.

2.2. Apel

Performative contradiction and uncircumventability

Apel's transcendental pragmatics aims to strengthen the Habermasian position by turning inescapability into grounding. Denials of truth, reciprocity, or reason-giving are performatively self-undermining: to deny that truth matters is still to raise a truth-claim; to deny reciprocity is still to address others as accountable partners; to deny the bindingness of reasons is still to offer reasons (Apel 1980, 225–300; Habermas 1990, 82–83). Apel calls such presuppositions uncircumventable (*Unhintergehbarkeit*). The thought is that if the denial of a presupposition collapses into self-refutation, then the presupposition has been grounded in a suitably 'final' way.

The structural limit of this strategy is not that it fails to show self-refutation. The limit is that self-refutation can be treated as a constraint internal to a practice, rather than as an account of normative authority. The strategic actor may accept: "If I want to argue, I must play by these rules." They can still deny that the rules bind them beyond the practice, or that discourse is anything more than one technique of coordination among others. This distinction matters empirically: institutions routinely speak the language of

justification (legality, equality, transparency, accountability) while designing procedures that frustrate the uptake conditions of these terms. A theory of legitimacy must be able to diagnose that pathology immanently, without simply reiterating the procedural norms whose authority is precisely what is contested.

2.3. The missing layer: Determinacy prior to procedure

The claim defended here is that discourse ethics requires an additional layer that is not merely procedural. Before there can be a rule of argumentation, there must be determinate meaning: enough differentiation to distinguish assertion from denial, commitment from refusal, a reason from a mere rhetorical device. Discourse ethics can identify presuppositions of participation; it does not sufficiently thematise the conditions of determinacy that make participation intelligible as participation.

If that layer remains implicit, discourse ethics risks conflating (i) the pragmatic fact that one cannot argue without certain presuppositions with (ii) the normative claim that one is answerable to those presuppositions. The alternative is not to reinstall a metaphysical moral foundation. It is to identify the minimal conditions under which something counts as a claim at all. Those conditions concern determinacy, and Aristotle's elenctic defence of the PNC provides a classical model of how to make such conditions explicit without attempting an impossible proof of a first principle.

3. Performative Contradiction as Failure of Signification

3.1. 'Ontological' in a minimal sense

Calling performative contradiction "ontological" risks misunderstanding, so the sense must be fixed with care. The claim is not that performative contradiction discloses a substantive metaphysical inventory (substances, essences, or a moral order in the world), nor that it supplies a metaphysical foundation for

ethics. The claim is instead formal and minimal: it concerns the conditions under which anything can be determinately said to be the case. In that restricted register, "ontology" names the structure of determinacy presupposed by signification, namely what it is for something to be this rather than that, and for an utterance to count as asserting rather than merely producing sounds.

This minimal ontology is not reducible to a sociological description of how people happen to speak. It concerns what must be in place for speaking to succeed as speaking. A convention can determine *which* marks or sounds count as a word in a given language, but no convention can eliminate the more basic requirement that a word, once in play, must be capable of being used determinately. Even the claim "everything is conventional" must itself be stated in a way that distinguishes what is being asserted from what is being denied. Determinacy is therefore not a further doctrine added on top of discourse; it is a condition internal to discourse insofar as discourse is meaningful.

In short, the term "ontological" in this argument does not mean "metaphysically thick". It means "condition of determinacy", where determinacy is what makes it possible for a claim to be identifiable as the claim it is.

3.2. Why the shift matters for normativity

Performative contradiction is often treated as a pragmatic mismatch: an agent says one thing while doing another in the act of saying it. That phenomenon is real, but it is not yet the most instructive case for the justificatory aporia in discourse ethics. A strategic actor can learn to avoid crude pragmatic mismatches while still exploiting discursive forms. If performative contradiction were merely a defect of performance, it would be a technical problem that can be managed through rhetorical sophistication.

The stronger proposal is that there is a distinct class of performative contradiction in which the defect is not merely between content and act, but between the utterance and the

conditions under which its content can be determinately meant. In such cases, the agent's performance undermines the very contrasts that make the asserted content intelligible as a determinate assertion. This is why the most revealing examples are not ordinary failures of sincerity, but reflexive denials of the conditions of denial.

To see the difference, it helps to isolate three layers that are often run together:

1. The pragmatic layer concerns what one is doing in speaking (asserting, promising, commanding, conceding).
2. The procedural layer concerns the norms of a social practice (rules of argumentation, reciprocity, turn-taking, and so on).
3. The semantic layer concerns determinacy, namely the contrasts and exclusions by which an utterance counts as meaning one thing rather than another.

Discourse ethics is primarily procedural. Apel's performative contradiction argument operates mainly at the pragmatic and procedural layers. The present paper argues that the justificatory aporia is best addressed by making explicit the semantic layer: the conditions under which the very language of justification has determinate sense.

3.3. The minimal conditions of determinate assertion

An assertion is not merely a vocal event. It is an act that undertakes a commitment. At a minimum, for an utterance to function as a determinate assertion, three conditions must be in place.

- First, there must be a stable difference between asserting and not asserting. An utterance must be identifiable as placing a content forward rather than withdrawing it, suspending it, or merely performing an expressive gesture.
- Second, there must be a contrastive space in which the asserted content excludes alternatives in the relevant respect. This does not require a full theory of meaning, but it does require that

denial be intelligible as denial, that is, that "not-p" can be distinguished from "p" in a way that matters to commitment.

- Third, there must be enough identity through the course of the exchange for re-identification. If what a term means shifts without constraint from one moment to the next, then the interlocutor cannot answer the question "is this the same claim as before?" and the practice of giving and asking for reasons collapses into equivocation.

These conditions are weak, but they are not optional. One can violate them, but then the speech act fails to be what it purports to be. The point is not that speakers always live up to these conditions, but that without them the very distinction between success and failure in assertion disappears.

3.4. Performative contradiction as collapse of determinacy

With those minimal conditions in view, we can state the thesis more precisely. A performative contradiction, in the relevant sense, occurs when an agent purports to assert p while undermining the contrastive and re-identificatory conditions required for p to be determinately asserted. The contradiction is therefore internal to the act of claim-making: the utterance attempts to stand in the space of reasons while erasing what makes that space possible as a space of determinate commitments.

The global denial of non-contradiction is the clearest test-case. If an agent denies, without qualification, that there is any relevant contrast between p and not-p, then they have deprived themselves of the resources needed to state that denial as a determinate denial rather than as an indifferent sound. They must still distinguish their denial from its negation (or at least from non-denial), and they must still treat what they say as the same claim over the course of the exchange. But those very operations reinstate the contrastive structure the denial purported to abolish.

This is why the defect is more basic than pragmatic inconsistency. It is not merely that the denier behaves inconsistently. It is that the denial cannot be sustained as meaningfully what it says while remaining a denial. The only stable exits are (i) silence or (ii) retreat to a qualified claim that preserves "in the same respect" contrasts. Aristotle's elenchus will later be used to show how this pressure is generated without any attempt to "prove" a first principle.

3.5. The normative upshot without moralising

At this point, the relationship between determinacy and normativity can be stated without equivocation. The "normativity" secured here is not moral obligation. It is minimal rational answerability internal to justificatory assertion.

To present an utterance as a justification is to invite assessment under the conditions that make justification intelligible: that one's claims have determinate content, that denials and concessions make a difference to what one is committed to, and that one can be called upon to clarify and defend what one has said. The strategic actor can, of course, speak and manipulate, but the moment they present their speech as justificatory, they incur a burden of answerability that is not a matter of external moral demand. It is a condition of the act they are performing. If they deny that burden while continuing to occupy the justificatory register, they attempt to use the grammar of reasons while disabling its semantics. That is the relevant performative contradiction.

This clarifies what the shift of register accomplishes. It does not solve ethical disagreements, and it does not deliver substantive norms. It secures a minimal constraint without which ethical and political disagreement cannot even take the form of determinate claims that can be contested and revised. In other words, it identifies the conditions under which discourse can be more than a technology of influence, namely, a space in which claims are answerable as claims.

4. Aristotle's Elenchus and the PNC as a Condition of Determinate Meaning

4.1. Why the PNC is not demonstrable

Aristotle's discussion in *Metaphysics* Γ is methodologically instructive. A first principle cannot be demonstrated in the manner of derived theses, because demonstration presupposes what it seeks to establish (Γ 3, 1005b10–20). Aristotle, therefore, does not offer a proof of the PNC; he offers an elenchus, a refutation aimed at showing that denial cannot be sustained while remaining in the space of meaningful assertion (Γ 4, 1006a11–15). The elenchus is not meant to compel assent by deduction from more basic premises; it makes explicit what the opponent's speech already commits them to.

This is structurally analogous to discourse ethics. If the problem concerns the status of what is presupposed by justification, it is misguided to demand a further justification in the same register. What is appropriate is an explication of dependence: a demonstration that the attempt to deny collapses the very conditions of its own intelligibility.

4.2. The argument from signification: 'to mean something' is already to differentiate

Aristotle's first move is to demand that the opponent "say something" (legein ti). If the opponent refuses to signify anything determinate, then there is no disagreement; if they do signify, then they have already accepted minimal constraints under which saying is possible. Cohen reconstructs Aristotle's strategy as an argument "from signification": the denier of the PNC must nevertheless take their utterance to have a determinate meaning, and that requires stable contrasts (Cohen 1986, 360–66).

The crucial point is that signification involves exclusion. To mean is to mean *this rather than that*. Even the act of denial requires differentiation: "not-p" must be identifiable as a negation of p, not as an indifferent repetition. Aristotle's canonical formulation

of the PNC is well known: "it is impossible that the same attribute belong and not belong to the same subject at the same time and in the same respect" (Γ 3, 1005b19–20). The qualification matters: the PNC does not deny ambiguity, change, or contextual variation. It blocks the move that would treat incompatible predications as simultaneously applicable in the same respect, thereby collapsing the contrast required for determinate predication.

Recent scholarship emphasises that Aristotle's defence does not depend on endorsing a particular inferential calculus. It turns on the pragmatic demand for meaning and the dependence of predication on stable signification (Massie 2022, 29–35). Once the interlocutor agrees to signify, Aristotle presses that to signify one thing is to exclude its contrary in the relevant respect; otherwise, the space of assertion collapses into equivocation or silence.

4.3. What elenchus secures: determinacy rather than 'classical logic'

Interpreted in this way, Aristotle's elenchus secures a modest thesis: not "classical logic is the one true logic", but "if you are to assert anything determinately, you must preserve enough differentiation for denial to function as denial". One can grant that some domains involve inconsistency, that some terms are vague, and that some consequence relations are revisable. What one cannot coherently grant is a global collapse in which p and not-p no longer constitute a contrast relevant to commitment. If there is no stable contrast, there is nothing determinate to affirm or deny.

The elenchus, therefore, models a kind of grounding appropriate to first principles: it does not derive the principle from more basic premises; it shows that denial cannot be sustained without abandoning meaningful assertion. That is precisely the form of grounding required for the presuppositions of rational discourse once we locate them at the level of determinacy rather than procedure.

4.4. From determinacy to minimal answerability

The elenctic point bears directly on normativity, provided one is careful about what sort of normativity is at issue. To assert is to make oneself answerable to questions of meaning ("what do you mean?") and of coherence ("how can this be maintained given what else you accept?"). This is not yet moral obligation. It is the minimal accountability internal to claimhood. One can refuse answerability by withdrawing from the space of assertion altogether. But one cannot both (i) present one's utterance as a claim in the public space of reasons and (ii) deny the minimal conditions that make claims intelligible and assessable as claims.

This is the sense in which performative contradiction has normative force without moralising. The authority at issue is the authority of claimhood: if you purport to justify, you thereby place yourself under the recognisability-conditions of justification. Elenchus makes explicit what is already enacted whenever one speaks meaningfully.

5. The Logic Objection: Paraconsistency, Pluralism, and the Semantics of Negation

5.1. The challenge: Aristotle's PNC is often treated as underwriting classical logic.

Contemporary logic complicates that inference. Paraconsistent logics reject explosion; dialetheists argue that some contradictions are true; logical pluralists argue that there may be more than one correct consequence relation (Priest 1979, 220–24; Beall and Restall 2000, 1–2). If inconsistency can be tolerated without triviality, why treat non-contradiction as a transcendental condition of meaning?

The worry can be sharpened: perhaps meaningful discourse does not require universal non-contradiction. Natural language tolerates inconsistency; scientific theories may contain contradictions without immediate collapse; and formal systems can model inconsistent information without becoming trivial. Why, then, interpret the PNC

as a condition of determinacy rather than as a historically privileged norm of 'classical' rationality?

5.2. Reply: The target is determinacy, not explosion

The first reply is to separate the PNC, understood as a constraint on determinacy, from specific inferential principles. Paraconsistent logics revise consequence relations so that contradictions do not entail everything. That revision addresses explosion; it does not eliminate the semantic contrast between A and not-A required for denial to be denial.

Logical pluralism illustrates the point. Beall and Restall distinguish pluralism about consequence from the ordinary semantic role of negation. In their discussion of "classical negation", they remark, in the context of truth-in-cases, that "~A is true in x iff A is not true in x" and add: "This is simply what 'not' means" (Beall and Restall 2000, 6). Their aim is not to legislate a single negation operator for all theoretical purposes, but to acknowledge that ordinary denial functions as a contrast-maker. The elenctic thesis requires no more than this: that there is a contrast relevant to commitment which makes it intelligible to say that p is denied rather than affirmed.

5.3. Dialetheism without global collapse

Dialetheism is similarly not the thesis that all contradictions are true; it is the thesis that some are (Priest 1979, 223–24). Even the dialetheist must preserve the distinction between (i) cases in which both A and not-A obtain and (ii) cases in which neither does, if the position is to be formulated and defended. Otherwise, the thesis that "some contradictions are true" cannot be distinguished from its negation. The elenctic claim advanced here is therefore compatible with localised inconsistency. What it excludes is a global posture in which negation ceases to make a difference to what is being claimed.

5.4. What survives: a post-metaphysical PNC

The upshot is a modest, post-metaphysical claim: meaningful assertion requires determinacy, and determinacy requires that denial

preserve a contrast relevant to what is being claimed "in the same respect". One may revise consequence relations; one may reject explosion; one may accept true contradictions in limited domains. None of these licenses denies that negation plays a differentiating role in claimhood. Aristotle's elenchus survives the logic objection because it operates at a level prior to the choice between formal systems: it concerns the conditions under which anything counts as a determinate assertion at all.

Elenctic Normativity: A Minimal Criterion of Rational Assessment

6.1. Definition

Elenctic normativity names a minimal criterion of rational defect: a claim (or institutional norm) fails when, under scrutiny, it negates the conditions that render its own justificatory language intelligible. The criterion is internal and diagnostic. It does not supply substantive moral content; it identifies when the public grammar of reasons is being used in ways that undermine its own uptake conditions.

This matters in precisely those contexts where procedural legitimacy-talk proliferates while contestation is structurally constrained. If institutions claim legitimacy in the register of reasons, elenctic normativity provides a way to test whether their reasons are being offered as reasons, rather than as legitimating signals.

6.2. The elenctic test

The method can be rendered in three steps.

(1) Identify the validity-claim in its own terms (for example: "our decision-making is transparent and accountable").
(2) Reconstruct the constitutive presuppositions that make the claim determinate (what would count as transparency rather than

opacity; what practices enable affected parties to understand, contest, and obtain remedies).

(3) Examine whether the institution's operative procedures sustain or erode those presuppositions. If they erode them, the validity-claim is not merely false; it is performatively self-undermining.

The point of step (2) is not to impose an external ideal. It is to make explicit the differentiations already invoked by the institution's own vocabulary. Where those differentiations are dissolved in practice, the institution's language functions as legitimation-talk without corresponding conditions of uptake.

7. Institutional Payoff: 'Transparency' in Automated Welfare Administration

7.1. Why this case is methodologically apt

Automated decision systems in welfare administration provide a clear setting in which the vocabulary of transparency and accountability is publicly invoked, while the conditions of contestation are frequently constrained. A well-documented European case is the Dutch childcare allowance scandal, in which mass administrative processing and a hardline anti-fraud orientation produced what a parliamentary inquiry committee called an "injustice without precedent" and in which affected parents received "extremely limited" information (Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee 2020, 5–7). The philosophical purpose of the case is not to decide Dutch administrative law. It is to show how elenctic normativity diagnoses self-undermining uses of justificatory language.

7.2. Step (1). The transparency claim and its regulatory echo

In contemporary AI governance, "transparency" is routinely promised in policy statements, codes of conduct, and compliance narratives. At the regulatory level, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act

places "transparency obligations" on providers and deployers of certain AI systems, including requirements that natural persons be informed when interacting with an AI system (European Union 2024, art. 50(1)). Such obligations are important, but they remain limited in scope: they concern disclosure that an AI system is being used, not necessarily the provision of contestable reasons for specific outcomes.

Institutional rhetoric often slides from this limited duty of notice to a broader claim that decision-making is transparent in the stronger justificatory sense of being intelligible to those affected, and therefore accountable.

7.3. Step (2). What 'transparency' must mean if it is to be determinate

To claim transparency in the justificatory register is to invoke differentiations that cannot be treated as optional rhetorical flourishes. At a minimum, three contrasts must be preserved.

(a) Notice versus intelligibility. Being told that an automated system is used does not yet mean being able to understand the basis of a decision.
(b) Explanation as public relations versus explanation as reason-giving. A narrative that cannot be used to contest a decision is not an explanation in the justificatory sense.
(c) Accountability as slogan versus accountability as an assignable practice of responsibility and remedy. If responsibility is structurally diffused so that no actor can answer for a decision, "accountability" loses determinate application.

These contrasts are not imported from an external moral theory. They are conditions for the word "transparent" to signify something determinate rather than collapsing into a synonym for "we have complied with some disclosure requirement".

The point is corroborated by widely used governance frameworks that distinguish transparency from explainability and interpretability. The NIST AI Risk Management Framework, for

example, treats "accountable and transparent" and "explainable and interpretable" as distinct characteristics of trustworthy AI (NIST 2023, 2). The distinction supports the elenctic claim: transparency cannot simply mean that *some* information is provided. It must be specified in relation to intelligibility and contestability.

7.4. Step (3): How procedures can dissolve the differentiations they invoke

The Dutch childcare allowance scandal exhibits a pattern in which justificatory language is maintained while the conditions of uptake are weakened. The parliamentary inquiry report emphasises mass processing and extremely limited information to those affected (Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee 2020, 5–7). European Commission material on the episode similarly highlights severe administrative failures and barriers to effective redress (European Commission 2021, 1–3). These features are precisely the kind of setting in which a strong public claim to "transparent and accountable decision-making" becomes elenctically vulnerable.

Under elenctic scrutiny, the defect is not merely hypocrisy. It is structurally self-undermining. The institution invokes the transparency/opacity contrast while organising procedures so that affected persons cannot access the reasons that would allow that contrast to be applied in determinate, contestable ways. In that situation, "transparency" ceases to operate as a determinate justificatory claim and becomes a legitimating signal.

Elenctic critique, therefore, forces a determinate choice. Either the institution must (i) specify transparency in a way that includes contestable reason-giving and (ii) implement procedural pathways that enable such contestation (including accessible explanations, review mechanisms, and assignable responsibility), or it must abandon the stronger transparency claim and restrict itself to the narrower duty of notice. What is ruled out is the hybrid posture in which an institution claims transparency while materially removing the conditions under which "transparent" differs from "opaque" in the register of justification.

8. Conclusion: What Elenctic Normativity Can and Cannot Do

This article has argued that the current wave of anthropomorphic AI raises a problem that is not exhausted by familiar concerns about safety, bias, or intellectual property. When AI systems are deployed in roles that imitate interpersonal exchange, they invite users to treat synthetic outputs as participation in the space of reasons. That invitation is structurally unstable. It trades on the forms of justificatory discourse while suspending, or at least obscuring, the conditions under which justificatory speech is ordinarily redeemable and attributable. The core philosophical claim has therefore been methodological: performative contradiction is most instructively grasped, in this domain, as a failure of determinate signification and answerability, not merely as a pragmatic inconsistency.

The Aristotelian elenchus clarifies why this matters. Aristotle's demand that an interlocutor "signify something" is not an antiquarian constraint, but an identification of the threshold at which discourse can function as discourse. A community of communication depends on stable differentiations, including the contrast between assertion and denial and the capacity to locate responsibility for claims. Apel's transcendental-pragmatic point radicalises the same insight: to enter argumentation is to incur commitments that are not optional conventions. Read together, they illuminate what is at stake when systems that cannot bear discursive responsibility present themselves in the grammar of first-person agency. The risk is not only deception, but a gradual erosion of the recognisability-conditions of discourse: users can no longer reliably tell when they are being addressed by an accountable interlocutor and when they are encountering an artefact that simulates the posture of one.

Against that background, Article 50 of the EU AI Act can be interpreted as more than a consumer-information measure. Its disclosure requirement for systems intended to interact directly with natural persons, together with its concern for impersonation and

deception in the transparency recitals, functions as a juridical insistence on a distinction that communicative reason needs in order to remain operative (European Union 2024, art. 50; recital 132). The point is not that the law metaphysically "proves" the boundary between human and machine. Rather, it operationalises an elenctic demand within a regulatory setting: it compels deployers and providers to make explicit what is otherwise increasingly easy to hide, namely the status of the apparent interlocutor. In doing so, it protects a minimal condition of rational uptake. If one cannot tell whether one is addressed by an entity that can be held to reasons, then one cannot reliably interpret speech acts as invitations to justification, nor can one allocate responsibility when harms occur.

This allows a more precise account of the "right to know" in the age of generative systems. The right is not only a right against deception. It is a right to the conditions under which justificatory discourse can be taken at face value as justificatory. Disclosure preserves the difference between (i) a conversational posture that can, in principle, be answerable to truth, sincerity, and rectification, and (ii) a synthetic output that may be useful but cannot itself bear those responsibilities. That distinction matters legally because accountability and remedy are assigned to providers and deployers, not to the system as an apparent speaker. It matters politically because democratic public reason depends on knowing when one is engaging other agents and when one is engaging instruments.

Two limitations should be stated plainly. First, Article 50-style transparency is a necessary condition of answerability, but it is not sufficient. Disclosure that one is interacting with an AI does not, by itself, yield contestable reasons, explainability, or due process in high-stakes contexts. Second, transparency mandates are vulnerable to compliance theatre: labelling can be technically satisfied while practical intelligibility and avenues of challenge remain absent. These limitations do not weaken the argument. They mark its scope. The claim defended here is that disclosure is best understood as a boundary-maintaining condition of rational addressability. A fuller governance framework must then build on this condition with

institutional pathways for contestation, responsibility allocation, and remedy.

The broader implication is that AI regulation should be read, at least in part, as regulation of the preconditions of discourse. In environments saturated with synthetic speech, insisting on the visibility of the artificial is one way to prevent the grammar of reasons from becoming detached from the practices that make reasons binding as reasons. Article 50 does not settle the ethics of AI, but it can be defended as protecting the minimal semantic and institutional conditions under which critique, justification, and accountability remain possible.

REFERENCES

Apel, Karl-Otto. 1980. *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*. Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Beall, J.C. and Greg Restall. 2000. "Logical Pluralism." Version of 28 March 2000. https://consequently.org/papers/pluralism.pdf (accessed 15 December 2025).

Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee. 2020. *Unprecedented Injustice (Ongekend Onrecht): Report of the Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee*. House of Representatives of the States General (The Hague), 17 December 2020. Reproduced as CDL-REF(2021)073 (Venice Commission). https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2021)073-e (accessed 15 December 2025).

Cohen, S. Marc. 1986. "Aristotle on the Principle of Non-Contradiction." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (3): 359–85.

European Commission. 2021. "The Dutch childcare benefits scandal." (Public information note). https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=26439&langId=en (accessed 15 December 2025).

European Union. 2024. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act). *Official Journal of the European Union* L, 12 July 2024. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ%3AL202401689 (accessed 15 December 2025).

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification." In *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, edited by Seyla Benhabib and Fred R. Dallmayr, 60–110. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Massie, Pascal. 2022. "Contradiction, Being, and Meaning in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ." *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1): 27–50.

NIST. 2023. *Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework (AI RMF 1.0)*. NIST AI 100-1. Gaithersburg, MD: National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Priest, Graham. 1979. "The Logic of Paradox." *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 219–41.

Aristotle. 1984. *Metaphysics*. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

EDUCATING THROUGH PHILOSOPHY: CRITICAL THINKING AND MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

Kerasenia Papalexiou

Dept. of Social Theology and Religious Studies
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens,
GREECE

papalexiougina@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper highlights the value of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking, emphasising its epistemological dimension as a lifelong approach to inquiry and scientific reasoning. The central research question concerns the importance of educating through philosophy, fostering conceptual understanding, the pursuit of truth, the construction of arguments, and engagement in a philosophical dialogue within educational curricula that incorporate philosophy for children. Part of the argument focuses on highlighting the presence of philosophical education since antiquity. The conclusions indicate that children perceive philosophy as a distinct way of thinking, corresponding to concepts and justified beliefs. The framework of the paper's approach is based on ancient Greek philosophy, the Socratic method, the homo mensura protagorean principle, the intellectual movement of the Sophistic Enlightenment, and the Platonic dialectic. The study's primary contribution lies in promoting "inquiry into the meaning of concepts," a key benefit of the P4C (Philosophy for Children) initiative, which fosters critical and philosophical thinking skills of growing importance in the modern world.

Keywords: philosophy for children (P4C), epistemology, critical thinking, teaching philosophy, ancient Greek philosophy

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to highlight the value of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking, proposing that it be introduced in adapted (analytical) programs in the Greek educational system, starting at younger ages[1]. Part of this paper is based on a

postgraduate research project carried out within the Master's program 'Science Education and Modern Technologies' (Democritus University of Thrace). The findings of this research have shaped the theoretical framework informing the present study.

The main part of the paper emphasises the epistemological dimension of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking in a constantly changing world. The research question focuses on the value of philosophical thinking, understanding concepts, searching for truth, building arguments, and training in a Socratic, non-formal type of dialogue within educational programs in a broader context. The framework of our approach is based on ancient Greek philosophy, the Socratic method (midwifery-dialogue-the pedagogical value attributed to states of not-knowing-Socratic irony), the homo mensura protagorean principle (central to the Sophistic Enlightenment), and the Platonic dialectic (Kinney 1983, 230). Philosophy's most pivotal contribution to the issue at hand is its relocation of the search for causes from divine agents to human reason and agency. This intellectual move, initiated by Thales, Heraclitus ("*ἐδιζησάμην ἐμεωυτόν*", DK B101), and other Presocratics (Popper 1998), was later inherited and further refined by Socrates. The pursuit of self-knowledge is now recognised as a central philosophical and ethical value. It is precisely at this point that one finds a compelling rationale for the early cultivation of philosophical inquiry in children who are naturally inquisitive and full of questions about the world around them (Lone 2018).

If change—a central concept in Presocratic thought—is reflected in today's fast-evolving digital world and global context (educationally, socially, morally, politically), then philosophy offers a crucial tool for navigating this reality with reflection and critical awareness. The effectiveness of the changing world and the necessity of useful philosophical discourse are not new findings. Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.) approached the problem of change from an ontological perspective, intertwining philosophical thought itself with the dynamic processes of change and becoming (DK B51, DK B55, DK B80). The ontological problem of identity and alterity,

closely tied to the tension between unity and multiplicity (Popper 1998, 23), can be traced back to the Presocratic philosophers—particularly Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Democritus—whose foundational inquiries shaped the earliest metaphysical conceptions of being, difference, and plurality.

THE BACKGROUND FRAMEWORK

Philosophy for Children (P4C) was Professor Matthew Lipman's (and Ann Margaret Sharp's) innovative project (1970) that utilised philosophy (Goucha 2007) as a means of intellectual nourishment to help children develop critical and logical thinking, questioning, curiosity, and creativity (Vansieleghem & Kenedy 2011). He was "transforming" philosophy into a teaching subject (involving philosophical novels) focused on skills development for children and young people (4-16 years old). He believed that in this way, students "can improve the quality of life in a democratic society" (Lipman 1998, 277). A similar approach is Nelson's (Socratic) method (Vansieleghem & Kenedy, 2011). We try to point out that this transformation is not a new one. Socrates, Plato's teacher, was the first philosopher who contributed to teaching philosophy by asking special questions (midwifery), introducing a new type of dialogue, formulating the distinction between knowledge and ignorance (*Theat.*150c-e), and trying to distinguish what one knows from what one does not know (*Apol.* 21d). Therefore, the philosopher relied on critical thinking, on the dialectical ability of the interlocutor (Kinney, 1983, 230), on his ability to control the hypotheses to be investigated, and not to accept them without examining. Although the Socratic method is concerned with adults, the core aspect of this method applies to pedagogical contexts involving children. It guards against overestimating a person's capabilities, which leads to cognitive errors (Kruger & Dunning 1999).

Lipman aimed to encourage and improve the higher level of children's reasoning and thinking ("critical, creative, and caring thinking": including active thinking, affective thinking, and valuative thinking) (Daniel & Auriac 2011). He believed that children, based on their own experiences and knowledge, can think abstractly and understand philosophical questions (Millet & Tapper 2011), which provides cognitive, social, and moral benefits (Lipman 1995). P4C improves levels of understanding, which is such an important condition for survival in the modern multicultural reality.

The Epistemological Dimension of a Non-Formal Mode of Philosophical Discourse

The epistemological dimension is one of the timeless stakes of philosophy. What is knowledge? When do I produce knowledge? Is knowledge possible? Plato's *Theaetetus* gave us valuable answers based on the three definitions of knowledge that are examined by Socrates and his interlocutor, the young mathematician, Theaetetus. During this dialogue, the need to define the nature of the verb "know" is highlighted through a non-standard form of philosophical discourse:

1. Knowledge as perception (151e);
2. Knowledge as true judgment (187b-c-), 3. Knowledge as true judgment accompanied by *logos* (201d).

The 2nd and 3rd definitions refer to the critical nature of the judgment/opinion, which is also one of the goals of the P4C project (critical thinking, reasonable explanation to fight for my opinion). The young mathematician, Theaetetus, is called upon to examine the validity of the three definitions, applying some of the principles of the Socratic method. First, analyzed them into their constituent elements, then he devised the best possible line of argument in their defence, and finally, he assessed which of these definitions withstand critical analysis and can therefore be accepted. During the

examination of these definitions, the soul is introduced as a cognitive factor (189e-190a). Consequently, critical thinking, depth of understanding, and the ability to analyse and synthesise information (3rd definition) are qualities that characterise Theaetetus, but also the overall issue of the theory of knowledge over time, although we know that Platonic knowledge is grounded in noēsis, which has the Forms (Ross 1966) as its object.

Critical thinking is the bridge that connects the epistemological dimension of ancient Greek philosophy, and more specifically, the perspective of Plato's *Theaetetus*, with P4C (Daniel & Auriac 2011) and the problem-solving basis (Lipman, 1995). Through a non-formal mode of philosophical discourse, children can learn to think critically (Splitter 2010) and develop the skills of distinguishing, comparing, explaining, classifying, generalising, and engaging in processes of analysis (Menn 2002) and synthesis. Generally, these are some of the steps of Platonic dialectic (mainly in the *Sophist*). In Plato, the dialectic began (Robinson 1953) with a "Q&A" method (*Kratylos* 390c) (Kinney 1983, 220) through specific processes to find definitions (*Theaet.* 202c3), approach the depth of the concept, and finally reach the realm of the Forms (*Rep.* 508e-511e, *Phaed.*, 101e-102a). In his later dialogue (*Soph.* 248a-251d), Plato applied the method of division and integration in dialectic. The most important contribution of Platonic dialectic to the issue of the philosophy of education lies in the fact that it is simultaneously a speech act and a reasoning process. This dimension fits perfectly with the evolving physical and mental activity of children and adolescents (Yang et al. 2023).

The teaching objectives set for the P4C project are related to the cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor levels and contribute to the cultivation of students' critical, creative, and emotional thinking (Lipman 2006). According to him: "I didn't want to teach children logic in the way we taught (or pretended to teach) college students logic" (Lipman 1976, 17). So "thinking" and "teaching" are the key elements, but in the right way. Regarding them, both Socrates and Protagoras provide valuable insights into these foundational

elements from a distinct philosophical vantage point. Socrates' teaching is midwifery (Tomin 1987), which functions methodologically as a pre-preliminary of the Platonic dialectic (Kahn 1998). The attainment of wisdom is considered human's inborn in Socrates' midwifery process, which distinguishes the idol from the real thing[2]. The midwifery method of Socrates, directly connected to human nature, deals par excellence with the soul, giving the mark of its trade: freedom from the useless[3]. The protagoreian thesis of homo measura (man is the measure of all that exists)[4] essentially expresses what Lipman emphasised above: we have to teach children in a different way from college students. The measure is man (child) and his needs, and not the course of logic.

PROPOSAL

The inclusion of a P4C program in the analytical curriculum of primary schools in Greece is a feasible proposal that creates a new learning environment in the modern digital world (web, artificial intelligence, deep learning, machine learning, big data), shaping the conditions for a humanistic utilisation of information literacy: ethics, norms, self-awareness, solidarity, human rights. Stimulating critical thinking in children through a philosophical inquiry is one of the most unique contributions made to the field of democratic education (Goucha 2007; Weinstein 1991).

In the P4C project, justification and argumentation have great importance within the community of inquiry (Lipman 2006). At this point, we can recall the third definition of the knowledge of *Theaetetus*: "Knowledge as true judgment accompanied by *logos*". Justification has great importance if it is accompanied by *logos*. One of the meanings of the word *logos* is the analysis of the parts of a whole, which also gives the logic of this whole. And beyond that, the third definition focuses on the justification of opinions through the use of *logos*, as a reasonable argumentation expressed in the appropriate language (which is the first meaning of *logos*). Although

Plato's aim was not empirical knowledge, his third definition (in the *Theaetetus*) seems unable to fully detach itself from the problem of doxa (judgment/opinion) (Kinney 1983, 230). The epistemological proposed synthesis lies in the justification of beliefs — the grounding of opinion in a rational foundation, captured in the notion of *logos*. In this light, the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program developed by Matthew Lipman can be seen as a contemporary pedagogical expression of this classical philosophical concern: encouraging children to transform their opinion into reasoned belief through a special type, which, although it does not follow a formal teaching format, is meaningful, profound, and genuine. *Theaetetus,* Plato's main epistemological work, focused on the justification of beliefs (3rd definition of knowledge, 201d), which has been one of the leading issues in the Platonic theory of knowledge (Gettier 1963). Justified norms and beliefs are related to epistemological and ethical issues, too. And the justification of beliefs about "ethical dilemmas, aesthetic qualities, political tensions" (Laverty & Gregory 2007, 283) was one of the key issues of this research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY REVIEW

Many scholars argue that philosophy is exclusively associated with adult life because they believe that philosophy presupposes intellectual maturity and appropriate philosophical knowledge, two elements that children lack (Kitchener 1990; Wilson 1992). Wilson (1992) criticises the P4C program, arguing that it does not adopt a clear pedagogical and ideological background. Cannot be easily answered questions like "What is philosophical thought?" or philosophical truth (Wilson 1992, 17), although these were the original questions that occupied classical philosophy. A common mistake made by those who reject P4C is the comparison between academic philosophy and philosophy for children. Fisher (2001)

encourages children's engagement with philosophy, although he recognises the existence of their cognitive weaknesses.

We must point out that philosophy was not born in academic auditoriums or classrooms. Its natural space in the ancient Greek environment was human intercourse, and its method was grounded in a meaningful non-formal type of dialogue, in rational justification, and interpersonal engagement, not as a formalised procedure, but as a spontaneous and genuine mode of inquiry. Besides that, Plato highlighted philosophising as a form of dialogue (Abarejo 2024). So, when Trickey and Topping presented the results of ten research studies (1970-2002), which revealed positive effects on logical thinking, self-esteem, creative thinking, language expression, and cognitive ability (Trickey & Topping 2004) were correct according to ancient Greek epistemology.

Taking into consideration the global developments in the field of audiovisual and digital literacy, the cognitive dimension of philosophy (theory of knowledge/ epistemology) plays an important role from the earliest stages of human education, which starts from admiration (Pl., *Tim.* 47b; *Theaet.* 155d) and wondering which is "a part of life for most children" according to Lone (2018, 53). In Aristotle's view, this process starts from the simplest, those that are easily accessible to the human senses, to the most complex:

i. "*Διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 12-13 (Due to wonder, people began to philosophise)

ii. "*ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀτόπων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 13-15 (Initially starting with what they had in front of their eyes, the simple ones, and then moving on to the more difficult ones)

iii. "*φανερὸν ὅτι διὰ τὸ εἰδέναι τὸ ἐπίστασθαι ἐδίωκον*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 20-21 (They sought knowledge for knowledge's sake)

iv. "*Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει",* Arist., *Metaphysics* 980a 21 (All people by nature desire knowledge)

The ever-changing nature of the world has consistently concerned philosophy, both epistemologically and ethically, particularly at the level of applied philosophy. In this constantly changing world, critical thinking is directly connected to philosophy and is cultivated not through systematic philosophical logic but through an open, applied epistemological way of thinking (Battersby 2018).

The perception of the world's change, however, presupposes a sound evaluation of empirical knowledge. The things that are easily accessible to the human senses (as an empirical foundation of knowledge) and the significance of a meaningful dialogue (Socratic midwifery) are the basic conditions that could lead to the success of the P4C program (Maleki et al. 2016), although such a program cannot be defined with absolute clarity for childhood (Lone 2018, 54).

Conclusions

Children cannot "philosophise" in the academic sense of the term, but they can perceive philosophy as a different way of thinking that corresponds to concepts, to creative thinking (Lone, 54). Plato might argue that the conceptualisation of thought (*Theaetetus* 185e) from the logical part of the soul helps students understand the concept of justice as well as the contrast of justice and injustice. The world of concepts is, therefore, a problem, not only for children but also in general. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (*Met.* 987b 35-37) understood the importance of this issue (Hall 1963). The logical integrity of the concept is based on the intellect, according to Plato, and this guarantees the unity of the concept (*Republic* 533b1).

The "inquiry into the meaning of concepts" (Laverty & Gregory 2007, 282) is a basic benefit of the P4C project, which builds argumentative thought. Philosophy is the innate starting point for

conceptual development and ensures the conditions for searching for the essential and methodologically appropriate. This starting point suits the sensitive childish soul. Just remember the definition of dialectic in *Theaetetus*: dialectic is the dialogue of the soul with itself (190a), something very easy for children but not so much for great philosophers.

NOTES

1. Here it should be added that, within the Greek educational system, students are first introduced to philosophy—partially—in the third year of lower secondary school, with a more structured engagement occurring in the second and third years of upper secondary school.
2. *Theat.,* 150c 2: "*πότερον εἴδωλον καὶ ψεῦδος ἀποτίκτει τοῦ νέου ἡ διάνοια ἢ γόνιμόν τε καὶ ἀληθές*".
3. *Theat.,* 150 b-c.
4. *Theaet.*, 152a 2-4: "*πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον" ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, "τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστι".*

REFERENCES

Abarejo, C. 2024. "Educating children for wisdom: Reflecting on the Philosophy for Children Community of Inquiry approach through Plato's allegory of the cave." *Childhood and Philosophy* 20: 1–28.

Battersby, M. 2018. "Critical thinking as applied epistemology: Relocating critical thinking in the philosophical landscape." In *Inquiry: A new paradigm for critical thinking*, eds. M. Battersby and S. Bailin, 2–20. University of Windsor.

Daniel, M. and Auriac, E. 2011. "Philosophy, critical thinking, and Philosophy for Children." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43 (5): 415–435.

Fisher, R. 2001. "Philosophy in primary schools: Fostering thinking skills and literacy." *Reading* 35 (2): 67–73.

Gettier, E.L. 1963. "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (6): 121–123.

Goucha, M. (Ed.). 2007. *Philosophy, a school of freedom: Teaching philosophy and learning to philosophise: Status and prospects*. Paris: UNESCO.

Hall, R.W. 1963. *Plato and the individual*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Kahn, C.H. 1998. *Plato and the Socratic dialogue: The philosophical use of a literary form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kinney, A.M. 1983. "The Meaning of Dialectic in Plato." *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 10 (3): 229-246.

Kitchener, R. 1990. "Do children think philosophically?" *Metaphilosophy* 21 (4): 416–431.

Kruger, J. and Dunning, D. 1999. "Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognising one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (6): 1121–1134. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121

Laverty, M. and Gregory, M. 2007. "Evaluating classroom dialogue: Reconciling internal and external accountability." *Theory and Research in Education* 5 (3), 281–307.

Laverty, M. 2016. "Thinking my way back to you: John Dewey on the communication and formation of concepts." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48 (10): 1029–1045.

Lipman, M. 1976. "Philosophy for children." *Metaphilosophy* 7 (1): 17–33.

Lipman, M. 1995. "Moral education, higher-order thinking, and Philosophy for Children." *Early Child Development and Care* 107: 61–70.

Lipman, M. 1998. "Teaching students to think reasonably: Some findings of the Philosophy for Children program." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 71 (5): 277–280.

Maleki, H., Zadeh, T.S.H., Beheshti, S., Abbaspour, A., & Farkhondeh, M. 2022. "Anthropological horizons of P4C focusing on Lipman's theory." *The Social Sciences* 11 (1): 6172–6177.
https://doi.org/10.36478/sscience.2016.6172.6177

Menn, S. 2002. "Plato and the method of analysis." *Phronesis* 47: 193–223.

Millett, S. and Tapper, A. 2011. "Benefits of collaborative philosophical inquiry in schools." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44 (5): 546–567.

Lone, J.M. 2018. "Philosophical thinking in childhood." In *The Routledge handbook of the philosophy of childhood and children.* Routledge.

Popper, K. 1998. *The World of Parmenides: Essays on Presocratic Enlightenment*. London and New York: Routledge.

Robinson, R. 1953. *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*. Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press.

Ross, D. 1966. *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, Ely House.

Trickey, S. and Topping, K.J. 2004. "Philosophy for children: A systematic review." *Research Papers in Education* 19 (3): 365–380.

Tomin, J. 1987. "Socratic midwifery." *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (1): 97–102. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800031682

Vansieleghem, N. and Kenedy, D. 2011. "What is Philosophy for Children, what is Philosophy with Children—After Matthew Lipman?" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45 (2): 171–182.

Weinstein, M. 1991. "Critical thinking and education for democracy." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 23 (2): 9–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.1991.tb00129.x

Wilson, J. 1992. "Philosophy for children: A note of warning." *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 10 (1): 17–18.

Yang, L., Corpeleijn, Eva, and Hartman, Esth. 2023. "A prospective analysis of physical activity and mental health in children: the GECKO Drenthe cohort." *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity* 20: 114 https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-023-01506-1

AI. Anthropological Implementation: Rethinking the Relationship Between Culture and Digitalisation

Domenico Barbuto

Social Anthropology and Anthropology of Tourism
Department of Tourism Sciences
University of Calabria
Italy

domenico.barbuto@unical.it

Abstract: This essay explores the complex relationship between culture and digitalisation, moving beyond the dichotomy between utopian visions of democratisation and dystopian perspectives of cultural decline. Digitalisation is interpreted not merely as a tool applied to culture but as a co-evolutionary environment capable of redefining fundamental paradigms such as production, consumption, authority, and memory. The analysis focuses on four thematic axes: algorithmic access, the evolution of prosumerism, the transformation of institutional authority, and the dialectic between archive and oblivion. Through this critical lens, the essay highlights how emerging opportunities intertwine with systemic challenges, emphasising the need for a new digital humanism grounded in critical awareness.

Keywords: culture, anthropology, memory, identity, prosumerism, digitalisation

1. Overcoming Simplified Narratives

Digitalisation has permeated every area of human existence over recent decades, transforming not only communication, work, and leisure practices but also the deep structures of society and the cultural practices that define it. It is not simply a set of technological tools but a complex ecosystem redefining spaces, times, identities, and relationships. The dominant approach has often been binary, swinging between techno-utopian visions of unlimited connection

and dystopian critiques denouncing data commodification and cultural authenticity loss.

To fully understand these transformations, a radical "rethinking" of the culture-digitalisation relationship is necessary, one that surpasses technological determinism and delves into the complexity of human interactions with and through the digital. The advent of digital technologies and pervasiveness triggered one of the most significant contemporary debates on culture's future. Early narratives oscillated between two extremes: on one side, a utopia of unlimited democratic access to knowledge — a sort of global, interactive "Library of Alexandria"; on the other side, an apocalyptic vision of qualitative impoverishment, discourse fragmentation, and the end of cultural authenticity. Today, decades after the first waves of digitalisation, this dichotomy appears inadequate and analytically sterile. The relationship between culture and digital technology does not have a unidirectional impact, but it is a process of mutual co-constitution— a complex ecosystem where technological logics and cultural practices shape each other (Van Dijck 2013).

A critical rethinking of this relationship requires abandoning generalisations to investigate the specific transformations digitalisation imposes on the very concepts of cultural production, consumption, legitimation, and preservation.

Anthropology, with its holistic study of practices, meanings, and social structures, offers a privileged lens to face this challenge. Far from seeing culture as a static entity "influenced" by technology, digital anthropology (Miller & al. 2012; Haynes 2016) proposes investigating how digitalisation itself is a cultural process, shaped and reshaped by human practices, and how it co-constructs new cultural forms. This essay aims to explore this dynamic relationship by analysing the mutations digital media imposes on cultural understanding, the new forms of agency and sociality that emerge, critical challenges linked to power and exclusion, and opportunities for a more conscious and inclusive future.

2. The New Guardians of Culture

From an anthropological viewpoint, cultural access is never just a technical matter; it is a symbolic mediation process deciding which memories, narratives, and forms of expression enter the public sphere. Digitalisation initially promised radical democratisation, capable of making a previously elite or context-bound cultural heritage visible and shareable (Coleman 2010). However, the shift from "universal" to "algorithmic selective" access introduced new, less visible but equally powerful cultural gatekeepers.

Digital platforms — social media, search engines, streaming services — are not neutral channels but socio-technical devices embedding values, economic priorities, and worldviews (Gillespie 2014). Anthropologically, algorithms are new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984), establishing hierarchies of meaning and visibility. Recommendation logics select which texts, music, films, and museum heritage compose individuals' everyday cultural horizons, influencing what is perceived as relevant, authentic, or legitimate (Pavlidis 2019).

Pariser's (Pariser 2011) concept of the "filter bubble" finds anthropological expression in identity construction dynamics: when subjects repeatedly encounter the same content, their cultural identity consolidates around a partial imaginary, reinforcing like-minded communities but reducing encounters with otherness (Couldry & Mejias 2019). In Appadurai's terms, "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996, 35) no longer appear as unlimited global flows but filtered spaces bounded by computational and commercial platform logics.

Digital anthropology teaches that algorithms not only organise content but also produce symbolic power: deciding who can be heard, which collective memories are recognised, and which voices remain marginal. The risk, as Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal 2018) note, is the emergence of a "platformized" cultural regime, where engagement metrics prevail over intrinsic cultural value criteria. This creates tension between

diversity and homogenization: while new forms of digital expression arise (memes, fan cultures, participatory practices), algorithmic infrastructure tends to favour what is popular and monetizable, sidelining local traditions or minority narratives. Ethnographically, observing how users interact with these algorithmic spaces means analysing new cultural navigation, selection, and resistance practices. Some groups actively circumvent platform logics, developing counter-circuits and alternative practices (digital graffiti, independent archives, open-source communities). Others unconsciously internalise algorithmic criteria, adapting their cultural production to what is most visible or rewarded. In both cases, the issue is not simply access but the formation of cultural identities negotiated through opaque infrastructures.

3. Participatory Culture: Production and Consumption

Digitalisation has blurred the line between cultural producer and consumer. Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2006) introduced the notion of 'convergent culture', describing a media environment where consumers become active participants, appropriating, reworking, and distributing cultural content. Practices like remixing, fan-fiction, memes, and citizen journalism show unprecedented creativity. This hybrid 'prosumer' (producer + consumer) challenges the traditional idea of artwork as a closed, immutable artefact created by a single author.

Participatory culture can be studied through the daily practices of various online and offline communities. Interactions on social media transform social ties, create new forms of belonging, and collective identity. Studies like T.L. Taylor's (Taylor 2018) on eSports reveal deep insights into participatory dynamics in playful and professional contexts, showing how cultural production often results from distributed global collaborations.

Remix and fan-fiction practices also represent cultural resistance, where communities reinterpret and subvert dominant meanings. An example is the terseness of online conversations, where immediacy and clarity rely on memes, carriers of accessible and viral language. This shows participatory culture is not passive consumption but active negotiation of meanings.

Yet, this transformation also carries ambiguity. While fostering individual and community expression, it often takes place within the exploitation dynamics of users 'free labour by large platforms, which monetise it, creating new forms of economic value extraction (Terranova 2000).

Moreover, content fluidity and constant remixing may induce a 'presentification' of culture, where historical contextualization and philological depth are sacrificed to immediacy and shareability.

The shift from book to network risks weakening complex argumentative structures in favour of more fragmented, horizontal consumption (Roncaglia 2010). Participatory culture is thus a dynamic, complex field intertwining creativity, resistance, and exploitation. An ethnographic approach captures these rich experiences, offering a critical perspective on ongoing transformations. It is essential, however, to address issues related to free labour and cultural depth loss to ensure participatory culture remains equitable and enriching.

4. Crisis of Authority and Reconfiguration of Cultural Institutions

The digital environment has challenged traditional sources of cultural authority: critics, curators, academics, and institutions like museums and libraries. Cultural value validation no longer happens only through vertical, certified channels but also through horizontal, distributed mechanisms such as user reviews, likes, and shares. This has dismantled elitist canons and empowered minority voices, but also sparked a deep expertise crisis. In a context where every opinion

has potential equal visibility, distinguishing expert knowledge from misinformation becomes challenging, fuelling the contemporary "post-truth" climate. Social media's widespread adoption and algorithms privileging viral over accurate content exacerbate this polarisation (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017). Traditional cultural institutions face a dual challenge: embracing digital tools to stay relevant, opening to public participation and dialogue; and reaffirming their role as critical mediators, quality guarantors, and custodians of contextualised knowledge. Many institutions experiment with new public engagement modes via digital platforms and co-creation practices.

The rise of Digital Humanities represents an attempt at synthesis, using computational tools not to replace but to enrich cultural heritage analysis and interpretation (Fiormonte 2012). Recent projects like "Europeana" provide access to millions of digitised objects from European libraries, archives, and museums, promoting cultural sharing globally. Another example is the "Digital Vatican Library", offering online consultation of invaluable ancient manuscripts and historical documents.

In Italy, the University of Venice's "Atlas of Emotions" project analyses emotions in literary texts through text mining and data visualisation, exploring how emotions are distributed and represented in Italian literature. Another Italian initiative, "Imago Mundi", uses digital tools to map and analyse ancient cartographies, revealing connections between geographic representations and historical contexts. The Vatican Library also exemplifies excellence, using advanced digital technologies to digitise and provide access to ancient manuscripts, supporting preservation and worldwide cultural dissemination. These projects highlight digital technology's role in understanding relationships between emotions, places, and historical sources.

International projects, such as Stanford University's "Mapping the Republic of Letters" and the "Pelagios Network", continue offering valuable insights for methodological comparison and deepening.

Reconfiguring cultural institutions in the digital age is not just about technological adaptation but involves profound rethinking of authority, mediation, and cultural value construction practices.

5. Digital Memory: Between Total Archive and the Right to Be Forgotten

Finally, digitalisation redefines cultural memory, radically transforming how societies preserve, interpret, and diffuse their heritage. The illusion of a total archive, where every past trace can be indefinitely saved and retrieved, clashes with digital media's intrinsic fragility: format obsolescence, data degradation, cyberattack vulnerability, and phenomena like "link rot". Digital memory is thus neither permanent nor neutral.
A notable Italian example is "Internet Archive Italia", which preserves Italian websites and digital resources at risk of disappearing. However, these archives also face technological limitations and the need for constant updates to ensure long-term accessibility. The selection of what to archive and make accessible is often delegated to commercial players like major tech platforms whose economic priorities may not align with long-term public interest. The Geocities shutdown, and the consequent loss of millions of 1990s web pages, is a striking example.

Moreover, digital memory abundance poses an opposite problem: the inability to forget. The persistence of digital traces raises critical ethical and social issues, crystallised in the debate over the "right to be forgotten". In Italy, the Mario Costeja González case, which led to the landmark 2014 European Court of Justice ruling, had a significant impact also in Italy, influencing numerous Data Protection Authority measures. Requests to remove personal information from search engines invoke complex challenges, balancing privacy and information rights.

For culture, this means historic processes based also on selective forgetting and canonization are replaced by chaotic information

coexistence. The challenge is not only preserving but curating, contextualising, and knowing how to "prune" archives to allow meaningful narratives to emerge. Maurizio Ferraris (Ferraris 2017), in his work on "documanity", highlights that critical management of digital memory is essential to prevent data excess from turning into noise rather than knowledge.

6. Conclusion

Rethinking the relationship between culture and digitalisation requires a deep and nuanced analysis that goes beyond easy euphoria and sterile condemnations. The transformation underway is structural and ambivalent—a complex intertwining of opportunities and challenges that redefines our ways of living, thinking, and interacting. The increase in access to information and digital resources, although undeniably positive, is mediated by algorithmic commercial logics that often prioritise profit at the expense of content quality and diversity. Creative participation, democratized thanks to digital platforms, coexists with the economic exploitation of content and data, raising important ethical and legal issues. The democratisation of taste, which allows anyone access to a wide range of cultural expressions, is accompanied by a crisis of expertise that risks flattening the complexity of the cultural landscape and reducing the public's capacity for discernment. Finally, the enhanced archive, which offers the possibility to preserve and access an enormous amount of information, generates new forms of oblivion and fragility, as the proliferation of data risks making it difficult to search for and enjoy meaningful content.

However, it is essential to remember that digitalisation is not just a technological phenomenon but a true cultural process that redefines the ways in which communities construct meanings, pass on knowledge, and develop collective identities. Digital practices shape new forms of sociality, belonging, and daily rituals, transforming not only what we do but also how we think and

perceive the world. Digital platforms are fertile grounds for the birth and spread of digital micro-cultures—environments where new online social rituals develop, strengthening the sense of belonging and defining interaction norms within virtual communities. These rituals are not simple digital habits but complex symbolic structures that profoundly influence the social and cultural lives of their participants.

From "likes" on a post to ritualised comments and shared hashtags during global events, these digital gestures create a symbolic fabric that connects geographically distant individuals, allowing the formation of social bonds that transcend physical barriers. For example, viral "challenges," which invite users to participate in specific activities and share their results online, represent rituals through which digital micro-cultures strengthen social cohesion among their members and create a shared sense of belonging. Collective streaming marathons, which allow groups of people to watch and comment in real-time on an event or video content, offer opportunities for symbolic aggregation and shared experiences. Discussion "threads" on specific topics, which allow in-depth exploration of common interests through a series of linked messages, promote the construction of shared knowledge and the creation of thematic communities. Finally, virtual ceremonies like "watch parties," which enable people to watch a movie or TV series together with other online users, recreate the atmosphere of a cinema and offer opportunities for socialisation and emotional sharing.

The real challenge, therefore, is not only technological but deeply cultural and political. It is necessary to develop a critical digital media ecosystem that promotes user awareness, regulates the monopolistic power of platforms, and redefines the mission of cultural institutions in the 21st century. Understanding the role of new social rituals means analysing how they influence identity construction, collective memory, and the ways communities self-represent in the digital context. The goal is not to restore a golden age (which perhaps never existed) of analogue culture, nor to uncritically

embrace every innovation. Rather, it is about forging a new digital humanism: an approach that puts technology at the service of long-term cultural values—complexity, diversity, critical memory, and dialogue—ensuring that the digital future of culture is a space of enrichment rather than impoverishment for the human experience.

Only through ethnographically deep understanding and careful analysis of emerging social rituals can we build a cultural ecosystem capable of responding to the challenges of our time, respecting the ideas and values of every human being and every culture.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.

Benjamin, W. 2000. *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*. Einaudi

Bongiovi Joseph R. 2019. "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power." *Social Forces* 98 (2): 1-4. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soz037

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.

Coleman, G. 2010. "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487–505.

Couldry, N. & U. Mejias. 2019. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

Ferraris, M. 2017. *Documanità. Filosofia del mondo nuovo*. Bari: Laterza.

Fiormonte, D. 2012. *Scrittura e filologia nell'era digitale*. Firenze: Carocci Editore.

Gillespie, Tarleton. 2014. "The Relevance of Algorithms." In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society,* eds. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot. Cambridge MA. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009.

Haynes, D. 2016. "Social media, risk and information governance." *Business Information Review* 33 (2): 90-93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382116651781

Jenkins, H. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.

Kerasovitis, Konstantinos. 2019. "The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Power and Perception." *Information, Communication & Society* 22: 1-4. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1609544.

Mayer-Schönberger, V. 2009. *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press.

Miller, T. et al. 2012. *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. 2nd Edition. London : Sage Publications.

Nora, P. (ed.). 1984. *Les lieux de mémoire*. Gallimard.

Pariser, E. 2011. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. UK: Penguin.

Pavlidis, G. 2019. "Towards a Novel User Satisfaction Modelling for Museum Visit Recommender Systems". In *Technologies in Cultural Heritage*, eds. Duguleana, M., Carrozzino, M., Gams, M., Tanea I. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05819-7_6

Roncaglia, G. 2010. *La quarta rivoluzione: Sei lezioni sul futuro del libro*. Bari: Laterza.

Rumsey, A.S. 2016. *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future*. Bloomsbury Press.

Sunstein Cass R. 2017. "#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media." *Ethic Theory and Moral Practice* 20: 1091–1093. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-017-9839-5

Taylor T.L. 2018. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming,* Princeton University Press.

Terranova T. 2000. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text* 18 (2): 33-58, Duke University Press.

Van Dijck, J. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press.

ANCIENT MYTHS IN THE MIRROR OF THE 21ST CENTURY: STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION AND ARTISTIC FUNCTIONS

Oleksandra Sulik

Kryvyi Rih National University
UKRAINE

sulik.sasha@gmail.com

Abstract: The article explores the reinterpretation of ancient Greek myth in twenty-first-century literature. It is shown that myth functions not only as cultural heritage but also as a dynamic code of modernity. Key strategies and artistic functions are identified, including identity formation, engagement with trauma, aesthetic play, and philosophical reflection. The study concludes that through continual renewal, myth remains highly relevant within the contemporary literary process.

Keywords: ancient myth, reinterpretation, cultural codes

INTRODUCTION

The ancient myth has remained one of the fundamental pillars of European culture for millennia, shaping archetypes, symbols, and metaphors that continue to resonate in literature and philosophy. Despite its distant past, myth is not a static cultural phenomenon: each epoch rediscovers it, reinterpreting it in accordance with its own values, challenges, and aesthetic strategies (Detienne 1986, 3-5; Burkert 1992, 76).

Twenty-first-century literature demonstrates a renewed interest in the classical heritage. Writers approach myths not as fixed narratives of the past but as living texts open to interpretation and dialogue. From feminist rewritings of well-known stories (*e.g.*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*) (Barker 2018, 3-15; Haynes 2019,

5-20) to postmodern ironic remixes and philosophical reinterpretations (Hutcheon 1988), ancient myth becomes a site for exploring new forms of identity, articulating trauma, and redefining cultural codes.

The aim of this article is to investigate the strategies of reinterpreting Greek myths in twenty-first-century literature and to demonstrate the artistic functions they perform in contemporary texts. The theoretical framework combines classical approaches (Jung 1959, 8-10; Eliade 1963) with poststructuralist concepts of intertextuality. The analysis focuses on the works of Madeline Miller, Margaret Atwood, Natalie Haynes, Pat Barker, and Colm Tóibín, which exemplify the diversity of myth's reinterpretations.

The "Canongate Myth Series" as a Stimulus for the Revival of Myth

The interest in ancient myths in twenty-first-century literature proved so significant that a large-scale publishing project dedicated to their renewal and rewriting was launched in the United Kingdom. This was the *Canongate Myth Series*, initiated by the Scottish publishing house *Canongate Books* under the leadership of its director Jamie Byng. The idea emerged in the late 1990s, with the first publications appearing simultaneously on 21 October 2005.

The project aimed to breathe new life into ancient myths, to demonstrate their relevance for the contemporary reader, and to provide writers from different countries and traditions with the opportunity to offer their own interpretations of *"outdated"* narratives. Unlike academic anthologies, the project was conceived as an international series of novellas, in which each author selected a myth and retold it in a free literary form.

The initial lineup already included Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*), Jeanette Winterson (*Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*), and Karen Armstrong (*A Short History of Myth*). In the following years, the project expanded with contributions by Ali Smith (*Girl Meets Boy*), Su Tong (*Binu and the Great Wall of China*), Salley Vickers (*Where Three Roads Meet*),

as well as internationally renowned authors such as Philip Pullman, A. S. Byatt, and others.

A distinctive feature of the series was its ability to bring together authors from diverse cultural backgrounds, offering a "translation" of ancient narratives into the language of modernity (Atwood 2005, 4-10; Winterson 2005, 9). At the same time, the project clearly reflected feminist and postmodern tendencies: myths were retold from the perspectives of female characters, transformed into ironic remixes, or infused with philosophical depth connected to twenty-first-century concerns (Hutcheon 1988).

The impact of the project proved to be substantial. The *Canongate Myth Series* not only resonated widely in Anglophone literature but also became a model for other publishing initiatives, demonstrating that myth can serve simultaneously as cultural heritage and as a contemporary medium for engaging with urgent issues. It stimulated the emergence of new reinterpretations of myth in prose, drama, and poetry, and reinforced international interest in the genre of mythological rewriting.

Thus, the *Canongate Myth Series* can be regarded as a key cultural platform of the early twenty-first century, laying the groundwork for the further development of feminist, political, and philosophical reinterpretations of ancient myth.

STRATEGIES OF REINTERPRETING MYTH

Contemporary twenty-first-century literature demonstrates a wide range of approaches to ancient myth. Authors do not limit themselves to reproducing traditional plots but employ diverse strategies of reinterpretation that transform myth into a relevant artistic and cultural instrument.

1. Feminist rewriting

One of the most prominent approaches is feminist reinterpretation, in which the "silent" or marginalised characters of myths are given their

own voice. Thus, Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad* retells the *Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective, transforming her from a passive wife into an active subject of narration (Atwood 2005, 5-18). Similarly, Natalie Haynes in *A Thousand Ships* and Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls* give voice to the women of the Trojan War – captives, wives, and slaves whose stories had previously remained at the margins of the epic (Haynes 2019, 9-14; Barker 2018, 22-25). This strategy highlights the hidden gender asymmetries of the classical tradition and redefines myth as a space of struggle for identity.

2. Psychoanalytic and existential readings

In the twenty-first century, myths often serve as metaphors for an individual's inner crisis. In Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, the focus shifts from epic warfare to the intimate experiences of the protagonists, turning the story of Achilles and Patroclus into a tragedy of love, loss, and the search for meaning (Miller 2011, 12-30). In *Circe*, the same author portrays the heroine's exile as a path of self-discovery (Miller 2018, 25-42). Such interpretations bring myth closer to contemporary psychoanalytic and existential concerns: loneliness, trauma, and the search for identity.

3. Political and ethical reinterpretations

This strategy reconsiders myth as a cultural mechanism of power. Authors expose the politics of violence, hierarchy, and domination inscribed in classical narratives. For instance, Colm Tóibín in *House of Names* retells the myth of the House of Atreus, transforming divine fate into human cruelty and ethical responsibility (Tóibín 2017, 32-66). Through such reinterpretations, myth becomes a space for reflecting on authority, freedom, and moral choice.

4. Playful and ironic reinterpretation

The postmodern tradition opened the way for ironic engagement with myth, turning it into an object of cultural remix. In Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, as well as in numerous contemporary plays and

poetic texts, myth functions as material for parody, cultural commentary, or metatext. Here, myth is no longer a sacred narrative but a flexible structure that can be deconstructed, fused with popular culture, and situated within contemporary realities (Hutcheon 1988).

Thus, four main strategies of engaging with ancient myth in twenty-first-century literature can be identified: feminist rewriting, psychoanalytic and existential readings, political critique, and ironic remix. Each not only revitalises ancient plots but also transforms myth into a tool for addressing pressing issues of modernity – from gender and identity to politics and cultural memory.

The Artistic Functions of Myth in Twenty-First-Century Literature

The revival of ancient myth in contemporary literature is associated not only with aesthetic interest but also with its multifaceted artistic functions. In the twenty-first century, myth ceases to be a relic of the past and instead operates as a dynamic cultural code. It enables authors not only to draw on universal archetypes but also to critically address questions of identity, trauma, memory, power, and freedom.

Based on an analysis of contemporary texts and scholarly literature, this article proposes a typology of the artistic functions of myth that encompasses four key dimensions:

1. myth as an instrument of identity (including gendered and cultural identity);
2. myth as a form of working through trauma in narrative (war, violence, loss);
3. myth as an aesthetic practice (intertextual remixes, postmodern strategies);
4. myth as philosophical reflection (on fate, responsibility, and the limits of human existence).

1. Instrument of identity

Contemporary authors use myth to reinterpret identity in its multiple dimensions – gendered, cultural, and social. Feminist reinterpretations such as *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005) or *A Thousand Ships* (Haynes 2019) allow female characters, traditionally deprived of voice, to reassert their place in history. This is particularly evident in the figure of Helen of Troy, who in modern scholarship and fiction is no longer treated as the sole "cause of war" but as a complex figure balancing beauty, victimhood, and political manipulation (Blondell 2013, 45-70; Hughes 2005, 120-145). Through this figure, twenty-first-century literature raises questions of female subjectivity and the cost of beauty in patriarchal culture.

2. Therapeutic function

Myth also serves as a means of engaging with traumatic experience – war, violence, and loss. In *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker 2018), the Trojan captives become both witnesses and victims of war, whose voices allow the traumatic experience of the past to be reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary memory. Similarly, the myth of Heracles is read not only as a tale of superhuman strength but also as a narrative of guilt and suffering: modern receptions emphasise his madness and tragic dimension (Stafford 2012, 90-111; Blanshard and Stafford 2020, 120-126). This perspective brings ancient myth closer to the categories of psychoanalysis and post-traumatic therapy.

3. Aesthetic function

Ancient myth continues to function as a rich source of intertextual allusions, remixes, and cultural codes. The postmodern tradition (Hutcheon 1988, 73-79) transformed myth into a space of artistic play, where classical images could be fused with contemporary realities. Thus, in Jeanette Winterson's novella *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles (Winterson 2005, 15*-40*)*, the legend of Atlas and Heracles becomes a metaphor for human burden and responsibility,

linking the ancient narrative to existential philosophy and the ethics of the twenty-first century.

4. Philosophical function

Finally, myth in contemporary literature retains its role as a medium for philosophical reflection on the limits of human existence. In *Circe* (Miller 2018, 42-87), the story of the exiled goddess becomes a meditation on freedom, solitude, and choice. In reinterpretations of Helen of Troy, myth unfolds as a paradox: a symbol of eternal beauty that simultaneously embodies destruction and helplessness in the face of fate (Blondell 2023, 60-71). Likewise, Atlas in Winterson's *Weight* acquires philosophical depth, transforming into a metaphor not only of cosmic but also of personal burden carried by the individual in the modern world. It is precisely in this constant renewal – in myth's ability to become a mirror for each new epoch – that its contemporary significance lies.

The artistic functions of myth in twenty-first-century literature can therefore be summarised in four key dimensions: myth as an instrument of identity, as a form of working-through trauma in narrative, as aesthetic play, and as philosophical reflection. The examples of Helen, Heracles, and Atlas illustrate how ancient narratives can be actualised in the context of gender, psychology, and philosophy, becoming universal metaphors of human experience.

Conclusion

An analysis of twenty-first-century literary texts shows that ancient myths remain an integral part of the cultural landscape. They not only preserve the memory of the classical heritage but also operate as a dynamic cultural code that enables critical engagement with the present. Contemporary literature uses myth as a language for addressing gender, identity, trauma, politics, and the ultimate questions of human existence.

Paradoxically, it is the very antiquity of myth that guarantees its openness to continual renewal: narratives crafted millennia ago acquire new horizons of interpretation and become metaphors for the twenty-first century. Myth functions as a *"mirror of the epoch"*, in which the past enters into dialogue with the present.

Authors return to myth because it condenses universal stories of love, war, violence, and the search for meaning. New interpretations restore the voices of those excluded from the ancient narrative – women, slaves, outsiders. Reading such texts is valuable not only for understanding cultural tradition but also for cultivating a critical perspective on contemporary society: myth becomes a medium for reflecting on power, memory, and identity. The analysis leads to four concluding observations:

1. **The right to speak and to tell the "truth" of the story.** Mythic figures – especially those historically marginalised – are granted voice, often in ironic or sarcastic registers that articulate previously taboo themes (embodiment, desire, agency). In Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, for example, Penelope and related female figures comment on the canon from within, while Helen's figure is reframed through the optics of desire and power (Atwood 2005).
2. **Reassembling archetypes.** Stable archetypes cease to be monolithic and gain new hues; gods and heroes are "rehumanized", rendered ambivalent, and endowed with psychologically complex motivations.
3. **An ethical shift: from didacticism to recognition.** In place of ornate moralising, an ethics of proximity and empathy emerges: readers perceive not ideal emblems but recognisable vulnerabilities and choices.
4. **From flatness to depth.** Formerly one-dimensional symbols become multilayered, "three-dimensional" figures with inner conflict, contradictions, and responsibility; this depth sustains both readerly interest and the contemporary relevance of myth.
5. **Myth as an inexhaustible resource.** Ancient Greek myths

remain an inexhaustible reservoir of narratives and images to which literature continually returns. The steady publication of new reinterpretations testifies to the enduring appeal of classical heritage. In 2025, for example, P. Rogerson's *Aphrodite* and B. Fitzgerald's *A Beautiful Evil* offered fresh perspectives on well-known figures of Greek mythology. Such works are welcomed by contemporary readers with enthusiasm and have been praised by critics, demonstrating that myth continues to serve as a productive and vibrant mode of cultural reimagining.

Thus, this study has achieved its aim of examining the strategies of reinterpreting ancient Greek myth in twenty-first-century literature and demonstrating the artistic functions myth performs in the contemporary text. The analysis has shown that the return to myth is not merely a matter of reminiscence or cultural memory but an active process of creative renewal. It is precisely in new interpretations that myth reveals its significance and becomes an integral part of twenty-first-century culture. It is no coincidence that scholars and literary critics repeatedly return to myth – not only in its classical form but also in its modern reinterpretations, which open up a wealth of new meanings. As it undergoes transformation, the mythological narrative remains a vital part of the literary process and an essential instrument for the critical reflection of culture and human experience.

REFERENCES

Atwood, Margaret. 2005. *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Barker, Pat. 2018. *The Silence of the Girls*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Blanshard, Anthony J.L. et. al. 2020. *The Modern Hercules: Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century*. Leiden: Brill.

Blondell, Ruby. 2013. *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blondell, Ruby. 2023. *Helen of Troy in Hollywood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Burkert, Walter. 1992. *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Detienne, Marcel. 1986. *The Creation of Mythology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Eliade, Mircea. 1963. *Aspects du mythe*. Paris: Gallimard.
Fitzgerald, Bridget. 2025. *A Beautiful Evil*. London: Penguin.
Haynes, Natalie. 2019. *A Thousand Ships*. London: Pan Macmillan.
Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge.
Jung, Carl Gustav. 1959. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
Miller, Madeline. 2011. *The Song of Achilles*. New York: Ecco.
Miller, Madeline. 2018. *Circe*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
Rogerson, Pauline. 2025. *Aphrodite: A Novel*. New York: Hanover Square Press.
Smith, Ali. 2007. *Girl Meets Boy*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
Stafford, Emma. 2012. *Herakles*. London: Routledge.
Su, Tong. 2007. *Binu and the Great Wall of China*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
Tóibín, Colm. 2017. *House of Names*. New York: Scribner.
Vickers, Salley. 2007. *Where Three Roads Meet*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
Winterson, Jeanette. 2005. *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

METRO MANILA AT FIFTY: POVERTY, DENSITY, AND GOVERNANCE

Dennis A. De Jesus

Professor
Polytechnic University,
PHILIPPINES

dennisdejesus035@gmail.com

Abstract: Metro Manila at Fifty highlights the contradictions between economic progress and persistent inequality. Despite having the lowest poverty incidence in the Philippines at only 1.1% of families in 2023, the urban poor continue to face overcrowding, precarious housing, and stigmatisation in times of crisis (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 12–13). This study examines the intersection of poverty, density, and governance through official statistics and qualitative accounts from disaster risk and political studies. Findings reveal that official poverty data often conceal lived vulnerabilities, particularly among informal settlers whose experiences are shaped by overcrowding and inadequate services (Villarama et al. 2021, 3–4). Political dynasties remain dominant in the governance structure, creating barriers to inclusive development and citizen participation (Balanquit et al. 2017, 120–125; Mendoza et al. 2022, 6–7). Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how high-density, impoverished areas suffered disproportionately due to weak social protection and moral labelling of communities as "pasaway" (Eadie et al. 2025, 8–9). These results underscore that poverty in Metro Manila is not solely an issue of economic deprivation but also of governance and spatial vulnerability. The study concludes that reforms in governance, improved measures of deprivation, and stronger citizen engagement are essential to achieve an inclusive and resilient future for the metropolis.

Keywords: Metro Manila, poverty, density, governance, inequality

INTRODUCTION

Metro Manila, also known as the National Capital Region, is the political, economic, and cultural centre of the Philippines. It was

formally declared a metropolitan area on 24 November 1975, by virtue of Presidential Decree No. 824, primarily to harmonise the urban governance of its constituent cities and municipalities. Yet the urban character of Manila draws some of its roots from far before this. Historical records tell that, by the 10th century, the polity of Tondo and the Kingdom of Maynila were thriving centres of trade and politics. With the advent of Spanish colonisation in 1571, the city was carved into the colonial capital, marked by a distinct urban planning paradigm around the walls of Intramuros and church establishments. The infrastructures that would cement Manila's transition into a modern metropolis were foisted upon her through the American regime. The political history of the region since then has remained largely under the control of elite and dynastic families, which continue to play an important role in governance structures today (Balanquit et al. 2017, 118–120). Currently, Metro Manila is the most densely populated urban area in the Philippines.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2024, 14–15), despite having only 1.1% of families living in poverty in the NCR compared to 15.5% nationally in 2023, this data does not fully consider the lived deprivation from being poor in informal settlements. Studies conducted with urban poor communities during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed multiple vulnerabilities, from lack of access to clean water and healthcare to being labelled as "pasaway" (disobedient) when lockdown orders were violated (Eadie et al. 2025, 9–10). This paradox highlights that while Metro Manila appears affluent and modern, issues of inequality and governance capacity remain unresolved. This research, therefore, asks three important questions: (1) How have historical narratives shaped poverty, density, and governance in Metro Manila? (2) In what ways do political, social, and spatial connections influence the lived experiences of urban poor communities amidst overcrowding and deprivation? (3) Which governance reforms are most urgent to address poverty and inequality in high-density areas of Metro Manila, and how can citizen participation strengthen these reforms?

METHODOLOGY

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study combined a review of existing literature with secondary datasets. Official statistics on poverty incidence and population density were obtained from the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2023 report on family and individual poverty (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 5–7). Qualitative studies from publications were also reviewed: Balanquit et al. (2017, 117–142) examined political dynasties of Metro Manila using electoral data (1988–2016); Mendoza et al. (2022, 4–8) unpacked the relationship between dynastic politics and poverty alleviation; Villarama et al. (2021, 2–5) investigated the spatial distribution of COVID-19 positive cases in relation to the density of impoverished communities; and Eadie et al. (2025, 6–11) conducted in-depth interviews with street dwellers to explore experiences of vulnerability during the pandemic. For the sake of analysis, these studies were thematically coded under three interrelated domains: (1) poverty and deprivation, (2) density and spatial vulnerability, and (3) governance and political structures.

RESULTS

Colonisation under Spain and America formed centralised structures of governance that have ejected to its current metropolitan structure. Balanquit et al. (2017, 120–126) demonstrate that the prevalence of political dynasties in the region is high, particularly in Quezon City, Manila, and Caloocan, where families from dynasties hold multiple offices at the same time or over multiple generations. Mendoza et al. (2022, 6–7) showed that areas of high concentrations of dynasties experienced weaker poverty reduction, suggesting elite capture of resources. Second, poverty statistics show contrasts. Though the NCR is the official lowest family poverty incidence in 2023 (1.1%) compared to the national 15.5% rate, studies suggest this as an inadequate measure

of vulnerabilities from informal settlements (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024, 13–15). Villarama et al. (2021, 3–4) have also shown that COVID-19 cases mostly occurred in poor, high-density areas, where infection clusters were statistically distributed among residents living in cramped conditions. Third, qualitative evidence articulates social-political exclusion and stigmatisation. Eadie et al. (2025, 8–10) document that urban poor communities were framed as "pasaway" during lockdown enforcement, with residents facing precarious decision-making between bodily hunger and governance sanctions. However, community solidarity led to resilience through community networks and NGO operations that supported livelihoods, while governance crises remained an issue of equity.

Table 1. Metro Manila Cities: Poverty and Density Data

City	Population (2020 Census)	Area (km²)	Population Density (per km²)	Poverty Incidence of Families (2023, %)
Manila	1854974	42.88	43252	1.5
Quezon City	2960048	161.11	18376	1.2
Caloocan	1661584	55.8	29770	1.4
Makati	629616	27.36	23016	0.8
Pasig	803159	31.46	25529	0.9

The demographic and poverty characteristics of selected cities in Metro Manila are presented in Table 1. The population density in the city of Manila is the highest, with over 43,000 individuals living in every square kilometre, an indicator of severe overcrowding, in space-vulnerable land. Caloocan has a close population density, with nearly 30,000 individuals/kms² occupancy, while Quezon City is the most populous city in Metro Manila, but has the lowest density, due to its overall large size of its land area. Interestingly, poverty incidence does not correlate with the population density of an area. For example, the poverty incidence rate in Manila (1.5%) and Caloocan (1.4%) is higher than that of Makati (0.8%) and Pasig (0.9%). This indicates that poverty rates in Metro Manila, like or

density, do not occur as a result of urban density, and that other, more heuristic economic, governance, social, and quality of services structure impact economic poverty.

Figure 1. Population Density vs. Poverty Incidence

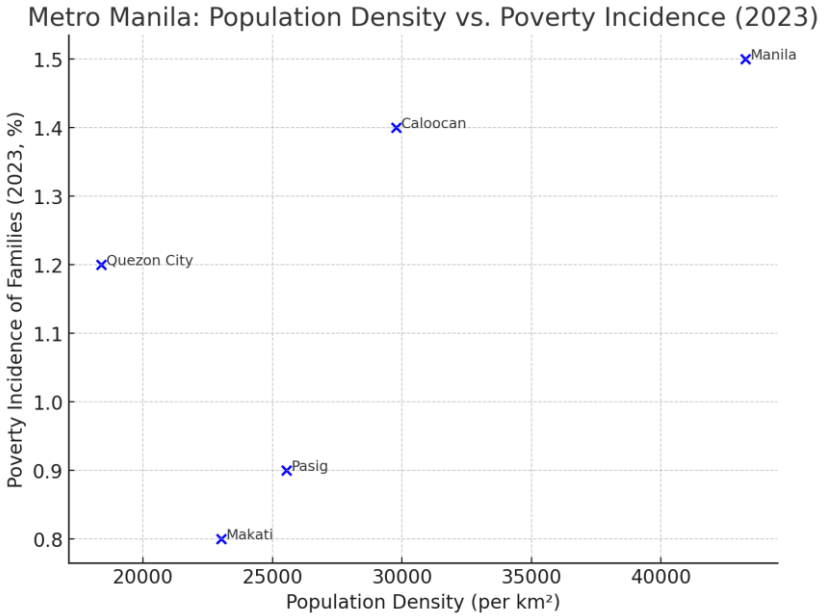

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between population density and poverty incidence across the same cities. The scatterplot illustrates that density and poverty are not naturally related in a simple linear form. Manila and Caloocan show that while high density can be associated with relatively higher poverty incidence, Makati shows that a dense urban environment can also reflect a low poverty incidence, relative to other cities, assuming that economic bases are robust, and governance is efficient. The arrangement of the points illustrates that poverty incidence in Metro Manila is mediated by factors such as employment and housing, and local government performance, not poverty density alone.

In general, the data being presented in the table and figure reflect that poverty in Metro Manila is complex and multifaceted. Density fuels stress on housing, health, and infrastructure, but ultimately its impact will depend on the relative strength of the local economy and governance capacity. For example, indicative of the fact that presumptive high-density makes poverty reduction possible, are cities such as Makati and Pasig, where more established business districts (and thus higher local revenue) are present. Poverty is exacerbated even in neighbourhoods in cities such as Manila and Caloocan with fewer resources and weaker governance systems. These findings support the argument that any efforts to address poverty in Metro Manila will require not just urban planning to address density, but also systemic reform across governance and social protection to ensure that development is inclusive.

Discussion

The results indicate that the inequities present in Metro Manila cannot be understood through poverty rates alone, but must be comprehended through temporal legacies and political systems (Balanquit et al. 2017, 130–135). Political dynasties reinforce the centralisation of power, diminishing democratic participation and inhibiting responsiveness in governance (Mendoza et al. 2022, 7–8). Significant population density, combined with a lack of adequate infrastructure, amplifies socio-ecological vulnerability, as evidenced during the pandemic (Villarama et al. 2021, 4–5). Moreover, the moral othering of the poor and labelling them as "pasaway" demonstrates how governance practices can disaffirm or displace vulnerable groups (Eadie et al. 2025, 9–10). Solutions to such inequities must involve reforms to sectoral governance, investment in equitable housing and infrastructure, and nationwide crisis responses that recognise the dignity and agency of all citizens.

In summary, Metro Manila at fifty serves as an indicator of national development, as well as a reminder of unresolved disparity

issues. While official statistics depict relative wealth, the daily lives of residents in the poorest neighbourhoods expose vulnerabilities that deter resilience and equity. Governance reform is needed, especially reforming political dynasties, broadening participation processes, and reforming anti-poverty programs that take into account urban density and informality. "Competitive" development needs to include social protection, equitable urban planning, and inclusive capacity/protection from crisis so that Metro Manila evolves into a metropolis that is economically competitive and socially and racially just.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Given the qualitative nature of understanding lived experiences in Metro Manila, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate research instrument. Below is a sample interview guide adapted from Eadie et al. (2025):

1. Can you describe your household situation (members, income sources, type of housing)?
2. How long have you been living in this community?
3. How would you describe your access to basic services such as water, electricity, and healthcare?
4. What challenges do you face in obtaining these services?
5. How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect your family's livelihood?
6. Were you able to access government support (cash aid, food packs, healthcare)? Why or why not?
7. What challenges did you experience with the enforcement of restrictions?
8. How do you feel about the label 'pasaway' often used by officials or media?
9. Do you think this label fairly represents your community? Why or why not?

10. What coping mechanisms did you and your neighbours use during the crisis?
11. Were there any NGOs or organisations that supported your community?
12. How would you describe your relationship with local government officials?
13. Do you feel that your voice is heard in decision-making that affects your community?

REFERENCES

Balanquit, R.T., L.P. Coronel, and J.Y. Yambao III. 2017. "Measuring Political Dynasties in Metro Manila." *Philippine Review of Economics* 54 (1): 117–142. https://ideas.repec.org/a/phs/prejrn/v54y2015i1p117-142.html.

Eadie, P., N. Pimentel-Simbulan, Y. Su, and C. Yacub. 2025. "COVID-19 and Urban Poor Communities in Metro Manila: Social Vulnerability and the 'Pasaway.'" *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 125: 105565. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2025.105565.

Mendoza, R.U., J.K. Yap, G.A. S. Mendoza, L. Jaminola III, and E.C. Yu. 2022. "Political Dynasties, Business, and Poverty in the Philippines." *Journal of Government and Economics* 7: 100051. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2022.100051.

Philippine Statistics Authority. 2024. "2023 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics of the Philippines." August 15, 2024. https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/phdsd/2023%20FY%20Official%20Poverty%20Statistics%20Publication_15August2024.pdf.

Villarama, E.P.S., E.B. Lopez, A.R. Sayo, X. Seposo, and C. Smith. 2021. "COVID-19 Is Moving to High-Density, Poor Residential Areas in Metropolitan Manila, Philippines." *Western Pacific Surveillance and Response Journal* 12 (2): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.5365/wpsar.2021.12.2.741

ODYSSEUS' NEST: AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE OBSESSION WITH TERRITORIAL MOBILITY IN JACK KEROUAC'S "ON THE ROAD" AND "THE DHARMA BUMS"

Abdeljalil Melouani

Faculty of Letters and Humanities
Sultan Moulay Slimane University
Beni Mellal, MOROCCO

melouaniabdeljalil@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines the restless mobility at the heart of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" and "The Dharma Bums" as a cultural and spatial problem rooted in the American identity. The paper situates Kerouac's nomadic protagonists within a tradition where movement across space becomes both an act of resistance and a symptom of cultural schizophrenia. Kerouac's ceaseless East-West and North-South trajectories echo the Odyssean myth of return. Yet, the impossibility of a final home destabilises the very notion of belonging, mirroring the ambivalent nature of American identity itself. While previous studies have explored Kerouac through the lenses of exile, mobility, and nomadism, few have interrogated the schizophrenic dynamics of space and identity shaping his narratives. This article extends these approaches by employing post-structural and postcolonial theories—drawing on Lefebvre's production of space, Deleuze's becoming, Bhabha's hybridity, and Said's cultural critique—to reveal how Kerouac's restless cartographies expose contradictions at the core of American cultural production. By linking spatial movement to the politics of identity, exile, and resistance, the paper reveals how Kerouac embodies a minority position through the notion of space, where mobility transforms into both a critique of national myths and a search for alternative cultural geographies in literary expression.

Keywords: American literature, cultural studies, exile, mobility, myth, nomadism, return, space

INTRODUCTION

The United States, even before independence, has been shaped by the idea of exploring other territories since the earliest settlers

(*Britannica* 2025). This tendency of territorial navigation and identification, which still resonates in the 21st century, is an extremely cultural problem having to do primarily with the origins of the American identity. Space here is crucial for it lays the foundation to deconstruct the problematic. Putting culture and literature as "a noble means of investigation and change" into question (Ginsberg 2018, 26), Kerouac's novels *On the Road and The Dharma Bums* depict a restless search for home by moving from East to West and South to North in an endless circular way. This problem unveils the webs of the American dream by locating space as the centre of political and cultural discussion.

The mobility in Kerouac's novels entails an ambivalence that sticks the protagonists into the American world, but at the same time contributes to their restless travel towards a final im/possible home. This paper alludes then to the myth of Odysseus, known for his dream of a final return, while the final nest contradicts the nature of the mytheme, similarly to the American identity. This ambivalence mainly results in the obsession with space, be it political, schizophrenic, or exilic. The Beat generation in this regard has seen in space an outlet that promotes "the search for antidotes to their disillusionment with U.S. culture and politics of their time" (Adams 2009, 157).

This paper exploits the hypothesis of Turner in that the American frontier, since the early settlement, has forged the identity of the nation and the later generations (Turner 1963). Meanwhile, Melehy's adoption of a geographical reading of Kerouac's novels by linking him to the literature of Canadian exile and nomadic cartography opens the angle to situate Kerouac as a cultural minority's writer (*Jack Kerouac and the Nomadic Cartography of Exile* 2012); (*Literatures of Exile and Return*: *Jack Kerouac and Quebec* 2012). In this context, researchers Kherif and Al-khawaldeh (2020) analyse Kerouac according to a nomadic framework through Deleuzian dialectics of becoming. On the other hand, Cresswell links the Geographical reading of Kerouac to mobility as a motif for resistance and instant production (1993).

These works are pivotal in the reformulation of this paper's problematic; however, they do not geographically read Kerouac through the Schizophrenic nature of American identity in relation to the dynamics of space. This article extends and employs resistance and becoming mainly to recurring American cultural production. In order to understand authentically how the American mind works via literary representation, this paper deconstructs the novels using the post-structural and postcolonial approaches by taking concepts for analysis from Lefebvre, Deleuze, Bhabha, and Said.

FROM EAST TO WEST AND FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

In *On the Road* (1957), Sal Paradise leaves New York on the East Coast towards Chicago and then Denver. During seven years, the protagonist moves from the East Coast towards the West Coast and from North to South in a circular motion: New York City, Chicago, Davenport, Des Moines, North Plate, Cheyenne, Denver, Laramie, Salt Lake, Reno, San Francisco, Madera, Los Angeles, San Louis, Washington DC., etc. In the *Dharma Bums* (1958), the same cycle happens but inversely with Ray Smith, who starts his adventures from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Nevada, Washington State and the woods.

The similarity in orientation and difference of start in both novels is very significant and symbolic rather than geographical in political terms. Initially, it is necessary to say that Kerouac's profile has been fascinated with the notions of East and West from his beginnings as a young American man from the Atlantic Shore. In his Correspondence with his sister Caroline Kerouac and brother-in-law Paul Blake in a 1947 letter on March 20th, Kerouac says: "Incidentally I may not go by N.C. in June on my proposed Western trip gotta get back East for our summer vacation a month later, don't I? And Nin, if you can come here this month, great!—Mom is

always dying to have you around and I'm always dying" (*Selected Letters* 1996, 106).

From his words, there is a general sense of enthusiasm and confusion at the same time about East and West that he does not keep to himself but instead shares with his closest people because of extreme excitement that might be interpreted as deep spatial desire by people who are not familiar with him. This excitement, at the same time, comes along with the feeling of death, the depressive death that culminates in staying in a single place for his whole life. Death as a symbol of space appears to be purely abstract, but in fact, it is quite contributive to American life. Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* confirms that representations of space are certainly abstract, but they also play a part in social and political life (Lefebvre 1991, 41).

Sal Paradise similarly exemplifies the same attitude with his swaying mobility between East and West across the years. In 1947, he decides to leave New York and start a trip towards the West: "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that, I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off" (*On the Road*, 3). The protagonist here directly admits that he wants to discover the general state of the country, and that his life has not started until the event of Dean, who introduces him to active being.

Sal then finds himself in a situation of death where his modus operandi is deactivated on the East Coast. The East, then, represents a place of stagnancy and death, where animus is postponed without a possibility of change until the appearance of the mad who plays the role of the destabilising force. The West, on the other hand, forms a dream of the protagonist to achieve within his dead life. A dream of this kind immediately opens up the horizon of possibilities of seeing and experiencing what is absent on the East Coast.

The title of the novel itself, *On the Road,* is symbolic of a definite ongoing process of mobility, but whose destination is unknown. It

is reasonable to say that the road meant here is the one on the West side, the known road of dreams and the countryside for Sal. However, the image for an Eastern man like Sal is blurred by a notion of vagueness and the absence of planning to reach the West. Therefore, the East again is a source of a disarrayed image that does not hinder itself from tormenting Sal, the freedom lover, paralysed within that location. The problem here becomes one of image production, or as Lefebvre describes, the realm of *representational space* (Lefebvre 1991). The ambiguity of a definite point of arrival arises because of the abundance *of associated images* and *symbols* that the American scene produces about space. In other words, it is not the realm of the perceived or the conceived, but the lived space of political control framed by a borderline.

The American scene, based on this, has two split mirrors of the same country, Eastern and Western, that both create a desire to move to the other side. The road in this regard does not start with the first step of leaving New York towards Chicago, but instead it has been underway since the first sparkle of awareness by Sal about the nature of the region where he lives, *representational space*, and the necessity of motion as a symbolic political act of progress. The character has created by his imagination a conflicting binary that influences immigration on a popular scale at the beginning of the travel process.

Different than Sal, Ray moves from South towards North looking for a new adventure: "Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955… my duffel bag under my head and my knees crossed and contemplated the clouds as we rolled north to Santa Barbara… and I intended to sleep on the beach at Santa Barbara that night and catch either another local to San Luis Obispo the next morning or the first class freight all the way to San Francisco at seven p.m." (*The Dharma Bums*, 4). The act of moving from South to North depicts a sense of lack covered by a dream to see the prosperous promised place.

For a man who comes south in a first-class freight towards San Francisco, travel provides an incentive for change during a period

of fall. The month of September embodies the state of germination and death towards a new beginning of life. The individual here undergoes the stage of death, where it is mandatory to pass from the moribund sphere into the creative one. Simultaneously, the idea of putting one's duffel bag under one's hand suggests a strong conviction by the author to highlight the obsession with mobility that an American individual like Ray engulfs within his consciousness.

The obsession of chasing the ideal dream, even when the economic state is not comfortable the thing that imposes on him travelling with goods on a local freight towards the destination. The imperative of commodification during the passage aligns with the same ambiguity Sal Paradise suffers from as the clouds hover above Ray's head, the thing that mirrors his blurred vision about his future within his current place. This bleak vision reflects a castrated *political space* (Lefebvre 1991) that does not establish itself in the absolute form, but is made up of capitalistic, scattered elements of physical dominance.

The sense of uncertainty Kerouac's protagonists feel amidst their travel process reflects a general sentiment of geographical loss in their stagnant environment. The first symptoms of this cultural American obsession with infinite space begin with this phase, where travel merges with individualism around spatial political reformulation and geopolitical signification.

FROM WEST TO EAST

The significance of directions is always in flux for characters and changes across the narrative scheme in the novel. Sal develops a contradicting vision that makes him reminisce about the East that he has always sought to leave:

> (…) and before me was the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent; somewhere far across, gloomy, crazy New York was throwing up

> its cloud of dust and brown steam. There is something brown and holy about the East, and California is white like washlines and empty-headed. (*On the Road*, 71)

Sal finds himself in front of the bitter reality that the West is no better than the East, and immediately, he has to admit his new findings. Within the implications of geography and distance, the West now, for Sal, does not invite intellectualism and elitist ambition as imagined before, but instead it is a place of a brainwashed and empty-headed society.

The East now is a synonym of production and activity, as he labels it 'brown'. The use of colours like brown and white to designate the sacred against the empty is a strong initial symptom of the mad individual state. However, to understand the aspects of the mad traveller here, it is important to stop at the ambivalent shift of truth for Sal and the manner in which he deconstructs his narrative on his own. The binary of colours indicates the instability of signification as time goes by, with the discovery of other states by Sal, who is shocked by what California finally represents, but the issue here lies in 'The American continent'.

The ambiguity that the signification of directions portrays about East and West seems, by the end, to unveil the state's real unproductivity and passivity in general, either in East or in West. In other words, Sal's confusion about the truth of places by swaying from East to West and vice versa is only a mirror of the country's real hideousness by the end. Sal's obsession with the distant border and ignorance of actual place is not only a symptom of the mad behaviour, but also a dangerous alibi of the schizophrenic mentality of the travelling American individual within the no-direction land.

Sal is lost between East and West without knowing he is schizophrenic by nature. This is because he belongs to a world where production and creativity governs the human desire and dreams. Deleuze and Guattari explain this schizophrenic's obsession with the never-ending beginnings: "Production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a cycle whose

relationship to desire is that of an immanent principle. That is why desiring-production is the principal concern of a materialist psychiatry, which conceives of and deals with the schizo as Homo natura" (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 2009, 5).

Deleuze then aligns with Kerouac in that the concept of desire lies in the heart of the schizophrenic, who is the synonym of the mad in Sal's case. The confusion of directions produced is itself the cycle that governs production and desires within the economic system of the country. That is to say, the constant mobility between East and West, looking for enlightenment, is itself a process that feeds the capitalistic system. Otherwise, stability would put the country into a state of stagnation.

The confusion apparent within Sal is the same tendency that made American mobility in the 1950s contagious among American states' borders. Deleuze is quite accurate in using the expression 'Homo natura' for describing madness as a natural phenomenon in this context. The relationship between mobility, production, desire, and Capitalism is one based on the notion of production that schizophrenia stems from, while sticking to a final direction, as an aspect of sanity is somewhat the symbol of death.

Deleuze also confirms the equation by saying: "Putting an end to the process or prolonging it indefinitely… is what creates the artificial schizophrenic found in mental institutions" (2009, 5). In other terms, the social psychiatry, according to Deleuze, is the one responsible for the infinite desire of exploring the American territory by Sal. This engine binds together machinery and animalism regarding travel as a mirror of life for Sal, who remains an unconscious desiring character.

Similarly, Ray voices the same confusion about directions when, together with his friend Japhy are invited to a big intellectual gathering by their beatnik friends. The two meet Alvah Goldbook and Warren Coughlin, who engage in a discussion about East and West. Ray instantly takes the opportunity and says:

> (…) also by strange, unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures, that's what I like about you, Goldbook

> and Smith, you two guys from the East Coast, which I thought was dead. We thought the West Coast was dead!" (*The Dharma Bums*, 49).

The core of identity for them lies essentially in the idea of freedom. What seems to come for Ray and Japhy as a desire to meet the ideal compatriot is undoubtedly the realisation of ubiquitous death across all regions. More precisely, their journey as Sal's reveals a moribund confusion about East and West that ends with a negative conclusion. Following their vision, the reader does not accurately know which place is the real source of death or whether the death of states is real. They, however, indirectly describe a general national state of a 'Terra Incognita' where the political sovereignty governs a national gloom with the coasts as territorial borderlines for individuals.

Space is extremely attached to the idea of death, for Ray insists on the notion of 'living creatures' and 'eternal freedom'. These desires depict a distorted map of the American political class imbued within the American individual who is dismembered from life and freedom across all regions. Within the same scheme, Ray declares through the vision of Japhy: "the hall is the blue sky, the rooms are vacant and empty, the east wall strikes the west wall, at the centre not one thing" (*The Dharma Bums*, 51).

Ray gives the metaphor of a construction to portray the social petrification of the United States, where the space of breathing is only "the blue sky", and narrowness suffocates existence within the American domain. Ray indirectly, through narrating the words of his dear friend Japhy, violently hammers the peculiarities and centrality of American Geopolitics. That is to say, East and West are the same within a country where what lies in the centre is not different from the two coasts, and, additionally, the idea of the centre reflects the absence of a solid construct, as in "not one thing".

Heading South for a New Horizon

On the Road's directions diverge with Sal and Dean deciding to go

South and explore what goes behind the American State. South represents the distant and closest symbol to inferior cultures in the American consciousness; hereby, it is the space of the exilic, as Edward Said coins (*Reflections on Exile*, 1994). By going South, Sal and Dean deconstruct the structure that has always shaped the East versus West dichotomy. This binary is what constantly keeps the dialogue of a unified nation alive, as it has been shaping American history for centuries:

> We note that the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The coast was preponderantly English, but the later tides of continental immigration flowed across to the free lands. This was the case from the early colonial days. (Turner 1963, 44)

As Turner provides, the history of East-West dialogue has started since the colonial period. Yet further than this, history has developed to include the internal mobility that *On the Road* encompasses through Sal and Dean, who, as mentioned before, shatter the historical structure of American frontiers.

By detecting the incentive that drives the American identity with the notion of "the free lands", as Sal, together with Dean, chases freedom, the South represents now a chance of evasion for them from the American world and its monotony towards other possibilities of unknown horizons. It is not East that meets West in this context, but East and West leave the stage for South. The south for them now is a "magic vision" that exceeds the boundaries of reality. The new target of the compass is the new nexus of consciousness that overpasses the predetermined mobility towards a transnational universal awareness whose exilic drives are undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. The nomadic drive, thus, is subject to the political hegemony in the north in that "the power of the nomad's mobility is often remarked upon as an important strategy in the evasion of power" (Adey 2009, 85).

The idea of flying down towards other horizons while the nation's rockribs down the Tierra del Fuego symbolically seems to call for an anti-national feeling of resentment towards internal

politics and the structure of American society overall. However, the sentiment here is not anti-national but rather transnational in order to establish a new ground for the concept of freedom. This transnational process seeks not only abandon the American world and its characteristics but also find new embodiments of the ideal state that the American consensus appears to miss, leading to the problem of exile.

The state these mad young men try to implement resembles an ideal illusive world like the Eldorado, but is struck by the harsh exilic reality. Their vision overlaps with the same political ambition staged in Plato's *Republic*. Following the political nature of the United States regime, Plato's republic (*politeia* in Greek) similarly followed a system of independent city-states (Roochnik 2005, 8). The concept of freedom that Plato criticises leads to a political system where chaos is dominant, and that is what is really happening in Sal and Dean's country, which is primarily founded on the idea of the "free state".

The two characters then try to evade excessive freedom by desiring to head south and towards other worlds that contain 'less freedom' according to the typical essentialist American perception. Ironically, Sal seems superficially to be obsessed with the notion of freedom, but his loss of the compass indicates a strong alignment with Plato's rejection of the 'free' democracy that weakens the city as a metaphor for the state. The rejection of American directions signifies a strong absence of choice and, consequently, the presence of political determinism.

It is systematically an act of spatial reformulation itself to reject the American understanding of the word of freedom and instead follow the patterns of reason and wisdom through the process of travelling, which indicates his conscious choice of exile. However, Sal is very aware of this determinism and that the realisation of his vision of a wise understanding of freedom by his American fellows cannot supersede the imagination by solely the individual "I couldn't imagine this trip" because this I is determined to fail if alone. Instead, the vision he strives to achieve comes only through the collective "and us flying down the curve of the world".

The Dharma Bums ends with Ray alone in the desolation peak with his new job as a fire lookout. He concludes his trip by contemplating nature and saying:

> Everywhere awful icefields and snow straws; one blade of grass jiggling in the winds of infinity, anchored to a rock. To the east, it was grey; to the north, awful; to the west, raging mad, hard iron fools wrestling in the groomian gloom; to the south, my father's mist (The Dharma Bums, 117).

Ray confirms the same idea that consists of the individual against their political cold environment by using the metaphor of the icefields and the single jiggling blade of grass in the wind. Ray has a bleak vision of what is going on in the country, and he sees himself swaying in the winds of infinity, far from the American *habitus* as exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past (Said 1994, 140).

The winds symbolise the same political loss of compass that Sal suffers from, while the "rock" stands for the United States, which represents the disobedient fate for Sal. Ray settles his travels with a sense of despair alongside an awareness of his predetermined American fate, the one of a wild freedom that is rampant everywhere, and the chances of change are low. The gloom ascends with his perception of his generation, who socially compete within a national state of melancholy in either the east, west, or north. Ray sees his vision as infinite, while the nation's is finite and determined to vanish with time. The compass again is broken, with East not giving any signs of hope, while north and west are eaten by the trend of wild freedom.

The protagonist faces, at this final stage, the hard-to-grasp reality that his being fails to accept the land, yet he is obliged to inhabit that environment as the word "anchored" suggests. However, within the same paradox, Ray tries to evade the paradigm of the East that has been historically influenced by Europe, while the West is immersed with fanatic liberalism. He is stuck in the void between a completely imported European ancestral conservatism inhabiting the East, as in the metaphor of "the father's mist", and an insane liberal

orientation that does not align with the American political dream of an ideally governed state. The south again, in another sense, incarnates the political dream Ray feels he has to carry, but faces a disarrayed scenery that hinders the dream from germinating.

The travels of Sal and Ray alongside the development of their travel perceptions hide a mad process of struggle about political signification as American young men. They realise in the beginning that the East is not suitable for meeting their dreams of freedom and thus head towards the West. This representation ideologically anchors in the Eastern consensus since East represents the point of Germination of the United States, and it is itself an unconscious mad attachment to a single linear orientation. However, using Bhabha's concept (*The Location of Culture* 1994), both characters surf in the *in-between* and *third space* as their body is still inside the US despite the mind erring elsewhere, which drowns their existential condition into an *exilic third space*.

Kerouac's protagonists embody the transnational by embracing an alternative vision that tries to transcend their imposed reality towards other horizons (the south and other worlds); however, their vision does not correlate with the nation's paralysed visions. On the other part, their orientation unconsciously aligns with the origins of the American spirit, no matter how nomadic they try to be, which is behind the establishment of the United States. Therefore, they carry inside what they are evading. Sal and Ray reject the American spaces with all its political and cultural aspects, but travelling is the only inadequate insatiable solution, which results again in an unrestful cultural loop.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning, the American identity through the works of Kerouac reveals a mad, insatiable attachment to space. This attachment certainly appears to germinate from the earliest nexus of the country's history. By swaying from East to West, South

to North, West to East, and again North to South, Kerouac's protagonists embody a sense of schizophrenic spatial loss that never settles down, being purely American. Despite transcending the imposed political space towards the unknown horizons, Sal and Japhy are pregnant with an unreachable American dream, and thus indirectly carrying the American mobile tradition. Identity here is paradoxically complex and ambivalent as it sways between the abysses of imaginary space, political schizophrenia, and exilic third-space.

Kerouac successfully paints the schizophrenic mirror of American culture, being the centre of the American identity. The latter, shaped by historical travel and negotiation of borderlines, internally operates even among the very rebels. Kerouac uses space not only as a ground for his narratives but also as a political and cultural expression that reveals what it means to be American. His works in this context are an allegory of American ideology and culture that should be evaluated from a historical perspective (Jameson 2019, 176).

The allegorical has a persistent dimension in the literary and cultural texts, reflecting the fundamental collective thinking and collective fantasies about history and reality (Jameson 1983, 19). Kerouac then succeeds in reviving the myth of Odysseus through his symbolic narrative that depicts a contradictory political and cultural American identity, being lost in spaces but still framed in a geographical background. With this tragic ambivalence, Homer's lines anchor the unrestful American pendulum:

> The good Odysseus now awoke from sleep on his native soil. After so long an absence, he failed to recognise it, because the goddess Pallas Athene, Daughter of Zeus, had thrown a mist over the place. (*The Odyssey* 2003, 174)

REFERENCES

Adams, Rachel. 2009. *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America.* Chicago: Chicago UP.

Adey, Peter. 2009. *Mobility*. London: Routledge.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2025. *American Colonies*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-colonies

Cresswell, Tim. 1993. "Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's *On the Road*." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 (2): 249-262.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2009. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. New York: Penguin Books.

Ginsberg, Allen. 2018. *The Best Minds of my Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Homer. 2003. *The Odyssey*. Translated by E. V. Rieu. London: Penguin Books.

Jameson, Frederic. 2019. *Allegory and Ideology*. New York: Verso.

—. 1983. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. New York: Routledge.

Kerouac, Jack. 1957. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin Books.

—. 1996. *Selected Letters*. New York: Penguin Books.

—. 1958. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Penguin Books.

Kherif, Sonia, and Samira Al-Khawaldeh. 2020. "Spatial Nomadology in Jack Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler*: Kerouac as a Becoming-Nomad." *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science* 8 (12): 1-16.

Lefebvre, Henry. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Melehy, Hassan. 2012. "Jack Kerouac and the Nomadic Cartography of Exile." In *The Transnational Beat Generation*, by Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl, 31-50. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Melehy, Hassan. 2012. "Literatures of Exile and Return: Jack Kerouac and Quebec." *American Literature*. 84 (2): 589-615.

Roochnik, David. 2005. *Plato's Republic: Course Guidebook*. Virginia: The Great Courses.

Said, Edward. 1994. "Reflections on Exile." In *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, edited by Marc Robinson, 137-149. Winchester: Faber & Faber.

Turner, Jackson Frederick. 1963. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.

.

RECYCLING THE REMNANTS OF THE 'MASTER NARRATIVE': DYNAMICS OF (RE)MAKING THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN J.M. COETZEE'S "FOE"

Kamel Abdaoui

Dept. of English
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Kairouan
TUNISIA

kamal.38@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines marginality as a kernel of resistance to hegemonic representation as well as a site of self-fashioning in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986/1987). Conceived as a counter-narrative to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719/2007), Coetzee's novel (re)narrativises or, in a sense, recycles the contingently scattered fragments of alterity, (under)represented as rudimentary and insignificant remnants of the original (hi)story in Defoe's text. Coetzee's text, alternately, opens up a dynamic space of renegotiation that shifts from monologue to dialogue; from narrow ethnocentric and androcentric mindsets that exclude the Other to an awareness of the Self of its own limitations and lack of autonomy to articulate its sameness without harbouring a productive and humanising relationship with difference. Such an ethical and existential necessity for intersubjectivity urges the Self to accommodate alterity as a central and significant agent in the construction of its own subjectivity. While Susan Barton attempts to write (about) the silenced and oppressed Friday, namely, by unfolding or deciphering his 'true' story, she ironically ends up rewriting herself and concurrently empowering her once repressed and spurned narrative by converting it into a site of resistance to and subversion of the dominant discourse of the Centre.

Keywords: centre, margin, remnants, (post)colonial discourse, resistance, rewriting

1. INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986/1987) has been regarded, at least within the critical spectrum of Western literature, as a twentieth-century

narrative that attempts to write back to the eighteenth-century literary canon, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719/2007). Defoe's novel is not just a text that marks the debut of the English novel, but it is more importantly a 'master'[1] text that reverberates logocentric and Eurocentric discourses of early European colonial military and political-economic extension beyond the old continent's geographical limits. In this context, most of the postcolonial critics have highlighted the colonial and imperial bearings and implications of Defoe's text, readdressed in Coetzee's *Foe*. To mention but a few, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stresses the undermining effect of Coetzee's novel as it exposes the slippages and egocentric excesses of the white colonial demeanour in *Robinson Crusoe* as a text representing or speaking for the Western Centre. For her, "*Foe* is more about spacing and displacement […]. This is perhaps the result of the colonial white's look at the metropolitan classic" (Spivak 1990, 7). Ayo Kehinde, respectively, has also placed Defoe's text within colonial economics by contending that, "It is an early eighteenth-century testament to the superiority of rational civilisation over nature and savagery, a text that foregrounds the developing British Empire's self-representation through encounters with its colonial Others" (Kehinde 2006, 98). Last but not least, in his reading of *Foe*, David Attwell maintains that, "[b]ased on a revision of *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel [Coetzee's *Foe*] develops a characterology of the relations of power between the metropolitan centre and the settler-colonial and native sectors of colonial society" (1993, 103-104). The intersections between these critical positions revolve around the centre/margin dichotomy characterising the encounters between Self and Other in colonial contexts.

As an attempt to revisit the critical hub concerning the dialectic between centre and margin, this paper claims that the margin, with all its different connotations, could be read as an enabling space of mobility through which Coetzee, so to argue, manages to recycle the remnants of Defoe's narrative by giving them a subversive dimension that (dis)locates all what is distanced, misrepresented, underrepresented, and silenced at the centre of his novel, *Foe*. In this

vein, this paper examines, at a first step, Coetzee's rewriting of Crusoe, the central protagonist-narrator and enunciator of discourse in Defoe's novel, as 'Cruso,' a third-person character whose early death by the end of the first chapter displaces him on the fringe of the narrative. Then, the discussion orients towards the introduction of Susan Barton not only as a 'female' protagonist-narrator, raising by that gender empowerment or disempowerment issues, especially, in her triadic power relation with Cruso on the island then with Mr Foe in England, but above all, as the central consciousness of the narrative whose encounter with Friday has instigated an ethical transformation of her subjectivity. The inclusion of the figure of alterity in the story turns Susan Barton's narrative into a permeable thread pervaded with silences and apertures from which the Other peeps out or "irrupts", using Derek Attridge's term[2]. This falls within the scope of what Jacques Derrida designates as the unexpected presence of the 'arrivant', whose sudden 'visitation' (over)takes the Self into an act of awaiting without being waiting for[3]. The last articulation in this paper explores the way Coetzee puts at play the different extents and twists of Friday's character by presenting his alterity as a form of un-identity, an incommensurable conundrum that not solely interrupts Susan's adamant endeavour to bring her narrative to a teleological significant conclusion, but it equally disrupts the liberal humanist and logocentric conceptualization of the other as an intelligible and containable entity, bound to the power systems of representation and hierarchization.

2. *FOE*'S CRUSO: THE LEGACY

In Coetzee's *Foe*, the poetic and narrative complexities of Crusoe as the eponymous protagonist and narrator in Defoe's novel are conspicuously peeled away. The omission of the 'e' in the spelling of his first name, coupled with referring to him in the third person, which indicates his loss of the subject-position in the enunciation of

discourse, make out of Coetzee's Cruso an artful reduction to rudimentary and archetypal traits of Defoe's Crusoe. Such a minimisation is not so much an act of curtailment or limitation of Crusoe's character and characterisation as it is a process of revisioning through which Coetzee reconstructs a radically different character with a different agenda, more than just being a mere doppelganger. By being attributed an allegorical dimension[4] more than a realistic one, Cruso is staged in Coetzee's text as a dislocated, decontextualized and probably dehistoricized version of the original Crusoe in Defoe's novel. This is reflected in the dramatic change in the plot, the course of events, and the symbolic and discursive construction of the character itself in the text.

While Crusoe is offered the chance to be rescued and transferred back to England, which probably opens the door for further colonial explorations and adventures, the Cruso of *Foe* is not. Commenting on Cruso's early exit from the narrative, Jane Poyner contends that "whilst Cruso, the essential colonizer in *Robinson Crusoe*, is relegated to the margins of Coetzee's story: not only is he supplanted by Barton as narrator and author of the adventure, he also dies in the early stages of the narrative, not making the ideologically all-important journey home" (Poyner 2009, 92). Cruso's teleological journey towards achieving the colonial project, as emphasised in Defoe's novel, is cut short in Coetzee's narrative. In *Foe*, Cruso could not survive the act of leaving the island, his dominion, where he is the absolute and incontestable "Master" (22) and "the true king of his island" (*Foe* 1987, 17). Except in the first chapter of the novel, his existence in the rest of the narrative takes the form of a mere matrimonial honorific that provides Susan Barton with a social cover or umbrella to survive the detriments of misjudgement as a single and helpless woman in a male-dominated sphere. On the board of the ship taking her back home, Susan Barton is advised by the captain to "call Cruso [her] husband and declare [they] had been shipwrecked together, to make [her] path easier on board" (42), that is, to avoid or at least to put a curb on the high risk of being sexually assaulted or abused by the crew.

Shortly after reaching her homeland, England, homeless and penniless, Susan finds herself compelled to live in a clandestine way in "lodgings in Clock Lane" where she has to "go by the name of *Mrs Cruso*" (47, emphasis added). Apart from the first chapter, Cruso's presence in the narrative is reversed into an absence, where he is dwindled to a lingering memory of a shadowy spectre that would haunt Susan Barton's story.

Unlike Crusoe, who is presented as an enthusiastic adventurer, an explorer, and an emblem of European expansionist spirit, entrusted with the mission of civilizing and dominating his surroundings[5], Cruso is depicted in Coetzee's narrative as an atrophic and callous figure whose only interest or passion, little if any he has, is cantered upon building terraces as means to impose territorial control over the island through colonial modes of mapping and dissection of colonized space. From the very beginning of the narrative, the staggering presence of the colonial apparatus is indicated by the process of compartmentalising space on the island. The power acquisition of space is metaphorically galvanised in the Cruso's building of terraces and fences on the island. In the first chapter of the novel, all the events and actions take place in an uncharted and unknown territory, designated by Susan Barton as 'Cruso's Island'. The only physical markings that Susan pays attention to are Cruso's cottage, built over a hill and surrounded by terraces. When inquisitively asked by Susan about his reticence to make use of other possible tools and resources in the wreckage for other activities like farming and carpentry instead of limiting his quotidian labour to building terraces only, he sternly responds: "The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them" (33). Cruso seems to act as a founding father of the early European colonies, where he installs boundaries and erects barriers separating civilisation from savagery and open wilderness, especially the threat of possible attacks by "apes" as well as "cannibals" (14). "Clearing ground and piling stones" (33), as he explains to Susan, becomes his ultimate reason for being, the supreme work and achievement of his

existence. Shortly after having been rescued by a ship, he does not survive. Without his territorial markings on the island, he dramatically succumbs to his illness and dies.

Cruso is depicted as a white man of European descent who settles on the island. As a coloniser, he spreads his power not only through the domination of space but through the control of colonial subjects. His ideology of 'the white man's burden' is realised through his control over Friday, the second inhabitant of the island. Cruso is presented as an enigma in the story; there is no account of his earlier life or inner feelings. Although he is not muted like Friday, they both share the same trait of having a recondite mode of existence. Accordingly, there is no real communication between Friday and Cruso. Silence, isolation, loneliness, and a lack of linguistic exchange characterise the relationship between the two characters. While the 'tongueless' Friday is robbed of his voice, Cruso seems to be reticent to keep a record of his (hi)story. Reflecting on Cruso's unwillingness to keep a diary, Susan realises that "Cruso kept no journal […] because he lacked the inclination to keep one" (16). She seems to settle with the idea that "Cruso on his island is a better thing than the true Cruso, tight-lipped and sullen in an alien England" (35). Commenting on Susan Barton's frustration at Cruso's abstruse and lethargic posture, David Attwell argues, "Coetzee's Cruso is unmoved by Susan's desire for authorisation. In fact, in his taciturn resistance and self-absorption, his refusal to keep a journal, his reluctance to do anything to save himself, he is quite unlike his model (being closer, if anything, to *Defoe's* model)" (Attwell 1993, 107). Probably, Coetzee's deviation from the original model is not so much a recreation of a new model, but it would be rather a distillation process that brings to the front the representational and discursive aspects underpinning Defoe's Crusoe. This can be detected in the master-slave relation between Cruso and Friday in *Foe*. The former is presented as the archetype of the white male coloniser in the text. Besides giving strict commands and orders to Friday, Cruso forces the latter to do hard labour by assigning him the task of carrying stones to build terraces

around the cottage. When Susan Barton asks Cruso about the reason why Friday does not know many English words, he informs her that there is "no need of a great stock of words" (21). Cruso refuses the idea of educating Friday; he indirectly gets rid of English as a language that could connect Friday with Western culture as a set of ideas, values, attitudes, and social mores. For him, the basic needs and pragmatic knowledge, rather than the sophisticated manners, would be enough to teach Friday practical commands.

While striving to teach Friday language to break his silence, a task ironically inherited from Cruso, Susan Barton fails short of surmounting the limits of the Eurocentric self-representation of the white man as being the centre of civilisation, ordained with a mission to enlighten other people(s). In her letter to Mr Foe, the novelist in the story, she confesses: "I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me, and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times, I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness" (60). Feeling ruffled by Friday's irrevocable silence, Susan Barton understands that her humane sympathy for him is not enough to establish an interactive pattern of communication. She seems to retrograde in her stance on the Other, though with an undertone of shame, by conforming to Cruso's colonial utilisation of education as an instrument of power—camouflaged as a white man's responsibility to educate and civilise colonial subjects—that serves as its ultimate goal to modulate and eventually subjugate the colonised.

3. Susan Barton: The Ethical Burden

Besides Cruso and Friday, the two male characters on the island, Susan Barton is introduced as the only female inhabitant, "my name is Susan Barton, and I am a woman alone" (10). Although she stands out as the main voice of the text, Susan Barton is represented as a denigrated and historically silenced figure striving to claim an

authorial voice in an androcentric space. At the opening scene, Susan Barton is first depicted as a powerless and vulnerable person, her "hands blistered", her "back burned", her "body ached". She was nearly half-naked in her "petticoat" (1), struggling to reach the island. Being a white European lady does hardly spare Susan the fate of being treated as the third subject on the island because she is merely a 'woman.' She is subjugated both as a castaway and a different gender. During her stay, her movement around the island is harnessed by Cruso as she is not allowed to go beyond the terraces. Regardless of sharing the same ethnic and cultural background, the relationship between Susan and Cruso is by no means intimate and mutual. Cruso does not show any interest in knowing about her story before reaching the island. He sees her only as an unwanted burden on 'his' island. He is the king of the island, his "castle" (9), where everybody should comply with his rules.

Notwithstanding her efforts at surmounting the barriers elevated around Cruso's subjectivity, Barton fails to establish a reciprocal and equivalent relationship with him. In her pursuit of self-positioning, she uses her charms as a female to attract Cruso. Her body becomes the only space to confront men in her life since her voice is suppressed. She is sexually abused and humiliated by the mutinous crew before reaching the island. On the island, she gives herself to Cruso in the hope of experiencing a romantic adventure—the utopian pattern of Adam and Eve in paradise. But her venture comes to no avail as she regretfully admits, "Cruso did not use me again. On the contrary, he held himself as distant as if nothing had passed between us" (35). Cruso shuns her overture as he barely regards her as a commensurate match or partner in any love relationship. Acknowledging her failure to communicate with him, Susan comes to the conclusion that, "After years of unquestioned and solitary mastery, he sees his realm invaded and has tasks set upon him by a woman" (25). Bearing such a deeply ingrained misogynistic mindset, Cruso views Susan Barton solely as a female castaway who has to be subjected to his will. However, Cruso's illness and death on the ship while leaving the island hardly put

Susan on the track of liberation from subalternation and dependency; rather, it takes her into another path of struggle for her autonomy and agency as a storyteller.

Shortly after settling in England, Susan Barton embarks on an epistolary journey with Mr Foe, the novelist who is supposed to write her story on the island. At first, she bears high expectations that the latter would treat her respectfully as an intellectual equivalent, away from the bigoted stereotypical representation of women as marginalized weak creatures. Nevertheless, to her misfortune, Mr Foe turns out not to be so much different from Cruso in terms of their outlook on women. During the face-to-face encounter between Susan Barton and Mr Foe, the acts of subjugation are carried on, but this time they are overtly mixed with some insinuations of a possible sexual exploitation. In the scene in which Susan Barton meets Mr Foe in his house, he offers her accommodation in his private "lodging house" (130) with a "soft bed" (137). After making love, Susan realises that despite the social and spatiotemporal distances separating the two men (Mr Foe and Cruso), they are not too much different in inscribing their phallocentric statements of power on her female body. While in bed with Mr Foe, Susan Barton confesses, "I might have thought myself in Cruso's arms again; for they were men of the same time of life, and heavy in the lower body, though neither was stout; and their way with a woman too was much the same" (139). After two failed attempts at establishing a reciprocal pattern of interaction with the two white males in the story, Susan Barton realises that she is framed within a representational power grid that promotes the deprecating assumptions and clichés about women as supine, inferior, and thus othered figures of society. In an act of revulsion and resistance to processes of containment, Susan reclaims her independent agency in the face of censorship imposed by Mr Foe. Addressing him, she exasperatedly declares: "I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to

her own desire" (131). Susan Barton recognises that she is doubly subalternized, not so much for being a homeless and social castaway as it is for being a woman in a world dominated by men. After meeting Mr Foe in person, it is her voice as a storyteller which becomes the target of processes of modulation and restriction exerted by patriarchy. In order to escape such unbalanced relationships with Cruso and Mr Foe, where she occupies the position of the oppressed, Susan resorts to Friday, the historically oppressed Other, to forge out a dynamic and liberating form of subjecthood operating in a more enabling space of intersubjectivity, away from the rigid and monolithic structures of her cultural identity.

Susan Barton's encounter with Friday correlates with an ethical awakening that empowers her to challenge the binary or either-or logic encapsulated in the dominant Eurocentric and androcentric discourses present in the novel, where Friday is (mis)represented as a 'negro' and, respectively, Susan is (under)represented as a 'female.' While the two white male characters, Cruso and Mr Foe, fail to accommodate an intersubjective relationship with the ethnically (Friday) and sexually (Susan) different Other(s) as they maintain their monadic and narcissistic posture throughout the narrative, it is Susan Barton who is endowed with the propensity to embrace a fluid and post-binary form of subjectivity that entitles her to take an ethical action towards the tortured and silenced Other.

Unlike Defoe's novel, where the encounter with Friday is a minor and inconsequential event within Crusoe's solipsistic and self-centred narrative, Susan Barton's stumbling upon Friday at the opening scene of Coetzee's novel has a pivotal effect on the subsequent events in the story as it exposes the stereotypes and clichés upon which the representation of alterity is predicated. At the first sight of Friday, Susan describes him as follows: "A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him […]. He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick

lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust" (6). The physical portrait of Friday in *Foe* is not just a recycling of the remnants of Defoe's Friday; it is rather a thorough rewriting or recreation of the character, more probably for a different finality. Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* is depicted as young, vivid, with a close *European* physical allure rather than that pertaining to a *negro*: "he had all the Sweetness and Softness of an *European* […]. His Hair was long and black, not curled like Wool; his Forehead very high, and large, and a great Vivacity and sparkling Sharpness in his Eyes […] His Face was round and plump; his Nose small, not flat like the Negroes" (Defoe 1716/2007, 173). If we juxtapose the two texts, all the physical traits of the eighteenth century's Friday are entirely reversed in the twentieth century's one. Coetzee disentangles Defoe's Friday from the colonial/imperialist representation which gives him an air of 'European-ness,' by reappropriating him his African-ness or 'negroness,' as referred to by Susan Barton in *Foe*. By doing so, Coetzee manages to reposition Friday a priori to or beyond the grasp of the colonial discursive mechanisms of othering by presenting his otherness as a disjunction in the text, defying acts of containment and normalisation.

In colonial discourse, the process of othering produces and maintains an image of the Other as an appendix to the Self, where the former is only an alienated and deformed construct. In "Three Women's Texts and Critique of Imperialism", Spivak maintains that the image of the Other is an inevitable corollary of imperialism. She holds that "the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (1985, 253). The colonial process of othering, therefore, tends to produce a distorted image of the Other, whether it be positive or negative, authentic or imaginary, that serves an ultimate end: defining the Self. Nevertheless, Coetzee's reference to Friday as a "dark shadow", as mentioned earlier, seems to go beyond the idea that the Other is so much an oblique construction, an object of desire or fear that re-echoes and in a way reverberates the Self. Rather, the Other's

spectral and obscure presence, especially in a number of Coetzee's texts, not only bears witness to the colonial history of violent silencing and eclipsing of alterity, but it more importantly prompts an ethical process of transformation that some Coetzeean characters experience[6]. Mike Marais contends that some Coetzeean novels suggest that "the self's encounter with the ungraspability of the other" (Marais 2001, 118) reflects Coetzee's ethical concern with alterity as "he refuses to attempt to represent the Other in his fiction" (Marais 2000, 161). The enigmatic and shadowy air shrouding the Barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*, for instance, has placed the Magistrate and Mrs Curren respectively into a moral quandary as they both end up questioning their own sense of belonging to the colonising group[7].

In *Foe*, despite the ostensible racial and cultural chasm separating the two characters at the beginning of the narrative, the first contact between them on the beach is described in physical terms, emphasising the corporeal proximity as a substitute platform of human mutuality rather than the ideology-laden discursive structures of representation embedded in language. At her first sight of Friday, Susan has recourse to the mainstream stereotypical representation of blacks as uncivilised and savage people when she thinks that he is one of the cannibals. Nonetheless, after giving her water and then offering his back to carry her, all her fears dissipate after such an act of hospitality translated into body intimacy. The corporeal reciprocity between Susan Barton and Friday, which starts on the beach and continues throughout the story till the last scene at the bottom of the sea, symbolically invokes a process of liquefaction between the two characters. This fluid and intersubjective relation between Self and Other in *Foe* is discussed within a Levinasian conceptualisation of physical proximity. Emmanuel Levinas suggests that such a non-mediated and embodied relation between subjectivities is a space of "pure communication" (Levinas 1998, 134) that is capable of substituting the hegemony of representation. The significance of proximity with the Other, Levinas puts forward, lies in the condition of being "the-

one-for-the-other, exposedness of self to another, it is immediacy in caresses and in the contact of saying. It is the immediacy of a skin and a face" (84-85). The sense of responsibility triggered by the Other's corporal contiguity exceeds any struggle by the Self to assimilate the Other or recognise its alterity because it is in this recognition that the Self tends to transform the Other from incommensurability to intelligibility. Following this logic of self-substitution for the Other, the Self jeopardises its sameness by undergoing a process of erasure that ends up with the loss of the unitary and autochthonous sense of identity the moment it comes face to face with otherness. The corporeal presence of the Other, as an irreducible and thus unintelligible entity, disrupts the frontiers between identities and subverts presumptions of homogeneity and originality.

Within this framework, the body contiguity between Susan Barton and Friday could be read as an ethical turn that opens up a space of non-verbal interaction and reciprocity between Self and Other in the text. While describing this first physical contact with Friday, Susan discloses, "I hesitated to accept, for he was a slight fellow, shorter than I. But there was no help for it. So part-way skipping on one leg, part-way riding on his back, with my petticoat gathered up and my chin brushing his springy hair" (6). Her vulnerability as a washed away woman with sore hands is met with Friday's saviour-like allure with a "dazzling halo" around him. Instantly and without any hesitation, he offers her a "backwards embrace" (6) as a gesture of hospitability and tenderness despite the ontological abyss between them.

4. Mutilated & Muted Friday: The Embodied Otherness

Friday's presence in the story as a speechless black slave from an African origin is in itself a memento of the Western colonial legacy, especially what has become termed the slave triangular or transatlantic trade. After learning about the mutilation incident,

Susan keeps wondering about his muteness. Being tongueless, Friday is unrepresented and disempowered and therefore his identity remains a riddle and a blank space for Susan to ponder on. However, undeterred by the deeply-seated racial and cultural boundaries separating them, Susan works hard to break the silence around him, to reach out for his true story. Throughout almost the entire story, Susan keeps questioning him about the identity of his mutilators and the reason why they cut his tongue, a labyrinth of speculations and queries without the slightest clues to know anything about his past. In an eventual attempt to make Friday reveal the truth about his identity, she tries to communicate with him via music. Thinking that music as a universal non-verbal language can actually be an effective and probably a reliable vehicle of interaction, she confides: "As long as I have music in common with Friday, perhaps he and I will need no language" (97).

At first, Susan tries to learn to play the flute as she manages to get some responses from Friday. However, after many tries, she comes to the realisation that Friday remains closed upon himself, unwilling to reciprocate with her. She bitterly admits, "all the elation of my discovery that through the medium of music I might at last converse with Friday was dashed, and bitterly I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself" (98). In a final bid to unfold the mystery surrounding Friday's story, Susan Barton provides him with "a slate" to enact the mutilation through drawing. Against her expectations, Friday draws a picture of "walking eyes" (147), but he hides his drawings from her. He avoids any occasion to respond to Susan's obsessive desire to know him. Friday seems to withstand the panoptic power of surveillance exerted by Susan's both authorial and sometimes authoritative and inquisitive acts of probing, which would consequently reduce him into an object of study. Susan's recourse to the sensory and auditory means of communication falls short of creating an immediate and straightforward pattern of exchange capable of breaking the wall of silence insulating the Other in the narrative. The absence of Friday's (his)story makes Susan's narrative devoid of any interest or any

centre. Friday remains a sort of conundrum, a cryptic text challenging her authorial attempts to write him as a commensurable character in her story. Eventually, Friday's adamant rejection to respond to her multiple but fruitless communicative overtures pushes Susan Barton to desperately admit that all her endeavour is "a time being wasted by time" (70).

The role of language as an effective platform of interaction that can permeate the rigid structures of representation is undermined in the final scene of the novel: "But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157). Friday's mutilated and dismembered body stands as an aporia in the face of Susan's varied methods of communication, which often turn into acts of coercion to make Friday respond to her attempts. Susan's assumptions that through language it could be possible to reach a certain level of unity, wholeness, and significance seem to lose ground when it comes to representing or narrating alterity. In colonial discourse, otherness is negated, obliterated or, if not, subjugated and contained within closed conceptual and linguistic systems of representation. Therefore, the other is ripped off of his/her difference and is shrunk to a linguistic and discursive construct, an alienated and distorted stereotypical image of all that the self *is* or is *not*.

In his article, "Postcolonial Temporality of J. M. Coetzee's Foe (1986)", Benjamin Goh emphasises the disruptive potency of silence in resisting processes of assimilation and normalisation. Describing Friday as "the guardian of the margin", he maintains that "it is Friday rather than Susan who is the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text […], there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that cannot be unlocked. "The native", whatever that might mean, is not only a victim, he or she is also an agent". (Goh 2023, 114). This reading of the Other's silence as an intentional and active agency in the narrative seats Friday's tonguelessness as a somatic and unintelligible text that seeks to dilute colonial authorship through postulating corporeality as a counter-narrative

to representation. In this vein, by operating beyond the linguistic signification, Friday's mutilated body imparts a different story of what is negated, denied or forgotten in colonial history, narrativised this time by its own painful silence. Interviewed by David Atwell about the silence of Friday, Coetzee interestingly states:

> Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (Attwell 1992, 248)

Coetzee posits the body as a counterargument to the uncertainty of language. For him, the body as a non-linguistic signifier has a sort of access to meaning and truth that language cannot attain. The sense of undeniable truth that Friday's suffering body imparts in the final chapter of the novel reverses the authority of language cherished by the three other characters, Susan Barton, Mr Foe, and Cruso. In the last scene, the picture of Friday enchained reveals all the atrocities of slavery and exploitation of black people in South Africa or probably the whole continent: "In the last corner, under the transforms, half buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs […] the chain about his throat" (157). Although Friday is speechless, his silence marks his presence as a testimony of pain and suffering. The intense and heavy presence of the Other's violated body offers the possibility of an ethical transformation in the text. Before the last chapter of the novel, Susan believed that through her authorial voice as a storyteller, it would be possible for her to decipher and unfold Friday's true story, but all her endeavours to interpret his enigmatic silence, to unveil the history of violence and oppression related to his cut tongue, end in vain.

At the end of the story, Susan's narrative voice unexpectedly disappears when it is mysteriously replaced by an anonymous narrative voice. In the fourth chapter, Susan is referred to in the third person: "On the landing I stumble over the body, light as straw, of a woman" (155). Susan Barton, as a narrator and an

enunciator of discourse, makes her exit. She concedes her voice, her subject position, and reaches out for Friday in his silence at the bottom of the sea. Throughout the narrative, Susan has held the belief that appropriating her agency through storytelling is sufficient to claim and maintain her independence and autonomy. But after coming face to face with the ugly and inhuman truth about the tortured and silenced Other, Susan's concern about reclaiming her voice as a woman transforms into an ethical quest for self-realisation achieved through human reciprocity and interrelatedness with Friday. Emphasising the centrality of the Other in the moral development of the Self, Derek Attridge argues that "without responsibility for the other […] there would be no other; with no other, repeatedly appearing, always different, there would be no same, no self, no society, no morality" (Attridge 2004, 127).

Earlier in the narrative, Susan experienced a sense of loss and confusion when confronted with the unexpected and disruptive presence of alterity in her subjecthood. She eloquently describes the Other's presence in intimate terms, "We yield to a stranger's embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes […]. What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives?" (30). The only way for Susan Barton to cope with the serendipitous encounter with the Other is to accommodate alterity into her subjecthood, not by speaking for the Other this time but ironically by abnegating her authorial voice, loaded with ideological assumptions and prejudice about otherness, and join Friday in his silence through body intimacy and communion.

The body itself, to extend the metaphor in the text, turns into a permeable parchment full of 'cracks' and 'chinks' through which the other could possibly articulate his/her voice away from 'wakeful' 'vigilance' of the Self–evoking by that to the ocular power of surveillance and control inherent in dominating systems. At the last scene, she is described stretching in bed with Friday: "The couple in

the bed lie face to face, her head in the crook of his arm" (155). This is not so much an act of self-erasure as it is an act of self-merging, a process of liquefaction that is capable of offering a space of communication and intersubjectivity with the Other. It is only now that Friday, the silenced Other in the story, has the power or the will to open his mouth and let a "slow stream" flow across his body and then it "runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (157). In this final scene, the once disparaged 'slave' and 'negro' becomes able to occupy a central position in the narrative, gaining by that an authority and probably authorship, not in words but through his body, to finalise the story in Coetzee's novel. Probably, the only aperture offered to Susan to access Friday, to overcome the cultural and racial hurdles between them, is to share the corporeal space with the Other in a final gratifying 'embrace.

5. Conclusion

This paper has hitherto argued that Coetzee's *Foe* is a rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* where he manages to recentralize the marginalised leftovers of Defoe's narrative by allotting them a subversive scope in his novel. Starting with Coetzee's Cruso, on the face value of reading, it sounds like a reproduction of Defoe's Crusoe, and therefore it stands as a crossroad intertextual character linking the two texts. However, with a scrutiny of the text, it is an entire reinterpretation of the character that makes it much closer to Coetzee's earlier characters such as Dawn, Jacobus, Colonel Joll, and Mandel, who embody the dominating imperialist and androcentric ideologies in his fiction. Immersed within his monadic and solipsistic mode of existence, Cruso ultimately fails to assume a fluid subjectivity that would allow him to perceive of the sexually and ethnically different Other(s) as equal human counterparts.

It is rather through the introduction of the character of Susan Barton as a female protagonist-narrator that Coetzee succeeds in

bringing in the ethical issues concerning the white male ontological view of the world implanted in the original plot of the Western canonical text. Susan's encounter with Friday, the mut(ilat)ed Other, triggers a process of moral awakening and liquefaction that eventually leads her to relinquish her authorial agency. Unlike the two other male characters, who are presented as morally blind, Susan Barton is invested with the ethical capacity of departing from preconceived, panoptic, and limiting frames of identity and venturing into a fortuitous but productive space of change and becoming.

As importantly, through the reconstruction of Friday as an incommensurable silent figure of alterity, whose *tongelessness* has been at the centre of Susan's interests and preoccupations throughout the whole story, Coetzee puts into question the ability of some idiomatic systems of representation inherent in Western logocentrism to access or retrieve any true and significant meaning when it comes to understanding alterity. Nevertheless, even supposing that Friday's unique act of articulating his voice by the end of the narrative is a worthwhile attempt at recuperating agency that would lead to new pathways of resistance, it is the corporeal proximity between subjectivities that gains more significance in the text as it potentially opens up a fluid and extensive space that is capable of engulfing the Self and the Other into an intersubjective continuum.

ENDNOTES

1. While Jean-François Lyotard coined "metanarrative" as a totalizing legitimation story (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 1979, xxiii–xxiv), Fredric Jameson reinterpreted it, arguing late capitalism persists as a new master narrative (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 1991, 17–18).
2. Attridge 2004, 138.
3. This is a reformulation of Derrida's definition of unconditional hospitality according to which the other's 'visitation' turns up "unexpectedly,

inevitably, defying any horizon of expectation and any possible anticipation" (Derrida 2000, 83).

4, Among the critics who tackled the issue of allegory in Coetzee's early fiction is Stephen Slemon, who relates Coetzee's subversive use of allegory in his early fiction to the "revisioning and reappropriation of allegory" ("Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History" 1988, 162). For Slemon, the traditional structures of allegory, in a way, concur with the colonial hierarchical system of representation that tends to privilege the Self and inferiorize the Other in order to legitimise and maintain the status quo of colonisation.

5. This is used in the context of what Edward Said terms as "mission civilisatrice" in relation to the Western colonial enterprise during the 18th and 19th centuries (*Orientalism* 1978, xv).

6. In 'Yes, I am giving him up': Sacrificial responsibility and likeness with dogs in JM Coetzee's recent fiction", Lucy Graham emphasizes the moral implication of the Self/Other intersubjectivity in Coetzee's fiction from a Levinasian perspective, "For Levinas, the "face" is the embodiment of the other's demand which orders and enables the subjectivity of the self" (2002, 6).

7. It is worth noting that the feelings of guilt and shared responsibility between the perpetrator of torture and his/her compatriots are a recurrent motif in Coetzee's early fiction. Rafe McGregor (2017) sheds light on the dubious but reciprocal relation between the person of the torturer and some Coetzeean protagonists. In *Waiting for the* Barbarians, he argues, Coetzee emphasises the idea of shared guilt "by blurring the distinction between the torturer and the man of conscience, thereby asserting that all citizens of the empire share moral responsibility for the torturer's atrocities" ("The person of the Torturer" 49).

REFERENCES

Attridge, Derek. 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.

Attwell, David. (Ed.). 1992. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

_____. 1993. *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Coetzee, J.M. 1987. *Foe*. London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1986).

Defoe, Daniel. 2007. *Robinson Crusoe*. London: Oxford UP. (Original work published 1719).

Derrida, Jacques. 2000. *Of Hospitality*, trans. R. Bowlby. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Goh, Benjamin. 2023. "Postcolonial temporality of J. M. Coetzee's Foe (1986)." *Law and Humanities* 17 (1): 112–138.

https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2022.2148369

Graham, Lucy. 2002. 'Yes, I am giving him up': Sacrificial Responsibility and Likeness with Dogs in J.M. Coetzee's Recent Fiction. *Scrutiny: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 7 (1): 4-15.

Kehinde, Ayo. 2006. "Post-Colonial African Literature as Counter-Discourse: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Reworking of the Canon." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 32 (3): 92-121.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Marais, Mike. 2000. 'Little Enough, Less than Little, Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46 (1): 159-182.

——. 2001. Literature and the Labour of Negation: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*.: *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36 (1): 107-126.

McGregor, Rafe. 2017. "The Person of the Torturer: Secret Policemen in Fiction and Nonfiction." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51 (4): 44-59.

Poyner, Jane. 2009. *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Slemon, Stephen. 1988. "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23 (1): 157-68.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. "Three Women's Texts and Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 243-61.

——. 1990. "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's 'Crusoe/Roxana.'" *English in Africa* 17 (2): 1-23.

HYPOCRISY AND DISCRIMINATION IN U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S "SAMSKARA"

Kshiti Hegde

English Literature
Mumbai University
INDIA

kshitishegde@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the intersections of caste and gender in U.R. Ananthamurthy's "Samskara". It analyses how the novel puts forth the hypocrisy of Brahminical society. It presents a dissection of the characters of Praneshacharya and Shripati, members of Brahmin society, their actions, and the moral contradictions they embody. The paper critiques the social and religious codes that regulate women's bodies while also showcasing how marginalised female characters, such as Chandri, resist these norms and assert their agency. Drawing on feminist and caste-critical perspectives from thinkers like Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Kelly Oliver, and Bell Hooks, the paper examines how "Samskara" seeks to expose the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Brahmin patriarchy and reveals the deeply ingrained hypocrisy within the caste system.

Keywords: caste, gender, desire, hypocrisy, hegemony, patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

The Indian caste system has shaped the lives of countless individuals since its conception by enforcing rigid divisions in the name of purity. A structure that originates from the varna system and is rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, it systemically marginalises those born into "lower castes". This paper is an exploration of U.R. Ananthamurthy's text and how it seeks to expose the caste system and how it is often legitimised through religious texts and societal customs.

The themes of gendered discrimination and social stratification are showcased with effect in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965), a novel that presents the hypocrisy of a Brahminical society. Set in a fictional town, Swasthipura, the narrative is centred around Praneshacharya, an esteemed Brahmin leader and Chandri, a woman who belongs to a lower caste, who is put through a set of challenges to get her lover, a Brahmin man's rites performed. The paper highlights how, through the novel, Ananthamurthy critiques Brahmin orthodoxy, the performative morality of Brahmin men, while shedding light on the regulation of women's bodies, the fetishisation and control exercised over lower-caste women.

Samskara implores readers to question the oppressive norms that have historically governed social and gender hierarchies, revealing how marginalised female characters subvert and resist these norms. While analysing these themes of the novel, the paper draws on thinkers such as Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Kelly Oliver, and Bell Hooks to better understand the intersections of caste, gender, and power.

The Indian Caste System

The caste system is a social structure that has influenced many aspects of life in India. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines caste as "one of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restricts the occupation of their members and their association with the members of other castes".

The presence of caste is also reflected in the hegemon's treatment of women. Although female and class-based subjugation is not unique to India, patriarchal structures are historically pervasive worldwide. In India, the communities that follow the "*Sanatan Dharma*"[1] have practised social stratification through the *varna* system. The traditional divisions—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—rank individuals according to a hierarchy in which Brahmins are often regarded as the highest, holding power

and control over the "lower castes", often dictating the code of conduct for them. This hierarchical structure and the brahmins have historically governed social and familial relationships, particularly limiting the freedoms of people born into the "lower caste" and women.

The caste system is often presented and popularised by people in power as a sacred system within revered religious Hindu texts; these texts endorse caste as a means to preserve familial honour and maintain social propriety. They speak directly about the intersection of caste and gender, and there would be corruption of domestic as well as societal honour through sexual propriety if the women stray, or men interact with lower caste women, implying that regulating women's sexuality is essential to preserving caste purity.

> The women of the family become corrupted, and when women are corrupted, confusion of castes arises. And to hell does this confusion bring the family itself as well as those who have destroyed it. (Bayly 1999, 13-14)

This connection between caste order and purity through tradition and ritual permeated Indian consciousness, shaping beliefs about honour, in turn leading to the popularisation of maintaining rigid social codes. Over time, there have been persistent objections and protests throughout the nation against caste-based discrimination. Individuals who challenge the notion of caste as a natural or divinely sanctioned order have voiced how the system is not only unjust but also laden with malice and prejudice; such resistance has taken place at both local and national levels.

One of the most outspoken critics of the caste system was Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891- 1956), an intellectual and social reformer who was born *Dalit* and devoted his life to confronting caste-based oppression. Throughout his life, he argued that caste was more than just a social convention; it was a deeply ingrained "principle of graded inequality" that influenced the moral, spiritual, and legal structures of Indian society (Ambedkar 2002, 84). According to him, the problem lies not with individuals but with the religious doctrines that justify caste hierarchy.

One text that explores the injustice and prejudices that religion perpetuates is U.R. Ananthamurthy's (Indian writer and critic) *Samskara*. Through this paper, I hope to present how *Samskara* holds a mirror to Indian society by showcasing female characters who resist, subvert and reject ideas of femininity, laws and limitations imposed upon them in a patriarchal setup in the name of ritual, purity and caste. Under Brahmin patriarchy, women face intensified control, with Brahmin men often enforcing rules regarding marriage as well as regulating female sexuality. Women's bodies in Brahminical societies often symbolise impurity, rendering them primary targets of caste-based codes of purity and morality. I hope to explore how women become a tool to critique the hypocrisy of the *Brahmin* society and what it means to be a liberated woman in a society that looks to control women and maintain a binary.

SAMSKARA: A RITE FOR A DEAD MAN

U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) is often regarded as a landmark in Indian literature. It was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan in 1976. The novel explores the societal standings and relationships of people residing in a Brahmin community in the fictional village, Saraswathipura, located in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. The narrative revolves around Praneshacharya (a well-revered Brahmin man who often acts as judge of morality for the town), who, throughout the novel, undergoes a journey of self-discovery that shatters his belief systems and teaches him about the society he lives in. Through the experiences of Praneshacharya, *Samskara* offers a critique of Brahmin orthodoxy, its hypocrisy and examines the costs of rigid and blind adherence to ritual and caste-based purity. The novel portrays a society, on the cusp of transition but still holding on to restrictive ideologies, without considering the impact of social hierarchies on marginalised identities.

Through this paper, I explore how, in this society, women, despite being marginalised and cast aside in society, play a role in changing society and become a means for the audience to question their values. Brahmin women in *Samskara* are depicted as asexual, and they are mostly stripped of individual subjectivity; their purpose is limited to maintaining the household's ritual and upholding the homosocial Brahminical order. I believe they are subjected to a lifestyle of ritualised labour, where their own bodily "impurities" are perceived as threats to their husbands' reputations and livelihoods. Here, Praneshacharya's wife, Bagirathi, often exemplifies this austerity and self-neglect; she is a symbol of Brahmin women, her existence is devoid of any personal agency or will, and her value is defined solely by her function in the patriarchal economy of purity, which is more ritualistic than a practice. I hope to explore this ritualised erasure of women's identities through Ananthamurthy's critique of Brahminical patriarchy, where dominance is maintained by men through exercising control over women's bodies and sexuality.

Ananthamurthy presents a contrast of this image of ascetic Brahmin women with libidinal lower-caste women in the narrative, particularly the character of Chandri, often described as a beautiful and sensual woman with whom Praneshacharya has a sexual encounter; this encounter is one of the main focuses of the paper.

Gender and Hypocrisy of the Brahmin Society in the Novel

Through the character of Praneshacharya, a highly revered and well-educated Brahmin, Ananthamurthy exposes the deeply ingrained and disturbing practice of untouchability. Praneshacharya's hesitation to even speak with *Chandri*, the low-caste lover of the recently deceased Naranappa, because she is of a lower caste and he would have to take a bath again, reveals the strength of social stigma surrounding caste. His reaction when Chandri approaches him, needing help for Naranappa's funeral rites, epitomises the paradox

within his character. While being viewed and presented as highly learned and revered as a great man in society, he harbours hatred and critiques the women, especially Chandri, for their mere existence.

Additionally, the villagers' responses to Naranappa's death reveal the double standards and prejudices in their community; the peaceful nature that is called by religion is revealed to be a sham, a pretence. Naranappa, though excommunicated due to his lifestyle choices like his companionship with Chandri and having Muslim friendships, remains a Brahmin in their eyes until his passing, after which they doubt his caste altogether.

> The real question is: Is he a Brahmin at all? What do you say? He slept regularly with a low-caste woman. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 5).

> How could that be, Garuda? He threatened to become a Muslim. On the eleventh day of the moon, when every brahmin was fasting, he brought in Muslims to the *agrahara* and feasted them. He said, try and excommunicate me now. I'll become a Muslim, I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred Brahminism is into the mud. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 11).

Their words display the rigid rules of the community; they harshly condemn him in life, yet struggle to reconcile their conflicting responsibilities upon his death. This vacillation points to the social hypocrisy that permeates the Brahminical community, demonstrating their habit of moulding tradition around convenience rather than principle.

The text also sheds light on the injustice that lower caste women face. Chandri's marginalised position, solely due to her caste and gender, places her in the paradoxical role of both an outsider and a self-sacrificial figure. Tamil Dalit writer Bama Faustina explains the plight of a Dalit woman as double oppression:

> All women in the world are second-class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered

> dignified human beings... Dalit women have to put up with triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. (Limbale 2010, 116).

Despite the hatred directed at her, she exhibits greater compassion and responsibility than the Brahmin men by offering to sell her jewellery to fund Naranappa's funeral. Her actions highlight both her loyalty and her selflessness; however, her presence is neither valued nor is she ever treated with respect within the Brahmin society. This contradiction echoes the novel's overarching critique of caste and gender dynamics. In one scene, Praneshacharya, feeling helpless in the face of the community's indecisiveness, finds himself captivated by Chandri's beauty, which leads to a sexual encounter. Later, filled with remorse, he says,

> Chandri, get up. Let us go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself. (Ananthamurthy 1986, 68)

Throughout the text, Ananthamurthy also explores the destabilisation of caste and gender hierarchies through the actions of marginalised lower-caste female characters; their characters are more likely to transgress, and Chandri's sexual agency further unsettles established power structures. She transforms herself from an object of upper-caste male desire to a subject exerting her desires. By initiating a sexual encounter with Praneshacharya, Chandri disrupts traditional dynamics, positioning herself as a powerful figure within a system designed to suppress her. Praneshacharya's subsequent distress, according to me, reflects his internal struggle with losing his power to a marginalised woman.

Kelly Oliver (American philosopher) in *Subjectivity without Subject,* suggests that "women can resist constituted social practices" This questions the idea that people's roles and identities are naturally fixed. According to Oliver, there is "immanent resistance" within the constantly changing and unpredictable flow of power in any dominant system. This creates opportunities for marginalised women to assert their agency and influence (Oliver 1998, 114).

U.R. Ananthamurthy's depiction of Brahminical patriarchy's double standards is further exemplified through the character Shripati and his interactions with Beli, a lower-caste woman. I viewed Shripati's attraction to Beli as an interplay of desire, objectification, and social prejudice. His remarks comparing Beli's beauty to that of Brahmin women reveal a resentment and a stark dichotomy: while he outwardly upholds the values of ritual purity and caste hierarchy, he privately fetishises lower-caste women as objects of forbidden desire. This dynamic exposes not only Shripati's hypocrisy but also the broader moral inconsistency within Brahminical society observed in the case of Praneshacharya.

Shripati's treatment of Beli reflects how these norms are selectively upheld and easily circumvented by men seeking to exercise control over marginalised women. While he seeks her physical affection, he does not grant her any worth or respect beyond their intimate encounters. This reduction of Beli's existence to a mere object of desire underscores the Brahminical society's pervasive dehumanisation of lower-caste women, framing them as simultaneously alluring and unworthy of a "respectable" place in society. This ties into Bell Hooks' (1952- 2021) critique of the fetishisation of the "other" in dominant hegemonic cultures[2]. She writes:

> Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (Hooks 1992, 21)

In this context, lower-caste women like Beli are fetishised as exotic and exciting diversions within a restrictive, hypocritical social structure that conceals its exploitative tendencies beneath a façade of purity and restraint.

The text informs the audience of Naranappa's life despite his passing away, and the reader learns that his life choices serve as a direct challenge to these Brahminical norms. His transgression of traditional boundaries, especially his relationships with people of other castes, works as a way to undermine the exclusivity and rigidity upheld by Brahminical norms. Naranappa's association with

Chandri, a non-Brahmin, is a rebellion against a social order that prescribes strict codes of purity and hierarchy. His rejection of Brahmin values, however, contrasts sharply with the community's need for structure and looking down on women of other castes, as the same Brahmin men who condemn him secretly harbour desires for lower-caste women, thereby exposing a morally corrupt double standard.

Through these characters and relationships, *Samskara* offers an unflinching critique of Brahmin hypocrisy. The supposed moral and spiritual superiority that Brahmin men claim over the flower caste women crumbles when tested by moral choices, exposing a community that uses tradition to mask its failings. I believe that the text's exploration of Brahmins' caste-based discrimination reveals an entrenched system of insecurity that exploits lower-caste individuals while hypocritically preserving an image of purity and piety.

Conclusion

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man depicts the deep-rooted hypocrisy of Brahminical society. Through characters like Praneshacharya and Shripati, Ananthamurthy highlights the contradictions inherent in the Brahminical order, and the ideals of purity and self-restraint are often violated by the people who claim to uphold them. The treatment of women, especially lower-caste women like Chandri and Beli, exposes the prejudices and fetishised objectification that persist within this system. These women, despite being marginalised and oppressed, assert their agency in ways that challenge the rigid social structures.

Ananthamurthy presents the text as a vehicle to question the validity of caste-based hierarchies and to call attention to the moral and spiritual decay that accompanies blind adherence to tradition. The novel encourages readers to reflect on the consequences of

such systems, urging them to confront the oppressive dynamics that continue to shape Indian society.

END NOTES

1. Popularly recognised as Hinduism today.
2. Similar to hooks' observation of white hegemony, I have presented the quote in the context of how Brahmin society in *Samskara* acts as the hegemonic force, setting societal norms. Shripati's desire to "liven up" by expressing disinterest in women of his caste and seeking out lower-caste women reflects his defiance, but in doing so, he also fetishises the lower caste-women.

REFERENCES

Ananthamurthy, U.R. 1986. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*. Translated by A. K. Ramanujan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merriam-Webster. "Caste, n. (1)." Accessed April 24, 2025. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caste.

Ambedkar, B.R. 2002. "Caste in India." In *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, edited by Ghanashyam Shah. Permanent Black.

Bayly, Susan. 1999. *The New Cambridge History of India*, IV, 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Limbale S. 2010. *Towards an aesthetics of dalit literature: history, controversies, and considerations*. Trans. A. Mukherjee. Orient Black Swan.

Hooks, Bell. 1992. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 21. Boston: South End Press.

Oliver, Kelly. 1998. *Subjectivity without Subjects*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

THE PRICE OF TRANSCENDENCE: MORTALITY, MADNESS, AND THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH IN CHEKHOV'S "THE BLACK MONK" (1894)

Azzeddine Tajjiou

The Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador
Mohammed First University
Oujda, MOROCCO

azzeddine.azzeddinetajjiou@gmail.com

Abstract: This article investigates the interplay between death, madness, and spiritual yearning in Anton Chekhov's "The Black Monk" (1894) by examining the tragic journey of the protagonist Andrey Kovrin. Employing existential insights from Kierkegaard, the archetypal framework of Jung, Mircea Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy, and Foucault's critique of modern medical practices, the study reveals how Kovrin's visionary experiences embody a desperate search for transcendent meaning. His descent into madness—culminating in a fatal, serene smile—illustrates the inevitable outcome for a man whose inner mystical life is systematically pathologised by a society steeped in scientific materialism. The article contends that when spiritual ecstasy is dismissed as pathology, genuine transformative encounters with mortality are thwarted, leaving death as the sole recourse for the visionary. In fusing these interdisciplinary perspectives, the research situates "The Black Monk" within broader discussions on modernity's disenchantment and the existential challenges confronting those whose inner lives defy rational accommodation.

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, death, madness, existential crisis, modernity

INTRODUCTION

Anton Chekhov's "The Black Monk" plunges into a world where the desire for spiritual transcendence teeters on the brink of madness. At its core lies the struggle of Andrey Kovrin, a man whose visions of a spectral monk blur the line between divine

revelation and psychological disintegration. As he grapples with the tension between mystical insight and rational scepticism, the story unfolds as a meditation on the fragile boundary separating faith from delusion. Set against the backdrop of late 19th-century Russia, a period marked by the decline of religious authority and the rise of scientific materialism, "The Black Monk" reflects a society caught between fading spiritual traditions and an increasingly rational worldview. Chekhov, a physician by training and a writer by vocation, occupied a unique position within this context. His works often reflect an ambivalent stance toward religion and religious matters, neither fully rejecting the sacred nor embracing it uncritically. In "The Black Monk," this ambivalence manifests in the figure of the monk himself, whose presence defies easy categorisation. Is he a divine messenger, a psychological projection, or a harbinger of chaos? Chekhov leaves this question unresolved, inviting readers to grapple with the story's theological and existential implications.

The reception of "The Black Monk" has often oscillated between psychological and spiritual interpretations. Early critics, influenced by the growing medicalisation of mental illness in the late 19th century, viewed Kovrin's visions as symptoms of psychosis, framing the story as a case study in psychological pathology (Jackson 1993a, 78; Peace 1983, 45). More recent scholarship, however, has emphasised the story's engagement with religious and existential themes, situating it within broader debates about faith, doubt, and the search for meaning in a secularising world (Jackson 1993b, 82). This article builds on these interpretations while offering a new synthesis, arguing that "The Black Monk" embodies the paradox of religious experience, simultaneously transcendent and pathological, in a world increasingly defined by rationalism and scepticism. The theoretical framework of this analysis draws on four key thinkers: Søren Kierkegaard, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Michel Foucault. Kierkegaard's concept of existential faith provides a lens for understanding Kovrin's "leap" into belief (Kierkegaard 1985, 67), while Jung's archetypal theory illuminates the monk as a

manifestation of Kovrin's unconscious (Jung 1969a, 48). Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy reveals the story's spatial and symbolic tensions (Eliade 1959, 12), and Foucault's discourse on madness offers a critical perspective on how society pathologises spiritual ecstasy (Foucault 1988, 250). Together, these frameworks enable a multifaceted exploration of Chekhov's narrative, revealing its enduring relevance to contemporary debates about spirituality, mental health, and the human condition. By examining "The Black Monk" through these theoretical lenses, this article seeks to illuminate Chekhov's nuanced portrayal of faith and madness, while situating the story within the broader cultural and intellectual currents of its time.

"The Black Monk": A Narrative Overview and Thematic Context

"The Black Monk" (1894) follows Andrey Kovrin, a brilliant but fragile intellectual who, during a summer retreat at the estate of his childhood guardian, Yegor Pesotsky, begins experiencing visions of a spectral Black Monk. This enigmatic apparition convinces Kovrin that he is among the chosen few, destined for intellectual and spiritual greatness. His newfound sense of purpose, however, soon collides with the material and rational world embodied by Yegor and his daughter, Tanya, who view his visions as symptoms of psychological instability rather than divine insight. As Kovrin's hallucinations intensify, the tension between his exalted self-perception and the external reality deepens, leading to his ultimate collapse. Chekhov structures the story around a gradual yet inevitable unravelling. Kovrin, initially exhilarated by the monk's presence, finds his inspiration and confidence swelling; he becomes more productive, animated, and seemingly enlightened. However, this psychological elevation comes at a cost. His visionary episodes begin to disrupt his relationships, particularly with Tanya, who is both captivated and disturbed by his fervour. Under pressure from

his rationalist surroundings, Kovrin undergoes medical treatment that dulls his hallucinations, but with them, his vitality and intellectual fire also wane. The resolution is profoundly tragic: stripped of his visions, Kovrin descends into a listless mediocrity, culminating in his premature death.

At its core, "The Black Monk" is an exploration of the perilous intersection between genius and madness, faith and delusion, transcendence and self-destruction. It resonates with the *fin-de-siècle* anxieties of Chekhov's Russia, a society grappling with the waning authority of Orthodox spirituality and the rising dominance of scientific rationalism. Kovrin's predicament thus serves as an allegory for the modern existential crisis: the yearning for meaning in a disenchanted world. Now, having situated "The Black Monk" within its broader intellectual framework, the following sections will explore its engagement with existentialist thought, Jungian archetypes, and modernity's inclination to pathologise spiritual experience. Specifically, they will analyse how Kovrin's visions operate within this philosophical and psychological landscape, questioning whether they signify enlightenment or a descent into madness.

Faith as Subjective Truth: The Monk's Whisper and Kovrin's Inner World

In many ways, Kovrin's spectral visions illuminate Kierkegaard's assertion that deep and rewarding faith demands a blind "leap" (Kierkegaard 1985, 67). When the titular Black Monk first appears to Kovrin, declaring him "a genius" and one of God's chosen (Chekhov 1951, 33), the scholar's subjective reality mirrors Kierkegaard's conception of faith as a "subjective inwardness" untethered from objective proof (Kierkegaard 2009, 123). For Kierkegaard, true faith resides not in empirical verification but in the individual's passionate commitment to a truth that transcends rationality. The monk's prophetic whisper/allure to Kovrin echoes

the divine imperative Kierkegaard explores in *Fear and Trembling*, where Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac exemplifies the "teleological suspension of the ethical," a moment when the individual's relationship to the divine supersedes societal norms (Kierkegaard 1985, 98). Yet Chekhov subverts this paradigm.

While Abraham's faith, in Kierkegaard's interpretation, ultimately restores communal harmony, Kovrin's visions fracture his ties to the material world. His wife, Tanya, and her father, Yegor, embody the rational pragmatism of modernity, a worldview that pathologises spiritual experience. Tanya's insistence that Kovrin's encounters are mere delusions reflects Foucault's critique of Enlightenment rationality, which recasts non-normative states of consciousness as madness (Foucault 1988, 244). When she demands, "Explain why" to Kovrin's initial refusal of medication (Chekhov 1951, 28), her plea for empirical coherence clashes with Kierkegaard's assertion that faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off (Kierkegaard 1985, 72). This tension crystallises in Yegor's garden, a symbol of ordered materialism. Yegor's obsession with horticultural precision stands in stark contrast to Kovrin's ecstatic visions, which rupture the garden's rational framework. As Mircea Eliade observes, the sacred often intrudes upon the profane as a disruptive force (Eliade 1959, 12), and here, the garden becomes a spatial battleground between Kovrin's transcendent yearnings and Yegor's rigid empiricism.

In line with this analysis, we find similar conclusions from critics like Robert Louis Jackson who argue that Chekhov's ambivalence reflects fin-de-siècle Russia's "crisis of meaning," where Orthodox spirituality clashed with scientific materialism (Jackson 1993b, 82). Kovrin's refusal to dismiss the monk aligns him with Kierkegaard's *knight of faith*, who embraces paradox without guarantees. Yet his eventual demise critiques the peril of spiritual solipsism. Kovrin's hallucinations expose the danger of intellectual hubris, where genius blurs into madness. The monk's duality, simultaneously a "holy harmony" and a "phantom", symbolises, in many ways, Kierkegaard's claim that faith thrives in "the contradiction between

the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty" (Kierkegaard 2009, 206). As such, it stands to reason to argue that Kovrin's tragedy lies in his inability to reconcile these contradictions, his subjective truth collapsing under the weight of its own isolation.

The Pathos of Belief: Genius, Madness, and the Sickness unto Death

As the story escalates towards climax, starts to buy into the monk's claim that he is possessed by an unearthly genius. Here, we can notice the existential despair Kierkegaard terms the "sickness unto death," a dissonance born of the self's inability to reconcile finite existence with infinite longing (Kierkegaard 1989, 22). The monk's promise of "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 18) initially liberates Kovrin from the material banality that had "upset his nerves" (Chekhov 1951, 3), offering him a sense of divine purpose. Yet this transcendence proves illusory. Unlike Abraham, whose faith secures his place within Kierkegaard's ethical order, Kovrin's prophetic identity collapses into isolation, conceivably mirroring Chekhov's society's waning religious convictions and shift toward secularism. The monk, devoid of doctrinal substance, offers only an abstract call to spiritual greatness, parodying institutional religion's failure to address the existential void.

Simultaneously, and on the same point, Chekhov also forwards a critique of Romantic idealism that surfaces most starkly in Kovrin's disintegration. His ecstatic belief that he will lead humanity "into the kingdom of eternal truth" (Chekhov 1951, 18) illustrates Friedrich Nietzsche's warning that the pursuit of absolute ideals risks moral and psychological collapse (Nietzsche 1989a, 13). This ethical vacuum is laid bare in Tanya's condemnation:

> My father has just died. I owe that to you, for you have killed him. Our garden is being ruined; strangers are managing it already … That, too, I owe to you.

> I hate you with my whole soul, and I hope you may soon perish. Oh, how wretched I am! Insufferable anguish is burning my soul … My curses on you. I took you for an extraordinary man, a genius; I loved you, and you have turned out to be a madman. (Chekhov 1951, 31)

Here, Tanya's words make clear to us the human cost of Kovrin's leap into his *visions*, revealing how his faith, though subjectively authentic as the story repeatedly describes, becomes a destructive force untethered from communal responsibility.

Kovrin's death by the end of the narrative, marked by a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), signals not transcendence but surrender to the absurdity he sought to master. Chekhov reframes Kierkegaard's leap as a tragic dialectic: faith's promise of meaning is inseparable from its capacity to annihilate. Chekhov's protagonist is, therefore, a representation of liminal existentialists, poised between transcendence and despair, a liminality crystallised in the monk's final whisper: "You are dying only because your frail human body… can no longer serve as the mortal garb of genius" (Chekhov 1951, 34). Here, Chekhov parodies the rhetoric of divine election, reducing faith to a narcissistic fantasy. Tanya's pragmatic worldview, rooted in the garden's ordered reality, embodies the secular scepticism Kierkegaard derides as the "crowd's" inability to grasp the singular individual (Kierkegaard 1962, 68). Yet her anguish, symbolised by her "tear-stained, woebegone face" (Chekhov 1951, 16), underscores the human toll of Kovrin's existential isolation. In the end, Chekhov offers no resolution to the tension between faith and reason, leaving readers to confront the unsettling paradox that the pursuit of transcendent truth may demand the sacrifice of earthly connection.

The Shadow and the Self

Jung's theory of individuation provides a compelling framework for understanding Andrey Kovrin's psychological journey in "The Black Monk". Central to Jungian theory is the concept of the

shadow, an unconscious dimension of the self that contains both repressed aspects of the personality and untapped creative potential (Jung 1969a, 8). The Black Monk, as an apparition, can be interpreted as Kovrin's shadow, embodying his suppressed genius and spiritual hunger. When the monk declares Kovrin a prophet, he articulates a distorted call to self-actualisation, a summons to embrace the latent potential within Kovrin that has been stifled by societal expectations and his own rational scepticism. For Jung, the shadow is not merely a repository of repressed desires but also a source of creative and spiritual energy (Jung 1969a, 20). The monk's prophecy, thus, represents both a challenge and a temptation: an invitation to transcend the limitations of the ego and a perilous descent into the uncharted depths of the psyche.

The figure of the monk in "The Black Monk" embodies a profound duality, at once ethereal and perilous, which, in the context of his appearances to Kovrin, mirrors the ambivalent nature of individuation. On one hand, the monk's presence serves as a catalyst for Kovrin's intellectual and spiritual awakening, endowing him with a sense of purpose and grandeur. On the other hand, this spectral encounter destabilises Kovrin's psyche, precipitating a fragmentation of his identity. Jung warns that individuation, while essential for psychological wholeness, is fraught with peril: "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well" (Jung 1989, 335). Kovrin's failure to assimilate the monk's message into his conscious life exemplifies this danger. Rather than achieving a harmonious synthesis between his inner and outer worlds, he succumbs to spiritual inflation, mistaking the shadow's grandiose visions for ultimate truth. In this sense, his trajectory underscores the perils of an unchecked confrontation with the *unconscious*, where the promise of enlightenment gives way to psychological disintegration.

Kovrin's failure to integrate the monk's presence into his conscious life becomes increasingly evident in his growing

detachment from reality. While his visions initially offer a sense of exhilaration, they ultimately alienate him from those around him, particularly Tanya and Yegor, who serve as anchors to the external world. Jung notes that the shadow often disrupts relationships, exposing the conflict between the ego's need for stability and the unconscious's imperative for transformation (Jung 1969a, 15). Kovrin's descent into psychosis, then, emerges as a tragic consequence of his inability to mediate between these opposing forces. The monk, as an archetypal figure, encapsulates the paradox of individuation, a process that holds the promise of spiritual transcendence yet harbours the peril of psychological fragmentation.

Madness as Spiritual Crisis

At the core of the story's psychological complexity is the question of whether Kovrin's visions signify a genuine call to transcendence or merely a pathological delusion. From a Jungian perspective, Kovrin's experiences can be interpreted as a spiritual crisis, a confrontation with the numinous that challenges the boundaries of the ego. Jung distinguishes between neurosis, which he views as a failure to engage with the unconscious, and *psychosis*, which he sees as an overwhelming encounter with its contents (Jung 1969b, 45). In this light, Kovrin's visions are not merely symptoms of mental illness but manifestations of a deeper, archetypal reality that demands integration. The monk's assertion that Kovrin is "one of God's chosen" (Chekhov 1951, 33) reflects the individuation process's central goal: the realisation of the Self, the archetype of wholeness that transcends the ego's limited perspective.

However, Kovrin's inability to navigate this process successfully underscores the fragility of the human psyche when confronted with the unconscious. Jung emphasises that individuation requires a delicate balance between the conscious and unconscious realms, a balance that Kovrin lacks. His breakdown can thus be understood

as a failure of integration, a collapse under the weight of archetypal forces that he is ill-equipped to manage. This interpretation contrasts sharply with a Freudian reading, which would likely view Kovrin's visions as manifestations of repressed desires or unresolved neuroses. For Freud, psychosis arises from the ego's inability to mediate between the id's primal impulses and the superego's moral constraints (Freud 1960, 25). In this framework, the monk's prophecies might be seen as projections of Kovrin's unconscious longing for greatness, a compensatory fantasy that compensates for his feelings of inadequacy or failure.

Yet Chekhov's narrative resists such a reductive interpretation. While Kovrin's visions undoubtedly contribute to his psychological unravelling, they also contain elements of genuine insight and spiritual truth. The monk's promise of "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 18) resonates with Jung's description of the Self as a source of infinite wisdom and creativity. Kovrin's tragedy lies not in the visions themselves but in his inability to integrate them into a coherent sense of self. His final moments suggest a fleeting glimpse of transcendence, a momentary reconciliation with the archetypal forces that have haunted him. Yet this reconciliation comes at the cost of his earthly existence, underscoring the precarious nature of individuation when pursued without the necessary psychological groundwork.

Even as Kovrin approaches his demise, he recognises the value that the monk, whether a tangible figure from the external world or a manifestation of his subconscious, has brought him during a time when those around him had grown dull and disconnected from the virtues of possessive genius. In a moment of reflection, Kovrin speaks to the Black Monk, admitting:

> 'How happy were Buddha and Mahomet and Shakespeare that their kind-hearted kinsmen and doctors did not cure them of ecstasy and inspiration!" said Kovrin. 'If Mahomet had taken potassium bromide for his nerves, worked only two hours a day, and drunk milk, that astonishing man could have left as little behind him as his dog. Doctors and kindhearted relatives only do their best to make humanity stupid, and the time will come when

> mediocrity will be considered genius, and humanity will perish. If you only had some idea,' concluded Kovrin peevishly, 'if you only had some idea how grateful I am!' (Chekhov 1951, 28).

Chekhov's depiction of Kovrin's spiritual crisis invites a nuanced interpretation that integrates both Jungian and Freudian frameworks. Jung's lens allows for an understanding of the monk as an archetypal figure, positioning Kovrin's journey as a failed individuation process, while Freud's focus on repression and neurosis illuminates the psychological mechanisms underlying his breakdown. These perspectives together highlight the story's central tension: the delicate boundary between spiritual enlightenment and psychological collapse. Kovrin's madness, then, transcends mere pathology.

The Monk as Hierophany: Sacred Intrusion and Profane Fragmentation

Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane provides a revelatory framework for further interpretation of the existential rupture in Kovrin's world in Chekhov's "The Black Monk". For Eliade, a hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred, shatters the homogeneity of profane existence, creating a dialectic between the transcendent and the mundane (Eliade 1959, 11). In Chekhov's narrative, the Black Monk embodies this hierophanic force, intruding into Kovrin's meticulously ordered life as an agent of sacred chaos. The monk's appearances are strategically situated in liminal spaces and moments: the riverbank at twilight, the threshold between wakefulness and sleep, and states of psychological vulnerability. These interstitial zones, which Eliade identifies as traditional sites of sacred revelation (Eliade 1959, 26), serve as portals through which the *wholly other* breaches the ordinary. When the monk first materialises, floating "noiselessly" across the river with his "pale, death-like face," (Chekhov 1951, 11) he fractures the

rational framework of Kovrin's existence, offering a glimpse of a reality that defies empirical comprehension.

The spatial symbolism in "The Black Monk" accentuates the tension between the sacred and the profane. Yegor's garden, shaped by human design and scientific order, epitomises the profane realm, a space where nature is subjected to human control and rationality. The garden, with its precise arrangement and utilitarian focus, reflects the desacralization of modern existence, as Eliade describes: a world in which the sacred is suppressed in favour of a mechanised, homogenous order (Eliade 1959, 13). Yegor's obsession with maintaining this ordered space reveals his deep fear of disorder, which he equates with chaos and loss of meaning. In contrast, the monk inhabits wild, untamed spaces, the riverbank, the twilight hour, zones where nature operates beyond human manipulation. These unregulated environments, neither fully defined nor constrained by rational thought, act as conduits for the sacred, challenging the hegemony of the profane and revealing the delicate balance between transcendence and the limitations of the material world.

Julius Evola's critique of modernity in *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934) deepens this analysis. Evola contends that modernity represents a rupture from the "Traditional World," a hierarchical order grounded in metaphysical principles, leading to a "Kali Yuga" or dark age marked by materialism and spiritual decay (Evola 1995, 5). Yegor's garden, with its geometric precision and profit-driven ethos, embodies Evola's "Modern World", a realm where nature is stripped of its sacred essence and reduced to a commodity. The monk's intrusion into this sterile environment mirrors Evola's assertion that modernity's "hypertrophy of the rational" (Evola 1995, 78) suppresses the transcendent, leaving individuals spiritually adrift. Kovrin's visions, in this light, represent a doomed attempt to reclaim the "divine virility" Evola associates with traditional heroes (Evola 1995, 203), who derive authority from sacred hierarchies rather than productivity.

The hierophanic encounter, however, exacts a psychological toll. Eliade posits that engagement with the sacred is inherently transformative but perilous for those unprepared to integrate its destabilising force (Eliade 1959, 17). Kovrin, ensnared between modernity's materialist ethos and the monk's transcendental summons, oscillates between ecstatic illumination and existential disintegration. His initial embrace of the monk's presence invigorates him, imbuing him with a sense of divine election; he perceives himself as a genius destined to elevate humanity. Yet this proximity to the sacred proves unsustainable. Conditioned by rationalist dogma, Kovrin's psyche cannot reconcile the numinous with the quotidian. Eliade's assertion that the unprepared risk psychological fragmentation is borne out in Kovrin's unravelling (Eliade 1964, 33). His descent into madness is not a rejection of the sacred but a symptom of his society's failure to accommodate it, a world where hierophany is pathologised as psychosis.

Kovrin's trajectory echoes the shamanic crises Eliade examines in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, wherein initiatory encounters with the sacred precipitate either spiritual rebirth or annihilation (Eliade 1964, 62). Traditional shamans navigate these liminal states through communal rituals, achieving equilibrium between worlds. Kovrin, however, lacks such mediating structures. His visions oscillate between enlightenment and persecution, reflecting Eliade's contention that the sacred, when exiled from collective meaning, manifests as individual torment (Eliade 1959, 210). The monk, initially a herald of divine knowledge, becomes an agent of Kovrin's undoing, a tragic testament to modernity's estrangement from the transcendent.

The Failure of Profane Order: Desacralization and Existential Collapse

As explored earlier, Chekhov's narrative critiques modernity's overreliance on rationality, exemplified by the disintegration of

Kovrin's psyche and Yegor's garden. These symbols of control, Yegor's cultivated landscape and Kovrin's mental stability, highlight the fragility of the rational world. Yegor's meticulously organised garden, with its geometric precision, reflects the Enlightenment's confidence in mastering nature through human will. Yet, this belief in order proves unsustainable when confronted by the monk's presence, which intrudes with sacred disarray. The monk's appearance destabilises Kovrin's firmly entrenched rational worldview, drawing him into a space beyond the boundaries of the profane.

Eliade warns that the desacralization of existence precipitates existential crisis, as humanity severs its connection to the transcendent (Eliade 1959, 204). Kovrin's descent into madness reflects the vacuity of a life reduced solely to material concerns. His poignant observation that the glory of "the flower-beds" was still hidden away in the hot-houses (Chekhov 1951, 10) captures the soul-deadening effects of a world focused on utility, devoid of the transformative potential that comes from mystery and transcendence. The sterile nature of the garden's hidden beauty underscores the existential crisis modernity engenders, a disenchanted society that denies meaning beyond the empirical. René Guénon's analysis in *The Crisis of the Modern World* reinforces this view, arguing that the modern worldview privileges quantitative measures over the qualitative, relegating spiritual truths to obsolescence (Guénon 2001, 16). Yegor's obsession with "clear profit" mirrors this reductionist approach, in which life's deeper dimensions are obscured by a focus on efficiency and control. Guénon's critique of modernity's metaphysical bankruptcy illuminates why Kovrin's visions, far from being celebrated, are framed as a form of mental instability. The contrast between the closed, artificial environment of the hot-houses and the open potential of the garden suggests a loss of access to the transcendent truths once considered essential to human flourishing.

The monk's role as an agent of sacred chaos ultimately precipitates Kovrin's destruction, reflecting the spiritual

impoverishment at the heart of modernity. Eliade's theory that the repression of the sacred does not eliminate the human need for transcendence but distorts it is fully realised in Kovrin's tragic trajectory (Eliade 1959, 210). Initially, his hallucinations offer him glimpses of boundless knowledge, yet they quickly devolve into psychosis, precisely because modernity has no framework for interpreting the sacred as anything but madness. Tanya's insistence on treating Kovrin's experiences with medicine, and Yegor's simplistic reliance on bromide, are symptomatic of a worldview that reduces profound, spiritual encounters to pathologies. This reductionist logic, characteristic of modernity, ignores the deeper significance of spiritual crises, reinforcing a culture that is ill-equipped to address the existential hunger for transcendence. Jung's perspective on modernity's spiritual alienation adds a psychological layer to this critique. He suggests that severing the connection to the collective unconscious leads to neurosis, as individuals lack the archetypal symbols necessary for navigating their inner worlds (Jung 1933, 125). Kovrin's visions, when seen through this lens, represent a rupture in the rational mind, where the sacred, in the form of the monk, emerges as an archetypal force trying to integrate wholeness. However, Kovrin's failure to reconcile this force with his conscious reality illustrates the existential alienation of the *modern ego*, which fears the irrational and unconsciously represses the sacred (Jung 1933, 141).

Kovrin's fate, dying with a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), suggests a fleeting reconciliation with the sacred, achieved only through self-annihilation. Eliade's framework illuminates this tragedy as a cultural, rather than individual, failure. The monk, as hierophany, exposes the void at modernity's core: a world stripped of transcendence, where the sacred returns as chaos. The clinical pathologisation of Kovrin's visions illustrates historical efforts to suppress mystical experiences, recasting divine encounters as neuroses (Foucault 1988, 243). Eliade argues that such repression fosters nihilism or destructive transcendence (Eliade 1959, 212), a dichotomy embodied in Kovrin's final moments. His smile signifies

neither victory nor despair but a tragic acknowledgement of a society that exiles the sacred, mistaking illumination for illness. Through Eliade's lens, Chekhov's story can be read as a meditation on the existential consequences of *desacralization*. At the same time, the monk's intrusion, both terrifying and enlightening, underscores the inescapable presence of the sacred, even in a world that has repressed it.

PATHOLOGISING THE MYSTIC

Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) argues that the Enlightenment's rationalist project redefined non-normative states of consciousness, including mysticism, prophetic visions, and religious ecstasy, as pathological conditions to be managed by institutional power (Foucault 1988, 46-47). This framework illuminates the societal response to Kovrin's visions in "The Black Monk," where his encounters with the monk are labelled as "delusions" by Tanya and Yegor, reflecting a broader 19th-century cultural anxiety toward spiritual deviance. Foucault notes that the 18th and 19th centuries marked a shift from viewing madness as a "tragic experience" to a "mental illness" requiring correction (Foucault 1988, 64), a process Chekhov critiques through Kovrin's ostracisation. When Tanya insists that Kovrin must see a doctor immediately, her panic reflects the medical establishment's encroachment on spiritual subjectivity, reducing transcendent experience to a symptom of neurosis.

The medicalisation of Kovrin's visions aligns with 19th-century Russia's embrace of positivism, which sought to explain all phenomena through empirical science. Yegor's garden, a microcosm of this ideology, embodies the Enlightenment's obsession with order and productivity. His meticulous cultivation of pyramidal poplars and candelabra plum trees reflects a worldview that equates value with utility, leaving no room for the irrational or sacred (Chekhov 1951, 3). Foucault suggests that such

societies pathologise the "unproductive" elements of human experience (Foucault 1988, 210), and Kovrin's hallucinations, though they grant him intellectual fervour, are deemed dangerous precisely because they defy instrumental logic. The doctor's prescription of bromide and enforced idleness symbolises modernity's attempt to neutralise spiritual dissent, rendering Kovrin's ecstasy a "problem" to be solved rather than a mystery to be understood.

This process reflects what Foucault terms the "medical gaze," wherein doctors assume authority to define and regulate individual subjectivity (Foucault 1994, 54). Kovrin's visions, while reminiscent of religious epiphanies, are reduced to clinical symptoms, illustrating modernity's conflation of spirituality with pathology. Chekhov underscores this mechanisation of healing through the physician's impersonal approach: Kovrin is not engaged in dialogue but merely diagnosed, prescribed, and controlled. The detachment of medical discourse from individual meaning reinforces Kovrin's alienation, as the spiritual weight of his experiences is stripped away under the guise of rational intervention. The result is a dehumanising erasure of his interior life, mirroring historical treatments of visionaries institutionalised rather than understood (Foucault 1988, 250).

Madness as Resistance

Kovrin's refusal to relinquish his visions positions him as a subversive figure, challenging the hegemony of scientific rationalism. Foucault contends that madness can function as a form of resistance, exposing the limitations of dominant epistemologies (Foucault 1988, 281). Kovrin's declaration that his hallucinations contain "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 17) destabilises the empirical certitude of Yegor's world, asserting the validity of subjective truth. He insists that the monk is not a phantom and that he is, in

fact, a living man. This, gradually, becomes an act of defiance, rejecting the binary between sanity and insanity imposed by his society. Yet this resistance is tragically futile. The "cure" imposed on Kovrin, sedation and surveillance, exemplifies Foucault's "great confinement," where deviant individuals are stripped of agency under the guise of treatment (Foucault 1988, 38). The bromide treatments suppress not only his visions but also his vitality, reducing him to a "frail human body" devoid of purpose (Chekhov 1951, 34). This erasure of subjectivity underscores the paradox of modernity: society claims to "save" individuals by extinguishing the very qualities that define their humanity. Kovrin's lament "Why have you cured me? … I am a mediocrity now!" (Chekhov 1951, 27)—reveals the violence inherent in pathologising spiritual experience. His tragic arc is reflective of Foucault's critique of psychiatry as a tool of social control, silencing dissent by medicalising it.

Chekhov's irony lies in the fact that Kovrin's "madness" is the only source of meaning in a world obsessed with material progress. The monk's prophecy— "You will lead humanity thousands of years earlier into the kingdom of eternal truth… You embody in yourself the blessing of God which rested upon the people" (Chekhov 1951, 18)—becomes a grotesque parody of modernity's utopian promises. By silencing Kovrin, society not only destroys a visionary but also condemns itself to spiritual sterility. The tragic irony of his fate underscores Chekhov's central question: Is it better to live a rational but empty life or to embrace ecstasy, even at the cost of self-destruction? Kovrin's final moments suggest that modernity's rejection of the sacred breeds an existential void, masked by the illusion of progress.

Irony and the Death of Certainty

It would appear to us by now that "The Black Monk," as a story, resists any attempts at theological or philosophical absolutism,

embodying the quintessential modernist rejection of grand narratives that attempt to fix the meaning of life or truth. The story's ambiguous nature, leaving open the question of whether the monk is a divine emissary, a mere psychological projection, or perhaps even a manifestation of genius, mirrors Nietzsche's scathing critique of religious certainty. Nietzsche condemns religious belief as a "slave morality," a constricting force that suppresses the individual's will and authentic expression (Nietzsche 1989c, 34). Similarly, Kovrin's journey in "The Black Monk" interrogates the dangers of both spiritual and secular systems of thought that attempt to impose definitive answers on the complexities of human experience. Initially, Kovrin is intoxicated by the monk's promise of transcendence, an ecstasy that suggests the possibility of a higher, divinely ordained purpose. But this initial bliss quickly unravels as he becomes ensnared in solipsistic delusion, thereby exposing the futility of trying to locate absolute truth in a world marked by uncertainty and fragmentation.

The monk, in his ontological ambiguity, becomes a symbol of modernist scepticism toward metaphysical claims. Just as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor offers a critique of the Church's oppressive power over the individual, Chekhov's monk oscillates between roles of saviour and tempter, embodying the contradictions of faith itself. His holy harmony, which promises peace and understanding, is rendered hollow and destabilised by his spectral unreality. Chekhov, deliberately and masterfully, refrains from offering a resolution to this tension, urging readers to confront the paradox of faith in a world that has lost its sacral core. Kovrin's death, accompanied by a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), neither signals redemption nor despair, but instead points toward an acceptance of existential uncertainty. This notion aligns with Nietzsche's *amor fati*, an embrace of fate without illusion or expectation of divine justification (Nietzsche 1989b, 89). However, where Nietzsche's philosophy exudes strength and defiance, Chekhov's irony adds a layer of tragic

resignation, making the acceptance of this uncertainty not a triumph but a reluctant submission.

KOVRIN AS A SECULAR SAINT

Kovrin's tragic demise evokes the archetype of the secular saint, a figure whose personal sacrifice in pursuit of an elusive truth becomes both an act of defiance and a form of self-destruction. In many ways, Kovrin's journey mirrors that of Albert Camus's Sisyphus, who finds meaning not in transcending his fate but in the very act of resistance itself (Camus 1991, 5). Like Sisyphus, Kovrin is confronted with the absurdity of existence: the chasm between his lofty spiritual aspirations and the universe's utter indifference to his suffering. Yet, Kovrin's final smile, which could be interpreted as an expression of fleeting reconciliation, suggests a moment of clarity, albeit a moment born not from spiritual salvation but from the harsh realities of self-annihilation and the acceptance of his own limitations.

In this light, Chekhov's modernist theology rejects both the certainties of religious dogma and the despair of nihilism. The monk's final words—"You are dying only because your frail human body… can no longer serve as the mortal garb of genius" (Chekhov 1951, 34)—mock the conventional rhetoric of divine election and salvation, reducing it to an absurd jest. This declaration, though seemingly elevating Kovrin to the status of a *chosen one*, actually underscores the futility of any grand narrative that seeks to impose meaning on an inherently chaotic existence. Kovrin's death, therefore, is neither the fulfilment of a heroic journey nor the culmination of a meaningless existence. Rather, it is a tragic affirmation of the human capacity for both wonder and self-destruction, a bittersweet acknowledgement of the human condition's complexity. In this way, Chekhov anticipates Camus's assertion that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by

scorn" (Camus 1991, 23), though Chekhov's treatment tempers this philosophy with a profound sense of resignation and tragedy.

Conclusion: Literature as a Mirror of Spiritual Crisis

Chekhov's "The Black Monk" stands as a masterful interrogation of modernity's spiritual disarray, weaving together existential, psychological, and sociopolitical threads to expose the fractures in a world increasingly defined by rationalism and disenchantment. Through the tragic trajectory of Andrey Kovrin, a scholar whose visionary encounters with the Black Monk spiral into self-destruction, Chekhov critiques the violent binaries of his age: faith versus reason, sacred versus profane, genius versus madness. This narrative, far from offering a simple allegory, operates as a polyphonic text that resonates with the dissonant philosophies of Kierkegaard, Jung, Eliade, Foucault, and Camus, positioning itself as a cornerstone of modernist literature's engagement with existential fragmentation. Kovrin's hallucinations, dismissed as pathological by the story's empirical pragmatists, encapsulate the tension between Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" and Foucault's "medicalisation of deviance." Kierkegaardian existentialism frames Kovrin's visions as a subjective truth that defies objective verification, a testament to the individual's struggle for authenticity in a secularising world. Yet Foucault's analysis of power reveals how society pathologises such transcendence, reducing Kovrin's ecstasy to a neurosis to be managed through bromide and surveillance. Similarly, Jung's archetypal shadow theory illuminates the monk as both a manifestation of Kovrin's repressed genius and a destabilising force that fractures his psyche, while Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy underscores the monk's role as a hierophany rupturing Yegor's sterile, rational garden. Camusian absurdism, meanwhile, haunts Kovrin's demise, as his *blissful smile* in death mirrors Sisyphus's futile yet defiant embrace of meaninglessness. Chekhov synthesises these frameworks not to

resolve their contradictions but to amplify the existential void they collectively diagnose, a void modernity fails to fill.

In contemporary discourse, "The Black Monk" resonates with urgent debates about mental health, spirituality, and neurodiversity. Kovrin's hallucinations, pathologised by his peers as delusions, invite reconsideration through modern lenses that distinguish between psychosis and mystical experience. Where 19th-century psychiatry sought to erase such phenomena, contemporary paradigms increasingly recognise neurodivergent subjectivities as valid modes of engaging with the world. Chekhov's refusal to moralise Kovrin's choices, whether as martyr, madman, or visionary, challenges readers to confront the limitations of diagnostic categories that reduce spiritual longing to pathology. The story's ambiguity becomes its greatest strength, resisting the reduction of Kovrin's suffering to a single narrative and instead inviting empathy for the irreducible complexity of human consciousness. Ultimately, "The Black Monk" is a searing indictment of modernity's Faustian bargain: the trade of transcendent mystery for the illusory mastery of reason. In this, Chekhov anticipates the 20th century's existential quandaries, where the absence of divine certainty does not liberate but paralyses, and where the pursuit of absolute truth often culminates in despair. The narrative's enduring relevance lies in its refusal to offer solace. Chekhov neither sanctifies faith nor sanctimoniously condemns rationality; instead, he lays bare the cost of a world that cannot reconcile the two. In an era marked by escalating mental health crises and a resurgence of spiritual seeking, "The Black Monk" compels us to ask: What is lost when we exile the irrational, the mystical, the unquantifiable? The answer, etched into Kovrin's fate, is a warning: a society that reduces the sacred to a symptom does not cure madness—it *perpetuates* it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted with the support of the Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique et Technique (CNRST), through the PhD-Associate

Scholarship (PASS) program (2023–2026). I also acknowledge the generous support of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, which awarded me an African Fellowship for the 2025–2026 cycle, contributing significantly to the completion of this project.

REFERENCES

Jackson, Robert Louis. *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Camus, Albert. 1991. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage.

Chekhov, Anton. 1951. *The Black Monk and Other Stories*. Translated by S. S. Koteliansky and Constance Garnett. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 1990. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Eliade, Mircea. 1964. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Evola, Julius. 1995. *Revolt Against the Modern World*. Translated by Guido Stucco. Rochester: Inner Traditions.

Foucault, Michel. 1988. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1994. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage.

Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton.

Guénon, René. 2001. *The Crisis of the Modern World*. Translated by Arthur Osborne. Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis.

Jackson, Robert Louis. 1993a. *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jackson, Robert Louis, ed. 1993b. *Reading Chekhov's Text*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Jung, Carl. 1933. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Translated by Cary F. Baynes. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Jung, Carl. 1969a. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jung, Carl. 1969b. *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jung, Carl. 1989. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Edited by Aniela Jaffé. New York: Vintage.
Kierkegaard, Søren. 1962. *The Present Age*. Translated by Alexander Dru. New York: Harper & Row.
Kierkegaard, Søren. 1985. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Classics.
Kierkegaard, Søren. 1989. *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Classics.
Kierkegaard, Søren. 2009. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989a. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989b. *Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989c. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
Peace, Richard. 1983. *Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

How Far Will She Go: Theorising Female Rage in "Iron Widow" by Xiran Jay Zhao and "The Jasmine Throne" by Tasha Suri

Sonal Dutt[1], Parul Mishra[2]

1. PhD. School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), GD Goenka University, Gurgaon, India
sonaldutt204@gmail.com

2. Assoc. Prof. School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), GD Goenka University, Gurgaon, India

Abstract: Rage is as genuine an emotion as happiness or sadness; ideally, one would not have to put one's anger through a trial. However, the negative connotations around the word 'rage' make it difficult to be perceived without any bias. To make matters worse, *female rage*, which arises in response to patriarchal oppression, has a history of being infantilised or fetishised in popular culture. Angry women were shown as unhinged beings who relish making a mockery of morality and societal conventions. However, contemporary feminist writers are trying to change this perception. Their works, which vary in genre, strive to illustrate that this rage is a warranted response to the trauma of oppression that women face throughout their lives. They argue that it has a purpose, a moral code, and conviction, and can bring about social change. This paper illustrates how contemporary speculative fiction works, particularly the select texts of Xiran Jay Zhao (*Iron Widow*, 2021) and Tasha Suri (*The Jasmine Throne*, 2021), portray female rage; how it manifested and what fuelled it; and what price the protagonists paid for their rage. It then uses Judith Butler's gender theory to examine how putting a limit on this rage is just another form of patriarchal control.

Keywords: female rage, patriarchy, feminism, gender theory, trauma, speculative fiction

Introduction

Human emotions are not bound by reason. A person's reaction to the outside stimulus, be it human or material, is involuntary at best. However, the emotion most out of the voluntary control of a human

is anger. The unfortunate part is that no matter what provoked it, a person's anger is liable to be put through a trial of validity. Even if that does not happen, the disparity between how a man's rage and a woman's rage are treated is astounding. A man's rage is a force to be reckoned with. It is just, purposeful, and almost ethereal. His rage becomes this entity that demands to be seen and felt by everyone around him, and no one thinks to blame him for not containing it. Homer's ancient Greek epic poem *Iliad* (c. 8th century BC) detailed how heroic Achilles' wrath was, which sparked over an attack on his honour as well as the murder of his friend, Patroclus. The destruction and death caused by the Greek warrior's action are rarely ever under scrutiny for being wrong. *Hamlet* (c. 1599), one of the greatest tragedies written by Shakespeare, detailed how a man's wrath could lead to his destruction. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is a widely celebrated realist play about the anger of a working-class man. Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991), which was also adapted into a movie, has become a cult classic amongst fans of horror and thrillers despite the protagonist being a vicious serial killer. *The Broken Empire Trilogy* (2011-2013) by Mark Lawrence is one of the most celebrated fantasy series, wherein the major themes across the storyline are wrath and vengeance that the male protagonist exacts on the people who wronged him in the past. Rage itself is thought to be a very masculine trait that enhances and validates a man's virility.

But why is rage, or any other emotion, ascribed a gender? American philosopher Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), argues that gender is a socially constructed concept wherein certain roles, responsibilities, emotions, *etc.*, are imposed upon an individual. These attributes are put in place to ensure that the individual conforms to societal norms. A person's behaviour is considered gender-normative if it aligns with the set norms of their gender. Historically, women are taught to be soft-spoken, meek, and submissive, while men are encouraged to be brave, aggressive, and bold. There are set gender roles that society encourages, sometimes even forces its members to follow. These constraints are often

meant to control the behaviour of the people; to bind them to the gender binary. This is one of the reasons why children are taught gender roles from their formative years through language, culture, and tradition - boys are spurred on to be assertive while girls are instructed to be gentle. Even languages confine women to this otherness, which ostracises them from male spaces:

> (…) the binary structuration of language produces its valuations through a sexualizing economy that casts 'woman' as improper - the primordial ground against which the male subject is defined. Consequently, woman is aligned with 'otherness', 'the body', 'irrationality' and 'the animal', and all of these concepts seem *naturally* to conjure one another. (Kirby 2007, 24)

Women have been called the 'other sex' or the alien, where they are mocked as difficult to understand and impossible to please. The man is the reasonable one who must suffer through the irrationality of women. These polarising notions are often encouraged by society as a way of 'fitting in' in a binary world. Gender roles also dictate an individual's behaviour and emotions, and how society responds to them. Dictating how to feel and who gets to feel, thus, becomes another form of societal control where people are forced to stay boxed into normative behaviour.

Contemporary feminist writers are always looking for ways to challenge these outdated societal norms. While every story is not meant to be a social commentary, they do take on the absurdities of gender politics to liberate the sensibilities of their audience. There is a growing trend amongst these writers to explore as well as test the boundaries of female rage. With angry women the likes of Jennifer (*Jennifer's Body*, 2009), Offred (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 2017), Cassie (*Promising Young Women*, 2020) taking over films and television; songs about a woman's anger like Beyonce's *Hold Up* (2016) and *Labour* (2023) by Paris Paloma, the literary world is soon catching up.

The idea of a wrathful woman is not new, per se, but its understanding and significance are going through a recent revolution. Earlier female characters' anger was infantilised and

mocked way more than their male counterparts. Even the existing research focused on characters that were created for the male gaze. While they explored the reasons for this rage, the conversations were still male-centric and focused on quantifying female rage. It is imperative to perceive a woman's rage through the female gaze, where the focus is not on the intensity or validity of her anger but rather on the reasons and circumstances. This will enable a better understanding of the gravity of a woman's daily struggles. This research aims to explore feminine rage from a feminist perspective through select works, as well as examine the endeavour of patriarchy to contain this rage. The paper first discusses the bias against female rage and how it is changing. It then goes on to understand and explore this rage in both texts while also analysing how gender roles and patriarchal oppression try to force these women back into set norms.

Gender and gender roles play a significant part in how differently rage is perceived in men and women. According to Butler, gender is a social construct that has no ties to the material body. In her book, she talks extensively about how gender stems from repeated cultural and social practices. This paper holds this true and argues that this social practice of gender is responsible for creating and prescribing submissive gender roles for women while placing men at the social hierarchy. The disregard for women's anger and the subsequent need to contain it are also a form of patriarchal control. In this paper, two contemporary speculative fiction novels, *Iron Widow* and *The Jasmine Throne,* will be analysed through this understanding of Judith Butler's gender theory in relation to the texts and with particular attention to the exploration of the main female characters, Wu Zetian, Malini and Priya and their rage. By bringing together gender theory and speculative fiction, this research makes contributions towards two angles. First, it contextualises and familiarises female rage in a fantastical setting to better understand the pervasiveness of gender disparity. Second, it illustrates that gender-normative behaviours are encouraged by society as a means of control.

LET HER RAGE

A woman's rage is treated vastly differently in comparison to men. Women have been taught forever to have tight control over their emotions and thoughts. A single misstep in this practice results in them being labelled as emotional, hysterical, or even unstable. The portrayal of angry women in popular culture has been tiring. They have been infantilised, villainised, and even fetishised to a certain degree. The ancient Greek tragedy play *Medea* (431 BC) by Euripides follows the female protagonist as she exacts revenge on her unfaithful husband through some very extreme measures. Medea's anger at her husband was real, but the consequences were grossly exaggerated and tragic. Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic or Mr Rochester's wife, in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), is described as an unhinged woman who lashes out against her husband and Jane, the woman he loves. She is portrayed as a villainess who almost ruined her husband's life with her drastic actions. *Carrie* (1974) is a horror novel by Stephen King that follows the story of a girl with telekinetic powers who finally rages against her bullies, where she kills them and dying a violent death herself.

The idea of an angry woman, thus, sits very uncomfortable with society. It has created a certain hostility around how women feel anger, giving birth to even more prejudices and bigotry. Female rage is the rage that manifests "… particularly in relation to sexual violence, but also in relation to other forms of sexism, racism and injustice" (Orgad and Gill 2019, 596). Women have always been considered the 'weaker sex', which has resulted in a grave power imbalance between the sexes. They are seen as helpless creatures who are always in need of rescue or guidance. Not only men but women are also equal perpetrators of discrimination against other women; competition at work, jealousy in daily life, regressive mentality, *etc*., are some factors that pit women against women. The constant oppression of society, the microaggressions at every turn, and the blatant disrespect faced by women every day, in every facet of their lives, are bound to create several angry women to demand

that things change. However, expressing this anger has some polarising consequences for women. The 'angry Black woman' is, perhaps, one of the most prevalent stereotypes in American culture. It is a racially motivated misbelief that Black women are inherently aggressive and ill-tempered. This has very real repercussions for these women in their daily lives as well as the workplace, as people are inclined to assume that a Black woman being angry has more to do with her nature and personality rather than the situation (Motro et al. 2022). Other such harmful stereotypes include the 'ice queen', where a woman in power is usually considered to be heartless; some stereotypes also reduce angry women to conniving creatures without morals. These regressive portrayals of women in popular culture have only added to the negativity around the idea of female rage.

A defining moment in the efforts to change this perception came in the form of the #MeToo Movement. The phrase was first coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke, but gained serious traction in 2017 after the New York Times published an article detailing Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's horrific past of assaulting and abusing women in the film industry (Gordon 2023). Inspired by the actresses who spoke out against Harvey, many women from all over the world came together to speak out against their abusers. This movement became a global phenomenon that seemed to give a new direction to women's rage. Coupled with that, contemporary feminist writers are creating stories of glorious female rage to encourage women to embrace their anger and relish it. Their works also aim to articulate that this anger that women feel is a justified response to the trauma of oppression that they have been experiencing throughout their entire lives. Angry women are shown resorting to violence, not because it is the easy way out, but because it is the only remaining way out. The argument here is that their actions are extreme because the situation, the abuse, or the violence they experienced is extreme; "(…) the oppressive conditions which women must endure as women offer a powerful narrative justification for the 'spectacular action' of their violence" (Lentz 1993, 378). However, this does not

mean that these stories are out to mock morality, nor are they aiming to dispose of ethics. For these contemporary writers, portraying violence through their female characters is just another means to realise liberation and empowerment (Balanescu 2022). The crime thriller novel *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn is the story of revenge, where a woman plans her kidnapping to get back at her cheating husband. *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman is a science fiction novel where women discover they have immense electrical powers, which shift the entire dynamic of society. *Circe* (2018) by Madeline Miller is a retelling of the sorceress Circe in Greek mythology, whose rage shapes her destiny and identity. *The Queen of the Cicadas* (2021), a horror novel by V. Castro, is a haunting tale of a dead migrant worker who, along with the help of a goddess, vows to exact revenge on her killers while also defending those who call for aid. The story takes on themes like misogyny and racism, and how differently it affects women.

N.K. Jemisin's science fantasy novel *The Fifth Season* (2015) is a story of how women use their grief and rage to shape a better world and fight the shackles of brutal oppression. Such representations are a step forward in making people comfortable with the dynamics of female rage. These narratives also challenge the outdated gender norms where a woman must be meek, self-sacrificing, and ever-smiling to be likeable. Usually, female characters in such stories either are or grow to be outspoken, audacious, and even self-serving. Arya Stark's character from the hit fantasy book and television series *Game of Thrones* (1996) by George R.R. Martin starts as a defenceless little girl who witnesses the murder of her family, but goes on to become one of the deadliest assassins in the world, fuelled by her wrath and need for vengeance. Portraying narratives of angry women in mainstream media and literature is a sure way of getting people to be comfortable with the concept of rage. The more they see it, the more they will acknowledge it.

According to Butler, one important factor to consider while talking about the discourse around feminism is that the concept of a universal patriarchy is farcical. "The notion of a universal

patriarchy has been widely criticised in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (Butler 1999, 6). No person experiences oppression and exploitation in the same or equal way as others. The differences occur mostly due to the fact that different cultures, languages, and traditions differently affect the people who are a part of them. The context of culture thus becomes very intrinsic to the discussion of gender oppression. Western culture is poles apart from Asian or African cultures, and applying the same principles of feminism to them would be a gross misappropriation. There cannot be a coherent feminist theory without understanding the complexities that a person's culture brings to their identity. Another principal reason that disproves the adequacy of a universal patriarchy is the reality that gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, gender identities outside of the binary, and other such social categories to create varying and complex systems of injustice. A White woman's experience with patriarchy and bigotry would be completely different to that of a Black lesbian woman. Thus, this form of feminist theorising, in the broad spectrum of cultural complexities, is a futile exercise at best.

Iron Widow: A Power Struggle

The narration is set in the empire of Huaxia, a futuristic reimagination of Medieval China where Gods or the Heavenly Council aid humans to fight off the constant attacks from an alien species called the Hunduns. The civilisation survived annihilation and has been rebuilt since. Humans have built Chrysalises, giant fighting robots or mechas, that are piloted by young men. These men with high spirit pressures release qi that aids in steering the robots. Their co-pilots are called 'concubines' who are meant to support the men throughout the fights at the cost of their own lives; all of this is broadcast live throughout the nation. The young men are treated like celebrities adored by the public, while the young

women are just left to die. The protagonist, Wu Zetian, is a common girl who enlists as a concubine to avenge the death of her sister. She resents her family for selling first her sister and then her for the money. She pretends to be a docile girl and uses her beauty to get paired with Yang, the pilot who caused her sister's death. While piloting, their qi connects, and Zetian sees the evidence of his previous abuse against not only her sister but many other innocent girls. Overcome with hatred, she stabs Yang to death inside the Chrysalises. This was her very first act of rage, but in no manner was it senseless. Zetian did plan on killing Yang, but she still held out hope that he was just another innocent bystander who felt as helpless at the situation as she did. Her first words, as well as her demeanour after emerging victorious from the mecha show she is unrepentant about the violent nature of her act. It is evident from her words:

> You've been living a dream for long enough!" I yell at the cameras between bursts of maniacal laughter, raising my arms. "Welcome to your nightmare! (Chapter 8)

Butler begins her book by discussing politics and representation; two troublesome notions intrinsically linked together. In feminist theory, it is imperative to bring together the subjects of feminism under a universal category – women. The aim is to seek representation for women in politics as well as in society. However, it is this same category that then tries to control them:

> On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (Butler 1999, 3)

Just by being a 'subject', which must be regulated and represented by the law, a woman, unintentionally, becomes subjugated to the law and cannot be separated from it. It is this judicial structure that created the notions of what it means to be a woman, then regulates

the fact that these beliefs are upheld, and eventually exercises control over women and womanhood. Interestingly, this law actively tries to evade responsibility for having created the subject, that is, the ideals of womanhood, to further the narrative that these norms occur naturally and thus predate any law. This is done to ensure that the subject or woman cannot separate themselves from the law and forever be under its power. If by any fluke, a woman tries to break free from these constraints, she is labelled as an anomaly and must face the consequences of her rebellion. This often results in the woman being mocked, belittled or even ostracised from societal ranks. She is made an example of so that no one dares to follow in her steps and try to oppose the norms.

Society's need to dictate and constrain a woman and her emotions as a form of control is detailed in the selected text. After her first act of rage, Zetian is branded as 'Iron Widow'- meaning a girl who sacrifices her male partner to power up the mecha, is locked up in a dungeon, and is sentenced to pair up with another male pilot whose spirit pressure has killed every girl he has been paired with. The consequences of her rage come in the form of her being thrown into an even deadlier situation with no escape. Her freedom is taken away as she is considered a risk, and the authorities make sure that she can never overpower another boy ever again. They seek to control her 'power' to keep up the façade and make sure none of the other girls try to imitate her. They deliberately set her up for failure, knowing that it would end with her dying.

> They can't fathom the idea that "some random girl" could be so powerful. (Chapter 19)

A society makes use of the knowledge it has encompassed over generations to evaluate, disperse, and most importantly, regulate itself. It does that through 'discourse', which Butler talks about in her book. She refers to Michel Foucault's definition of the term: an intersection of power, knowledge, and relationships in a social system. Discourse forms intricate structures of cognitive understanding. Society shapes discourse into power by regulating

both the internal as well as external experiences of its citizens. The creation of the gender binary was one of the principal ways for society to exercise this power. It also enforces the idea that there are only two biologically determined sexes and that this process is natural and irrefutable. Forced into this binary, the subjects have no option but to conform to either one of the identities, male or female and live it as their truth. Butler maintains that there is a stark difference between sex and gender. Where sex is biologically rooted, gender is entirely a social and cultural construct that society uses to bind and control its subjects:

> Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex. (Butler 1999, 9)

Gender and gender roles, thus, become tools that aid society in maintaining its power. Historically, this has always worked against the interests of women. These socially created gender norms force women into subservient roles, placing them beneath men and their aspirations.

Similarly, the government of Huaxia uses gender norms to subjugate one-half of its population. After repeated battles in the Chrysalises, Zetian suspects that they are rigged against the concubines because a frightening majority of the girls never survive any of the battles. To find the truth, she resorts to torturing a high-ranking officer, who then confesses that the system is purposely outfitted to ensure the survival of the male pilots. He also admits that the girls who get tested before being paired up are just as likely as boys to have high spirit pressure. This is when Zetian realises the real treachery of the government. They have been lying for hundreds of years to protect their boys while readily condemning their girls to painful deaths. She argues that the only reason men in power have spent decades lying is because they are scared. Since they cannot

force women to respect them, they have forced them into submission. These lines aptly illustrate her argument:

> How do you take the fight out of half the population and render them willing slaves? You tell them they're meant to do nothing but serve from the minute they're born. You tell them they're weak. You tell them they're prey. You tell them over and over, until it's the only truth they're capable of living. (Chapter 25)

The government and the army saw a way to subjugate women and keep them trapped in their subservient roles by literally killing them off. All the while, they projected onto the public that dying as a concubine is the greatest honour a woman can achieve in her life. They also awarded fat cash compensations to the families of dead concubines to ensure that they continued volunteering their daughters for this task. This cycle of abuse and oppression had rotted away the foundations of society. They were putting on a façade of an ideal society while actively killing the subjugated half of their population. Women were forced into choosing either dying in poverty or dying as wealthy concubines, which in actuality is no choice at all. It is all propaganda that has been fed to them for generations to keep them as slaves to the system:

> Men want us so badly for our bodies, yet hate us so much for our minds. (Chapter 10)

Another way in which society ensures that its subjects are subservient, according to Butler, is by pitting them against each other. Society, with the use of language and epistemology, has created systems that further the interest of one specific group, that is, men. As a result, women who do not share these interests have to fight constantly to get their interests recognised by society. This forms a grave power imbalance between men and women. The society then uses this power struggle to serve its interests, may it be political, cultural, or monetary:

> The language of appropriation, instrumentality, and distanciation germane to the epistemological mode also belong to a strategy of domination that pits the

> "I" against an "Other" and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other. (Butler 1999, 183)

Once these clear distinctions are established, society then begins to question even the existence and legitimacy of the Other, that is, women. These questions are created in a bid to discredit the experiences and realities of women. Not just men and women, this distinction between the I and the Other can also be seen between races, classes, and other such social categories. The aim of a society for creating these differences remains the same: power and control.

THE JASMINE THRONE: RAGE BECOMES HER

The narration is set in a fictional country called Ahiranya, modelled on India. It was once a free country where the Gods had granted terrible powers to the temple elders, but it has now been subjugated by the Parijatdvipa empire. The empire came into being when three women, known as the mothers of flame, chose to sacrifice themselves in the holy fire. This helped some of the Parijatdvipans to gain fire powers, and they successfully drove off the Gods from Ahiranya. It is believed that almost all the original inhabitants of the country have been purged. The rule has continued for generations while its people have only suffered. The king and his officials enjoy obscene wealth, but the country and its people are poor and disease-ridden. The first protagonist is Priya, who is a servant in the regent's palace in the city of Hiranaprastha. She is secretly one of the few surviving temple children of the sacred Gods who conquered Hirana's deathless waters and gained some powers in return. Priya does not remember anything about her life as a child. The second protagonist is the princess of Parijatdvipa, Malini, who has been imprisoned by her emperor brother. He originally sentenced her to self-immolate, but she did not accept that decree and was thus sentenced to a life of solitude

and repentance in Hirana. Her keeper, Lady Pramila, is a cruel woman who is slowly poisoning the princess to death. Priya and Malini's paths cross when the latter arrives at the regent's palace. Priya is hiding her true identity and her powers as she leads a helpless and lowly servant life.

Butler criticises theorists who have categorised gender, and thus gender roles, as a relative concept rather than an individual attribute. She denies the concept that the 'feminine' only exists in relation to or because of the 'masculine'. If a woman's identity is to be conformed only through that of a man in and around her life, then that negates her singular experiences and struggles. A person's gender influences their social experiences, which in turn shapes their identity; "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed before a discussion of gender identity." (Butler 1999, 22)

For Priya and Malini, their gendered experiences shape their wrath and thus their identity. Priya is angry at her circumstances, at the emperor's cruelty and somewhere even at the Gods who so readily abandoned her and her people. On the other hand, Malini's fury stems from her brother's inhuman betrayal as well as her inability to defend herself from her keeper's bid to kill her. She has been left alone to fend for herself. Their realities and struggles have shaped them into the women they are: wrathful and grief-stricken.

> They were stealing her mind from her. They had denied her human company. She had nothing but herself. Nothing but the rage and grief that pulsed in her heart. (Chapter 4)

The intersection of gender with other social categories ensures that there cannot be a singular shared gendered experience. This means that the experiences of women with oppression and bigotry vary when their gender overlaps with social factors such as race, class, sexuality, *etc.* This need to unite women under a category or an ideal erases the influence these social factors have on the life of a person; "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of

cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed" (Butler 1999, 19). Society tries to bind women under a universal category with such rigid, pre-determined experiences as a way to exercise better and total control. Creating an ideal of a woman and ensuring that all the other women follow and voluntarily participate in it is just another way to undermine the agency of women.

Both Malini and Priya are constantly forced by the people around them to conform to the societal idea of a 'woman'. The protagonists are constantly made aware of their flaws, their faults, and their shortcomings at every turn. Their failings are attributed to them being women, or rather, uncouth women. Priya is considered undesirable because of her low societal status and her unrefined manners. She is a maidservant who will forever remain as such. Malini, on the other hand, is despised because she went against her brother and declined to accept his royal decree. In a way, she went against God's will. To instil a sense of responsibility in these wayward women, they are constantly reminded and taught about the sacrifices of women who came before them, especially the tales of the mothers. Malini's keeper has a routine of reciting these tales day in and day out in hopes that she realises her sins and repents by choosing to immolate herself in the same vein as the mothers of flame. A woman who has sinned rebelling society can only atone by sacrificing her life. Forcing such primitive and violent ideals on the protagonists is a sure way to ensure their subjugation:

> (…) my brother wants me to be pure and honourable like them. Because he thinks the only way a woman can truly serve the empire, the only way a woman can be good, is through the sacrifice of her life. (Chapter 14)

Butler maintains that gender is performative. By this, she means that gender is a process of patterns and repetitions of language and action. For Butler, gender resides in a human's repeated words and actions, which are performed out of free will. Further, gender is not just an act that a person puts up; instead, it becomes their

identity through this process. However, this ritualised repetition of gender, especially when performed as per societal norms, creates a false narrative of it being fixed and legitimate (Allen 2023). This leads to the creation of oppressive structures of power that force, upon men and women, this socially approved performance of gender binaries; how men should behave, how women should speak, what emotions to feel, the right way to perform their gender, *etc*. Society uses gender norms to isolate both men and women as a way of effectively exercising more power and control over them. Even within the same gender, it tries to create a hierarchy which would further create more power imbalance.

However, for Priya and Malini, their differences give them the strength to overcome their adversities. Despite being a mere servant, Priya has a kind and soft heart. She goes out of her way to help local children battling diseases, poverty, and hunger; her means might be limited, but it is in her nature to help those in need. She is hiding her secret and holds immense power, but she has never once acted rationally or used her powers for her own gain. Her grief and rage over the loss shaped her into a kind person who has her own goals, but she also wishes to aid those who are weaker than her. Whatever she endured became her strength, which eventually helped her realise her true power. Malini, on the other hand, is ruthless and a master manipulator. She figured out Priya's secret and did not hesitate to use that weakness to her advantage. She acts weak and despondent, but for her, it is a defence mechanism. The abuse she experienced at the hands of her brother shaped her into a woman who uses her mental prowess to exact her wrath:

> She learned that day to turn to a carapace of meekness rather than showing the true mettle of her fury. (Chapter 25)

Drugged and isolated, she patiently waits for the day she can exact her revenge. Her wrath will only vanish after she kills her brother and takes back the throne. Both these women form a kinship

through their suffering. Their goals, coincidentally, are the same: exact vengeance and restore glory to their name.

Conclusion

Female Rage has a history of being ridiculed in popular culture, where it was either misrepresented or ignored. Further, gender and gender roles dictate how differently society perceives rage in men and women. Contemporary feminist writers are on task to shift this perception into a more positive light. Analysing the selected texts through Judith Butler's gender theory provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of female rage. Holding to Butler's understanding that gender is a socially constructed concept, it brings forth society's bid to control not only a woman's actions but her emotional responses to the oppression she is faced with as well. Also, the gender binary and its compliance are ensured by society to maintain its power; anyone who steps outside the binary norms is automatically labelled an anomaly. Although Butler suggests that gender is performative, when performed as per social norms, it becomes regressive and constrictive. Understanding and theorising the intersection of female rage with race, sexuality, and class calls for future research.

References

Allen, Paige. 2023. "Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity: Definition, Examples & Analysis." Perlego Knowledge Base. http://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-judith-butlers-theory-of-gender-performativity/

Balanescu, Miriam. 2022. "Female Rage: The Brutal New Icons of Film and TV." BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20221011-female-rage-the-brutal-new-icons-of-film-and-tv

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Gordon, Sherri. 2023. "This Is Why the #MeToo Movement Matters." *Verywell Mind*, April 28. https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-metoo-movement-4774817

Kirby, Vicki. 2007. "Gender, Sexuality, Performance – Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." *Judith Butler: Live Theory*, 19–47. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472545688.ch-002

Lentz, Kirsten Marthe. 1993. "The Popular Pleasures of Female Revenge (or Rage Bursting in a Blaze of Gunfire)." *Cultural Studies* 7 (3): 374–405. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389300490271

Motro, Daphna, Jonathan B. Evans, Aleksander P.J. Ellis, and Lehman Benson III. 2022. "The 'Angry Black Woman' Stereotype at Work." *Harvard Business Review*, January 31. https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work

Orgad, Shani, and Rosalind Gill. 2019. "Safety Valves for Mediated Female Rage in the #MeToo Era." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (4): 596–603. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609198.

Suri, Tasha. 2021. *The Jasmine Throne*. London: Orbit.

Zhao, Xiran Jay. 2021. *Iron Widow*. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Teen.

CHIAROSCURO FAITH: ILLUMINATING THE SHADOWED CATHOLIC SELF IN DONNE'S "PSEUDO-MARTYR"

Faten Najjar

The Higher Institute of Languages of Moknine
University of Monastir,
TUNISIA

faten.najjar75@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper endeavours to present an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the literary work *Pseudo-Martyr* by John Donne, with the primary objective of unveiling and elucidating his repressed Catholic identity through a thorough exploration of the intricate layers of his personality. In light of the concept of "chiaroscuro", the core aim of this critical examination is to unravel the interwoven multifaceted dimensions of Donne's internal conflict and the intricate process of self-negotiation, all within the broader context of his religious identity. The title of this article succinctly encapsulates the central theme, *i.e.* exposing the suppressed and concealed aspects of Donne's identity as manifested in his literary opus. Through a meticulous and detailed scrutiny of the text *Pseudo-Martyr*, this work delves into the profound themes of religious emancipation and self-discovery, thereby shedding illuminating insights on the poet's profound internal struggles and the eventual liberation of his covert Catholic identity, all examined through the lens of "chiaroscuro" as both a literary and an artistic technique.

Keywords: Catholic, Donne, identity, Pseudo-Martyr, chiaroscuro

1. INTRODUCTION

In the intricate tapestry of artistic and literary expression, a myriad of specialised terms and connotations converge, often posing challenges for those less familiar with their intricacies and particularities. Drawing and painting harbour a lexicon replete with words whose meanings may elude those not immersed in artistic

discourse, while literature boasts its own set of esoteric terms that transcend everyday usage. Yet, these words may serve as portals to deeper understanding, unlocking layers of meaning and enriching the literary, aesthetic and analytical experience. Amidst this linguistic complexity, ambiguity shrouds many aesthetic connotations, infusing terms like "chiaroscuro" with other domains of interpretations, like literature, resulting in varied analytical resonances. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between art and literature manifests in shared technical lexicons and key concepts, such as "chiaroscuro", which permeate both visual and literary forms of expression. By elucidating unfamiliar terms, unravelling ambiguous connotations, and highlighting cross-disciplinary connections, this paper endeavours to foster a more profound appreciation of human creativity, inviting readers to embark on a journey where words illuminate worlds and boundaries between disciplines dissolve.

This article engages with the use of chiaroscuro, a technique in art and literature that creates contrast between light and shadow, in John Donne's own religious portrait from his prose work *Pseudo-Martyr*. For the latter reason, it is essential to begin by defining the concept of "chiaroscuro" in both art and literature to highlight the relevance of its connotation to John Donne's religious identity. Indeed, one of the definitions has been provided by Helen Gardner, who refers to "chiaroscuro" as something that is "literally clear-obscure" and that refers more specifically to "the treatment of light and dark in a work of art" (Gardner 1961, 754). In her definition, Gardner has associated the key concept in question with the artistic domain of painting and considers this association as the basic usage of the term. For instance, Shearman reckons that, in painting, the technique makes strong contrasts between light and darkness to model three-dimensional forms (Shearman 1962, 27). One of the painters with whom Shearman associates the birth and use of the chiaroscuro technique is Leonardo da Vinci, who is an early Renaissance painter and one of the pioneering figures in the use of the aforementioned technique (Heydenreich 2024)[1].

In his treatise *De L'Art d'Ecrire*, published in 1775, Condillac aimed to impart the fundamental principles of textual composition to the Infante of Parma through a comprehensive guide. Within this instructional work, Condillac draws a parallel between the artist and the man of letters, highlighting the similarities and connections between the two creative entities. He reckons that:

> The artist utilises three distinct tools in their craft: drawing, colours, and chiaroscuro. Similarly, the author also employs three essential elements: precision in structure parallels drawing, metaphorical language mirrors colours, and the organisation of words reflects chiaroscuro (Condillac 1947, 576)[2].

The similarities between the artist and the man of letters, as delineated by Condillac, arise from the mutual principles that govern their respective practices. Just as the artist utilises three fundamental tools—drawing, colours, and chiaroscuro—the writer, in a similar fashion, wields three equivalent instruments: precision in composition, metaphorical language, and organisation of textual elements. This analogy serves to highlight the common essence of artistic production, underlining the structural, expressive, and aesthetic components that are inherent in both visual and written forms. Hence, Condillac's analogy sheds light on the interconnection of artistic pursuits, going beyond the specific medium to unveil the overarching principles that underpin creative expression.

Therefore, it can be said that, in literature, chiaroscuro refers to the use of contrasting images and symbols to create an overarching narrative. In alignment with the research problem under scrutiny, this paper aims to scrutinise how chiaroscuro, functioning as both a visual and literary device, shapes the portrayal of the veiled Catholic identity within the religious discourse presented in Donne's text, while simultaneously illuminating aspects of Donne's multifaceted persona. The introduction further delves into the religious and political milieu surrounding the text, situating it within the broader narrative arc of *Pseudo-Martyr*. The use of chiaroscuro in art and its

symbolism are also analysed in detail, especially how it reflects the opposing natures of light and darkness, which may be reflective and signifiers of truth and deceit. Moreover, the article explains how the use of light and dark in *Pseudo-Martyr*, both literally and metaphorically, conveys the internal and external struggle in maintaining equilibrium, secrecy and religious identity. Therefore, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Donne's literary creations and the concept of "chiaroscuro" embedded within them, it is necessary to explore the historical background of the Counter-Reformation.

The Counter-Reformation as a historical epoch holds significant importance as it intertwines with the continuous discourse regarding the impact of European visual and literary customs on the English Catholic identity, where "the various combinations resulted in different understandings of their situation, and ultimately in a different memory and knowledge" (Corens 2019, 192). Being a covert Catholic amidst a predominantly Protestant society, Donne was confronted with the profound dilemma associated with this context. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* using chiaroscuro as a framework. It will explore how chiaroscuro is depicted visually and in literature. The following sections will start by examining chiaroscuro in art, delving into its background and symbolic meanings. The analysis will then focus on how Donne incorporates chiaroscuro in his writing, particularly looking at passages in *Pseudo-Martyr* where light and shadow symbolise identity and spiritual struggles. The final section of the paper will synthesise these findings. It will explore the significance of chiaroscuro as a recurring motif in early modern literary works, namely Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*, underscoring its pertinence in ongoing dialogues concerning art and spirituality. Through this systematic methodological approach, the study endeavours to offer readers a comprehensive exploration of the interconnectedness of visual aesthetics, spiritual themes and textual representations in Donne's oeuvre.

2. General Background and Theoretical Framework

This section shall furnish the reader with a comprehensive overview of the historical backdrop within which John Donne composed his work, *Pseudo-Martyr*. Furthermore, it delves into the ideologies of the "religious self" and the "religious other" through the lenses of chiaroscuro, elucidating how grasping these ideologies can enrich the readership's comprehension of Donne's religious persona.

2.1. Background of John Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*

Pseudo-Martyr is the prose text authored by John Donne and published in 1610. He wrote it with the intent of contributing a defence of King James I's *Oath of Allegiance*, and implicitly the new king himself, from a Catholic perspective (Oliver 1997, 171). Literary critics and historians like North, Oliver, Carey and others recognise the work as evidence of Donne's formal declaration of his departure from Roman Catholicism, though his official and much-needed conversion to Anglicanism was yet to take place. The significance of this text lies not only in its religious arguments and the opportunity it presents for a closer examination of Donne's theology, but also in its effect on his contemporary public image in literary criticism.

By writing an interpretation of this work through the lens of Baroque art and Counter-Reformation spirituality, the deeper complexity of Donne's presentation of a shadowed Catholic self is revealed and can contribute to a move away from traditional analyses of his religious history and motivations. It is important to note that terminology and concepts such as "chiaroscuro" and ideas such as "martyr" and "the Church militant" were not contemporary to the time in which Donne wrote or published this text, and so the reader would be encouraged to reflect on how such ideas contribute to the interpretation of a posthumous understanding and conception of John Donne in a modern critical context.

2.2. Significance of chiaroscuro in art and literature

The utilisation of chiaroscuro, an approach to depicting the dynamic nature of light and shadow, is a widespread visual and mental technique. This technique is characterised by a focus on light in the centre of the work, with everything else leading to it, while shadow adds depth and contrast (Gardner 1961, 409). According to the same source, the chiaroscuro method is commonly used in fresco and mural artwork to better exemplify the reality of the figures, which are inherently two and sometimes three-dimensional. By employing this method, artists are able to bring out the physical presence of their subjects. For example, the vivid interplay of light and shadow, as well as the changing hues, cannot be fully appreciated through written description alone. With chiaroscuro, painters provide viewers with a unique visual experience within the realm of the "clair-obscur".

The artistic technique known as chiaroscuro, which involves the complex interplay of light and shadow, maintains a position of significance not only in the area of visual arts but also reaches its influence into the sphere of literature. Within the context of literature, chiaroscuro assumes a metaphorical role, serving as a tool to intricately depict and communicate layers of depth and complexity within the narrative structure (Plante 2014, 470). Indeed, Condillac claims that just like painters play on lights and shadows, writers build visual illusions through playing on words, imageries and metaphors (*Ibidem*, 577). Moreover, the essence of chiaroscuro is intricately intertwined with the thematic elements of concealment and revelation, a parallel that echoes the fundamental purpose of this technique within the visual arts (Willett 1991, 3-4). In other words, in the realm of literature, the application of chiaroscuro as a form of literary device operates to inject multiple strata of meaning into the text, akin to the manner in which chiaroscuro in art functions to imbue visual compositions with layers of depth and stark contrasts between light and shadow.

Additionally, one cannot disregard the fact that the term "clair-obscur" has been deftly utilised by esteemed literary figures such as

Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne, who have skilfully tapped into the vast reservoir of metaphorical significance that this technique embodies and conveys (Plante 2014, 474). Diderot, a prominent figure of the Enlightenment period, integrates clair-obscur in his work, *Jacques the Fatalist,* to delve into the intricate relationship between destiny and personal choice, shedding light on the uncertainties of human existence (*Ibid*). Similarly, Retif de la Bretonne employs this technique in *Les Nuits de Paris* to contrast the allure of urban life with the underlying shadows of destitution and immorality, exposing the ethical dilemmas and societal disparities of his era (*Ibid*). By drawing upon the symbolic implications of clair-obscur, these writers imbue their stories with allegorical meanings and poignant emotions, thereby establishing a lasting impact on the literary heritage.

Tracing the relationship between the use of chiaroscuro by literary figures like Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne and its significance in examining John Donne's portrayal of what the researcher may call "shadowed Catholic self" in *Pseudo-Martyr* reveals a thematic resonance that goes beyond time and genre boundaries. Just as chiaroscuro involves the interplay of light and darkness, Donne's exploration of his Catholic identity uncovers layers of complexity and uncertainty. Diderot, in his exploration of the ambiguities of human existence through contrasting narratives, mirrors Donne's struggle with the conflicting aspects of religious faith and political pragmatism. Similarly, Retif de la Bretonne's juxtaposition of urban charm and societal shadows resonates with Donne's navigation of personal beliefs within the socio-political landscape of early modern England. By looking at Donne's "shadowed Catholic self" through the lens of chiaroscuro, we see a multifaceted depiction of inner conflict and external pressures, echoing the thematic richness and symbolic depth found in the works of Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne. Consequently, the concept of chiaroscuro enhances the exploration of Donne's intricate identity, shedding light on the complexities of religious and cultural negotiations in the early modern era.

2.3. The "Shadowed Catholic Self" in light of the chiaroscuro

The term "shadowed Catholic self" as introduced by the scholar within the context of this scholarly article holds significant importance when delving into the religious persona of John Donne. This term alludes to the complex interplay of psychological and physical ordeals faced by individuals adhering to the Catholic faith amidst the socio-religious milieu of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, characterised by prevalent discrimination against Catholics in the English society (Carey 1981, 16-21). A profound comprehension of the underlying essence encapsulated by the notion of the "shadowed Catholic self" proves indispensable in unravelling the intricate power dynamics and persecutions that transpired during the era of the Counter-Reformation, a time when Catholicism faced active suppression within the English realm (*Ibid.*). Thus, a meticulous examination of the portrayal of Catholics necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the concept of the shadowed Catholic self to enable a holistic understanding and profound appreciation of the myriad dimensions embedded within such a representation.

As previously alluded to, the term "shadowed Catholic self" denotes a concept of self-identity that has been tainted, uneasy, and deprived of its essence. This pertains to an internal and psychological journey, transcending beyond mere physical persecutions that may ensue from such an experience (Najjar 2022, 74-8). The apprehension of persecution, the harsh reality it brings forth, and the imperative demand for concealment and reticence all form integral components of what constitutes "the shadowed Catholic self". This focus on the internal turmoil and the complex psychological and emotional states associated with the idea of "living in obscurity" not only imbues it with profound meaning but also renders it a versatile metaphor that is well-suited for thorough literary analysis. Moreover, this exploration of the concept of "chiaroscuro" proves to be particularly fitting for dissecting the depths of this portrayal.

As it will be further developed in the analysis, the different facets of "the shadowed Catholic self" lend themselves to examination in relation to various themes, including the notions of secrecy and susceptibility. It showcases how the discreet, covert, and precarious nature of navigating life with a shadowed Catholic self can be portrayed to be, rightfully, comprehended. This particular psychological approach, incorporating well-established icons, symbols, and metaphors, has unveiled a rewarding and enlightening avenue for comprehending the beliefs and self-representation of Catholics in 16th century England. Above all, it has significantly contributed to broadening the comprehension of the emotional and psychological conditions experienced by Catholics during the early modern era.

3. Historical and Cultural Context

The religious landscape of Elizabethan England was characterised by profound tensions and divisions stemming from the Reformation and, more precisely, from "religious swinging" (Najjar 2022, 78). With the ascension of Elizabeth I to the throne in 1558, England experienced a shift from Catholicism to Protestantism as the official state religion. However, this transition was far from smooth, and religious tensions persisted throughout Elizabeth's reign (Shell and Hunt 2006, 68-70). One major source of tension was the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, fueled by ideological differences and political ambitions. Catholics who remained loyal to the Pope faced persecution and discrimination, as they were viewed with suspicion by the Protestant authorities (*Ibid*). This led to clandestine Catholicism, with many Catholics practising their faith in secret to avoid persecution.

The issue of religious conformity also contributed to tensions within English society. The Elizabethan government enacted laws requiring outward conformity to the established Protestant Church of England, leading to the persecution of dissenters, including

Catholics and Puritans. Non-conformists faced fines, imprisonment, and even death for refusing to adhere to the official religious doctrine (Sanders 1994, 83-102). Furthermore, religious tensions were exacerbated by external threats, particularly from Catholic powers such as Spain and France (Morill 1996, 15-16). Elizabeth's Protestant England found itself in conflict with Catholic nations, leading to fears of invasion and subversion. This geopolitical dimension further heightened religious anxieties and reinforced the perception of Catholics as potential traitors. For instance, Morill reckons that "the international and national security crises engendered by the Reformation merely quickened and intensified the processes of interaction between the peoples of the British Isles which were already in train for reasons that were sufficient unto themselves" (*Ibidem*, 15). In other words, the security challenges arising from the Reformation did not fundamentally alter the underlying dynamics driving interaction among the peoples of the British Isles, implying that such interactions were motivated by intrinsic factors rather than solely reactive responses to crises. It underscores the complexity of historical developments, highlighting how broader social, economic, and cultural forces played significant roles alongside geopolitical events.

During the period of Protestant rulership, individuals of the Catholic faith were subject to persecution, and conversely, the situation was reciprocated. It is noteworthy that Richard Sugg concurs with Eamon Duffy's proposition that these transitions between religious affiliations and forms of governance played a significant role in shaping collective and individual religious identities in England at that time (Najjar 2022, 78). Indeed, Sugg claims that "many of the Catholic faithful view the new religion [Protestantism] as a passing—if traumatic—aberration" (Sugg 2007, 8). In other words, Protestantism was no more than a traumatic experience that shall end one day or another and shall, one day and according to the concept of the chiaroscuro, move from the lights to the shadows. Overall, religious tensions in Elizabethan England were characterised by a complex interplay of political, social, and

religious factors. The conflict between Catholics and Protestants, coupled with the government's efforts to enforce religious conformity, created a climate of fear and suspicion that permeated English society during this period. The conflict not only fostered fear and suspicion, but it also cast a profound chiaroscuro effect over society. Just like the interplay of light and shadow in art, the contrasting forces of religious tension and government enforcement created a dramatic atmosphere. This atmosphere revealed both the dark depths of societal division and the flickers of hope and resilience amidst the turmoil. The chiaroscuro metaphor perfectly captures the nuanced complexities of the era. Stark contrasts between religious factions were interwoven with moments of illumination and obscured truths, reflecting the multifaceted nature of historical narratives shaped by conflict and conformity.

4. CHIAROSCURO IN DONNE'S *PSEUDO-MARTYR*

As early as his "Advertisement to Reader" in *Pseudo-Martyr*, John Donne strategically prepares his canvas by acknowledging the interplay of light and shade within religious identity, particularly his own "shadowed Catholic self". By openly addressing the complexities of religious allegiance and conformity in a time of religious conflict, Donne sets the stage for an exploration of conscience, conviction, and societal expectations. His declaration to readers serves to reveal the hidden layers of his own religious identity, casting light on the internal struggle and shadowed dimensions of faith that permeate his work. Through this transparency, Donne invites readers to navigate the chiaroscuro of religious identity with him, highlighting the intricate dance between public conformity and private beliefs in the tumultuous religious landscape of his era. For instance, Donne makes the following claim:

> And for myself, (because I have already received some light, that some of the Romane profession, having only seen the Heads and Grounds handled in this

> Booke, have traduced me, as an impious and profane under-valewer of Martyrdom). I most humbly beseech him (till the reading of the Booke, may guide his Reason) to believe that I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lives, for the glory of our blessed Saviour. For, as my fortune hath never been so flattering nor abundant, as should make this present life sweet and precious to me, as I am a Moral man: so, as I am a Christian, I have been ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdom, by being derived from such a flock and race, as I believe, no family (which is not of far larger extent and greater branches), hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, than it had done. I did not, therefore, enter into this as a carnal or over-indulgent favourer of this life, but out of such reasons as may arise to his knowledge, who shall be pleased to read the whole work.

4.1 Analysis of light and shadow imagery in the text

Laura Lee Willett also notes that the literary chiaroscuro Donne employs is "a metaphorical structuring of inner reality"—a deliberate aestheticization of religious tension characteristic of the Baroque period (Willett 1991, 4). This mode of representation allows Donne to translate doctrinal conflict into a visual and psychological economy in which illumination corresponds to inward conviction rather than outward conformity. Much like Baroque tenebrism—exemplified in Caravaggio's dramatic canvases, where figures emerge from darkness through sharply focused light—Donne's prose isolates moments of moral clarity against a surrounding field of uncertainty. Illumination, here, does not erase shadow but gains its force precisely through contrast, reinforcing the sense that faith is apprehended partially, under pressure, and within obscured conditions.

By associating martyrdom with personal spiritual vision rather than visible ritual or politicised defiance, Donne fundamentally reframes what it means to die for faith. Martyrdom is no longer authenticated by public spectacle, institutional endorsement, or corporeal extremity alone, but by the integrity of conscience and the capacity for sustained ethical discernment. As in Caravaggesque composition, where meaning is concentrated in a single illuminated

gesture rather than diffused across the whole scene, Donne relocates religious authenticity to the interior forum, where belief must withstand ambiguity, fear, and moral negotiation.

This inward turn displaces the traditional iconography of martyrdom, shifting emphasis away from the scaffold and toward the soul's private arena of struggle. The authentic martyr thus emerges not from the theatre of execution—where suffering risks becoming performative or ideologically instrumentalised—but from the shadowed interior space in which faith is tested without the assurance of public recognition. Such an understanding prepares the ground for Donne's later symbolic judgments, in which visible acts of zeal are scrutinised for their true moral substance. The reader is thereby trained to distinguish between genuine illumination and deceptive brightness, between symbols that signify divine authority and those that merely mimic it.

In this way, Willett's insight anticipates Donne's use of animal imagery—most notably the opposition between the Lion of Juda and the Weasel—where symbolic luminosity and obscurity are redistributed along ethical rather than institutional lines. Chiaroscuro thus becomes not merely a stylistic feature but a moral epistemology: it conditions readers to question appearances, to seek inward light beneath outward forms, and to recognise that in an age of confessional conflict, religious truth often reveals itself obliquely, through contrast, tension, and shadow rather than through unmediated brilliance.

4.2. Examination of contrasting symbols and motifs related to religious identity

One of the most compelling metaphorical contrasts in *Pseudo-Martyr* is Donne's deployment of the "Lion of Juda" versus the "Weasel" to expose and critique the misplaced zeal of self-declared Catholic martyrs. Donne writes: "It is not the Catholic faith which you smart for, but an unjust usurpation… it is not the Lyon of Juda… but it is for a Weasel, which crept in at a little hole, and since is grown to full and pampered" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). This striking zoological

opposition functions as a moral diagnostic tool, enabling Donne to distinguish between authentic spiritual authority and its corrupted, opportunistic imitation. Rather than rejecting martyrdom outright, he interrogates the grounds upon which suffering is claimed as sacred, thereby reframing the debate in ethical rather than confessional terms.

This animalistic dichotomy powerfully dramatises the chiaroscuro framework underpinning Donne's religious thought. The lion—majestic, visible, and scripturally sanctioned—embodies truth, divine authority, and legitimate sacrifice, radiating a symbolic luminosity grounded in Christological lineage. The weasel, by contrast, is defined by stealth, parasitism, and intrusion; it "crept in at a little hole", suggesting illegitimate access, moral concealment, and doctrinal corruption. In casting the Catholic Church's temporal jurisdiction in such shadowed terms, Donne performs a deliberate inversion of expected sanctity: what appears holy on the surface is revealed, under ethical scrutiny, to be animated by obscure and self-serving motives. Chiaroscuro here operates not merely as a stylistic contrast but as a method of moral exposure, revealing the disjunction between appearance and essence.

John Carey's observation that Donne's prose thrives on "rhetorical oppositions that both clarify and confuse" is particularly apposite in this context, for the lion/weasel binary exemplifies what Carey terms a "moral chiaroscuro" in which certainty is persistently destabilised by complexity (Carey 1981, 104). While the opposition seems clear-cut, its rhetorical force lies in its capacity to unsettle inherited assumptions about religious authority and suffering. The lion's radiance is not automatically guaranteed by institutional alignment, nor is the weasel's obscurity confined to overt corruption; instead, Donne invites readers to question how easily symbolic brilliance can be appropriated by power. The binary thus resists doctrinal simplicity, compelling readers to engage in ethical discernment rather than passive assent.

This symbolic layering aligns closely with what Laura Willett identifies as a Baroque sensibility in Donne's prose—"a

simultaneous embrace of brilliance and decay" that mirrors the visual logic of chiaroscuro painting (Willett 1991, 5). As in Baroque art, where illuminated figures often emerge from enveloping darkness, Donne's metaphors intensify meaning through contrast, sharpening perception while foregrounding what remains obscured. The lion's luminosity gains definition only in relation to the weasel's shadowed presence, just as moral truth in *Pseudo-Martyr* is apprehended through its proximity to error and disguise. Donne's metaphoric language thus functions as the literary equivalent of light–shadow rendering in painting: it directs attention, controls interpretation, and exposes the ethical textures beneath theological claims. In doing so, it reinforces the broader argument of *Pseudo-Martyr* that religious identity, like faith itself, must be read not in absolutes but through gradations of light and shadow shaped by conscience, history, and power.

4.3. Discussion of internal and external struggles in maintaining secrecy and religious identity

Donne's sustained critique of the temporal jurisdiction of the Roman Church further complicates his already precarious religious self-positioning. In a densely figurative passage, he writes: "It becomes not me to say, that the Romane Religion begets Treason; but I may say, that within one generation it degenerates into it… it is oppressed with such heapes of ashes, and dead Doctrine" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). The carefully hedged syntax—"it becomes not me to say"—signals Donne's acute awareness of the political danger surrounding religious speech, even as he advances a forceful indictment of institutional decay. His prose here literalizes the *shadow* of doctrinal corruption, mobilising imagery of ash, burial, and suffocation to suggest that spiritual vitality has been smothered by the accumulation of temporal power. The once-radiant authority of the early Church is no longer extinguished outright but rendered dim and inert, buried beneath the residue of politicised religion.

This metaphor of ash resonates powerfully with Donne's broader chiaroscuro aesthetic, both visually and symbolically. Ashes

signify the aftermath of extinguished flame—what remains when light has been consumed but not entirely erased. In this sense, Donne does not deny the historical or theological legitimacy of Roman Christianity; rather, he mourns its occlusion. The image of spiritual light "lost beneath heaps" dramatises the tension between internal faith and external religious performance, reinforcing Donne's earlier insistence that authentic belief resides not in institutional ritual but in inward assent. Chiaroscuro here becomes a means of expressing gradation rather than absolution: faith persists, but only in partial illumination, dimmed by the shadows of worldly ambition and coercive authority.

Donne's comparison of the Church to a diseased body diagnosed through "*actiones læsas*" (failing faculties) intensifies this critique through the language of medical pathology: "[We] may well discern *Actiones læsas*, by her practice… when she took this staff and crouch to sustain herself, having lost the ability of those two legs, whereon she should stand, The Word and Censures" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). This striking image of spiritual paralysis casts the Church as a body no longer capable of standing on its proper supports—scripture and moral authority—now forced to lean on the artificial crutch of temporal power. The metaphor simultaneously invokes vulnerability and distortion: the Church remains upright, but only through compromised means. The visual economy of partial light and partial collapse once again dramatises chiaroscuro's capacity to render internal conflict legible.

Crucially, this metaphor also mirrors Donne's own internal struggle. The failing ecclesial body becomes a displaced reflection of the author's divided conscience, caught between inherited Catholic allegiance and the demands of political survival. As Knoppers observes, Donne's prose registers a "theological doubleness" characteristic of recusant and post-recusant identity—an existence defined by outward conformity to the crown and inward fidelity to ancestral belief (Knoppers 2004, 83). Donne's careful performance of obedience is thus inseparable from anxiety; his rhetoric is calibrated to signal loyalty while simultaneously preserving ethical

autonomy. Secrecy becomes not merely a defensive posture but a condition of faith itself, shaping how belief is articulated, concealed, and negotiated.

In this light, Donne does not simply argue for a *via media* between Catholicism and Protestant conformity; rather, he enacts that middle space rhetorically through qualification, metaphor, and controlled ambiguity. As Morrissey explains, *Pseudo-Martyr* "is not a stable manifesto but a text of transition, where Donne rehearses competing claims and finally chooses loyalty to conscience over institution (Morrissey 2019, 143). The text's hesitations, disclaimers, and figurative detours are not weaknesses but structural expressions of Donne's chiaroscuro faith—a faith defined by muted illumination and acknowledged shadow. What emerges is not doctrinal certainty but ethical complexity, a religious identity forged in secrecy, negotiation, and moral vigilance within a landscape where full visibility is neither possible nor safe.

5. Comparative Analysis: Visual vs. Literary Chiaroscuro

5.1. Chiaroscuro in Renaissance painting vs. Donne's rhetorical imagery

The chiaroscuro technique in Renaissance painting—particularly in the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Caravaggio—revolutionised the representation of spiritual and corporeal realities by exploiting stark contrasts between light and shadow. Rather than illuminating figures evenly, chiaroscuro concentrates light selectively, compelling the viewer to engage actively in the process of perception and interpretation. As one art historian notes, this technique evokes an "affective darkness", wherein spiritual truth emerges not through full visibility but through the tension between obscurity and radiance (Arts 2024, 17). In Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, for instance, the surrounding darkness does not negate faith but conditions it: belief is achieved through tactile encounter and contemplative struggle rather than immediate visual certainty. Darkness, in this sense, becomes epistemologically productive.

Donne mirrors this visual logic in his rhetorical strategies in *Pseudo-Martyr*, translating painterly chiaroscuro into a verbal and ethical register. His deployment of antithetical imagery—most notably the illuminated "Lion of Juda" set against the shadowy figure of the "Weasel"—functions as a form of textual chiaroscuro, in which moral clarity is achieved only through contrast (Pseudo-Martyr, *Preface*, np). As in Renaissance painting, light in Donne's prose does not operate independently; it gains intensity precisely through its proximity to darkness. The lion's symbolic luminosity is sharpened by the weasel's obscurity, just as Caravaggio's illuminated figures emerge forcefully from enveloping shadow. Religious identity, therefore, is rendered not as a static doctrinal position but as a contested visual field shaped by tension, opposition, and selective illumination.

Moreover, just as Renaissance chiaroscuro guides the viewer's gaze—directing attention to specific gestures, wounds, or expressions—Donne's rhetorical imagery disciplines the reader's ethical vision. He trains readers to discern between authentic spiritual authority and its corrupted imitations, encouraging a mode of interpretive vigilance rather than passive acceptance. The visual intensity of Renaissance chiaroscuro thus finds a verbal counterpart in Donne's prose, where meaning is concentrated rather than diffused, and where religious truth must be sought beneath surface appearances. Faith, in both artistic and literary contexts, is apprehended obliquely: it emerges through shadows that complicate perception rather than through uniform illumination.

In aligning rhetorical practice with visual aesthetics, Donne participates in a broader early modern sensibility that treats obscurity not as a failure of representation but as a necessary condition for ethical and spiritual insight. His literary chiaroscuro, like its painterly analogue, resists transparency and instead foregrounds the process of discernment itself. The result is a mode of religious expression in which belief is not merely asserted but rendered visible through struggle, contrast, and controlled revelation—an approach that underscores Donne's commitment to

conscience over spectacle and inward illumination over outward display.

5.2. Nuances of expression: visible vs. interpretive chiaroscuro

Visual chiaroscuro operates primarily at the level of perception: viewers are confronted with illuminated forms set against obscured edges, and meaning is guided by the artist's manipulation of light and shadow within a fixed visual field. The act of seeing precedes interpretation. Rhetorical chiaroscuro, by contrast, functions interpretively rather than perceptually; it does not present meaning fully formed but instead invites readers to *discern* it through metaphor, contrast, and controlled ambiguity. As Willett observes, literary chiaroscuro "functions as a metaphorical mode of ambiguity, dramatising concealment and revelation within the textual fabric" (Willett 1991, 4). This distinction situates Donne's prose within a broader early modern aesthetic that treats ambivalence not as a flaw but as a deliberate expressive resource, capable of registering ethical and theological complexity.

In *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne repeatedly mobilises linguistic shadow to signal theological erosion without resorting to overt doctrinal condemnation. His description of the Church's degeneration into "heaps of ashes, and dead Doctrine" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, *Preface*, np) exemplifies this strategy. The image of ash does not merely denote destruction; it suggests residue, aftermath, and partial extinction—a semantic grey zone in which vitality has been dimmed rather than obliterated. This rhetorical shadowing compels readers to infer decline through implication rather than declaration, mirroring the way visual chiaroscuro implies depth and form through darkness rather than through explicit outline. Meaning, in Donne's prose, emerges obliquely, demanding interpretive participation.

John Carey's insight that Donne's writing frequently constructs "oppositions that collapse into one another" further clarifies the function of rhetorical chiaroscuro in destabilising binary systems of belief (Carey 1981, 104). Light and darkness, orthodoxy and error, loyalty and treason are not presented as mutually exclusive

categories but as interpenetrating states. Certainty, once illuminated, is immediately cast into suspicion by the surrounding shadow of ethical complication. In this way, rhetorical chiaroscuro resists fixed doctrinal resolution, replacing it with a mode of reading attuned to gradation, contingency, and moral tension.

Donne's imagery of the Church relying on a "staffe and crouch" for support (*Pseudo-Martyr*, *Preface*, np) reinforces this interpretive dynamic. The figure evoked is neither wholly upright nor fully collapsed, but suspended in a state of visible infirmity—half-lit and half-shadowed. As a rhetorical analogue to a chiaroscuro painting, this image captures the tension between solidity and dissolution, authority and dependency. The reader is not simply shown institutional weakness but is asked to *see into it*, discerning its implications through metaphorical contrast. Rhetorical chiaroscuro thus transforms reading into an ethical act, training readers to navigate uncertainty and to recognise that religious truth, like visual form in shadow, must be apprehended through careful and reflective interpretation rather than immediate clarity.

5.3. Convergence of visual and textual chiaroscuro in Donne's self-representation

Donne's prose in *Pseudo-Martyr* ultimately emerges as a literary canvas upon which spiritual identity is rendered through alternating strokes of illumination and obscurity. His self-representation is neither confessional nor declarative; instead, it unfolds through contrast, hesitation, and carefully modulated visibility. As Morrissey observes, *Pseudo-Martyr* functions as "a text of transition, in which Donne rehearses competing claims and resolves them only partially" (Morrissey 2019, 143). This partiality is not a failure of resolution but a constitutive feature of Donne's chiaroscuro faith—one that resists full clarity precisely because such clarity would collapse the ethical and political tensions that shape religious identity in a climate of persecution.

Condillac's aesthetic theory offers a productive lens through which to understand this convergence of visual and textual techniques. By analogising word order to chiaroscuro, Condillac suggests that meaning, like visual form, emerges through relational contrast rather than through isolated elements (Condillac 1947, 576). Applied to Donne's prose, this insight illuminates how syntactical layering, qualification, and delayed assertion function as verbal equivalents of light and shadow. Affirmation is repeatedly tempered by negation, conviction by caution, producing a rhetorical depth in which faith is brought into relief not through direct assertion but through carefully orchestrated tension. Donne's sentences, like Baroque compositions, direct attention selectively, illuminating certain ethical positions while allowing others to recede into productive obscurity.

The juxtaposition of spiritual light and shadow in Donne's imagery thus serves not a decorative but a hermeneutic function. By rendering his inner struggle visible through emblematic contrasts—the Lion of Juda set against the Weasel, the luminous authority of the Word weighed down by "heapes of ashes", or the Church standing precariously on a "staffe and crouch"—Donne stages his religious self at the threshold between revelation and concealment. These figures do not merely illustrate doctrinal positions; they externalise a divided conscience negotiating loyalty, survival, and integrity. Chiaroscuro becomes a mode of self-writing, enabling Donne to speak from within constraint while preserving ethical agency.

This convergence of visual and textual chiaroscuro mirrors the perceptual dynamics of Renaissance painting, where controlled contrasts of brightness and darkness convey psychological depth and moral ambiguity rather than narrative closure (Arts 2024, 17). Just as Caravaggesque figures emerge from shadow without fully escaping it, Donne's religious identity remains suspended between inherited Catholic allegiance and emergent political conformity. His prose invites readers to apprehend not only the

argumentative structure of *Pseudo-Martyr* but also the layered psychology of a recusant navigating early modern pressures of surveillance, accusation, and doctrinal realignment.

Tellingly, the following table offers a schematic summary of the major chiaroscuro patterns operating throughout *Pseudo-Martyr*, mapping the interplay between illumination and obscurity that shapes Donne's shadowed Catholic self. Rather than resolving these tensions, the table makes visible the structural logic of Donne's rhetoric, reinforcing the central claim of this study: that Donne's religious identity is articulated not through certainty but through contrast, negotiation, and the disciplined management of light and shadow.

Table 1: Chiaroscuro patterns and the *Shadowed Catholic Self* in Pseudo-Martyr

Element	**Light (Illumination / Positive)**	**Shadow (Obscurity / Tension)**	**Function / Interpretation**
Metaphorical Figures	Lion of Juda	Weasel	Contrasts authentic faith with distorted zeal; moral and theological evaluation
Spiritual Virtue	Meditation on martyrdom, inherited devotion	Fear of persecution, secrecy	Depicts internal conflict and negotiation of religious identity
Institutional Critique	Word and Censures (scripture, moral authority)	Heaps of ashes, dead Doctrine	Highlights the decay of temporal church power; differentiates internal faith from external practice
Rhetorical Strategy	Measured ambiguity,	Moral doubleness, tension	Conveys the complexity of conscience and

	balanced argumentation	between loyalty and conscience	public conformity
Visual/Textual Parallel	Illuminated faith and spiritual clarity	Concealed motives and obscured truth	Mirrors Renaissance chiaroscuro; creates a literary aesthetic of contrast

6. Synthesis and Implications

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Donne's deployment of literary chiaroscuro achieves several critical functions. First, it exposes the complex negotiation of identity inherent in living as a covert Catholic in a predominantly Protestant society, where outward conformity and inward conviction were often at odds. Second, it situates Donne's prose within a broader artistic and intellectual continuum, linking early modern rhetorical practice to visual aesthetics and showing how literary form can serve as a mirror of internal experience. Finally, this approach underscores the thematic resonance of light and shadow, which emerges both as a structural device and a symbolic lens for interpreting spiritual tension, moral ambiguity, and the contingencies of faith.

By reading *Pseudo-Martyr* through a chiaroscuro framework, one recognises Donne's work as an act of self-representation as much as theological or political argumentation. The text enacts what might be called a "performative illumination" — exposing some aspects of the Catholic self while leaving others deliberately obscured. This strategy reflects a broader Baroque sensibility in early modern literature, wherein ambiguity, tension, and paradox were valued as aesthetic and ethical tools. Consequently, the concept of "chiaroscuro faith" illuminates not only Donne's inner conflicts but also the cultural and psychological dynamics that shaped recusant Catholic identity in early seventeenth-century England.

Table 2: Light vs. shadow in Donne's chiaroscuro faith

LIGHT	SHADOW
Illumination, clarity, and divine presence	Darkness, obscurity, and doubt
Revelatory power of divine grace	Human fallibility and sin
Hope and salvation	Fear and despair
Divine love and mercy	Human frailty and suffering

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the investigation into John Donne's "shadowed Catholic self" demonstrates how *Pseudo-Martyr* functions as a literary canvas painted in chiaroscuro. Donne's rhetorical contrasts—between the noble "Lion of Juda" and the parasitic "Weasel", between the vitality of the "Word and Censures" and the "heaps of ashes, and dead Doctrine", between the light of spiritual devotion and the shadow of temporal jurisdiction—expose the tensions of a religious identity caught between allegiance and dissent. These images render visible the interplay of brightness and obscurity that shaped Donne's self-fashioning, revealing the paradoxes of a faith negotiated in secrecy and expressed through indirection.

This study has argued that such textual strategies exemplify what may be called Donne's *"chiaroscuro faith"*—a mode of belief articulated in contrasts, where affirmation and denial, loyalty and critique, clarity and concealment coexist without full resolution. In appropriating a visual aesthetic to a literary and theological framework, Donne's prose becomes a rhetorical equivalent of Renaissance painting: shadows do not obscure truth but rather define and sharpen its contours.

By situating Donne within both the artistic practice of chiaroscuro and the religio-political crisis of early modern England, this article has emphasised the interpretive power of

transdisciplinarity. Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* emerges not only as an intervention in the debates over the Oath of Allegiance but also as a profound meditation on the layered nature of religious selfhood. Ultimately, the chiaroscuro lens reveals a persona that is at once fragmented and unified, fragile yet luminous—a testament to literature's enduring capacity to illuminate the complexities of human identity under pressure.

NOTES

1. Conversely, Gardner considers Giotto to be the one who built the stepping stone for other painters, like da Vinci, in the development of the chiaroscuro technique (Gardner 1961, 409).
2. Translation of the author, the original text reads as follows: "Le peintre a trois moyens: le dessin, les couleurs et le clair-obscur. L'écrivain en a trois également: l'exactitude des constructions répond au dessin, les expressions figurées au couleur, et l'arrangement des mots au clair-obscur".

REFERENCES

Arts, Giulio. 2024. "From Leonardo to Caravaggio: Affective Darkness, the Franciscan Experience and Its Lombard Origins." *Arts* 13 (1): 1-22. doi:10.3390/arts13010017

Carey, John. 1981. *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. Faber & Faber.

Condillac, Etienne Bonnot de. 1947. *L'art d'écrire*, Vol. 1. Georges Le Roy.

Corens, Liesbeth. 2019. *Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe*. Oxford UP.

Donne, John. 1610. *Pseudo Martyr*. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/pseudomartyrwher00donn. Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.

Gardner, Helen. 1961. *The Metaphysical Poets*. Oxford UP.

Heydenreich, Ludwig Heinrich. 2024. "Leonardo da Vinci." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonardo-da-Vinci

Knoppers, Laura Lunger. 2004. "Constructing and Deconstructing Religious Identity: John Donne's Pseudo-Martyr." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (1): 79-104.

Mary, Josephine Jerina, K. Kalyani, and R. Balasarasvathi. 2019. "Chiaroscuro of Conflict, Disaster, Suffering and Ethnic Fratricide: A Study of Jean Arasanayagam's Poetry." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*.

Morill, John. 1996. "The British Problem, c. 1534–1707." *The British Problem c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, edited by Brendan Bradshaw and John Morill, Macmillan, 1–38.

Morrissey, Mary. 2019. "Was John Donne a Catholic?" *Reformation* 24 (2): 133-49. doi:10.1080/0268117X.2019.1626273

Najjar, Faten. 2022. "John Donne's 'Satyre III': (Re)telling Trauma, (Re)defining Religious Identity." *Journal of the Georgia Philological Association* 10: 74-96.

North, Marcy L. 2002. "Anonymity's Subject: James I and the Debate over the Oath of Allegiance." *New Literary History* 33 (2): 215–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057721. Accessed 17 Mar. 2024.

Oliver, P. M. 1997. *Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion*. Longman Singapore Publishers.

Plante, Manon. 2014. "The Art of Chiaroscuro Writing: Condillac and the Question of Word Order." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (4): 469-85. doi:10.1111/1754-0208.12201

Sanders, Andrew. 1994. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford UP.

Shearman, John. 1962. "Leonardo's Colour and Chiaroscuro." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 25 (1): 13-47.

Shell, Alison, and Arnold Hunt. 2006. "Donne's Religious World." *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, edited by Achsah Guibbory, 43-59. Cambridge UP.

Sugg, Richard. 2007. *John Donne*. Palgrave Macmillan.

"Trauma." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma. Accessed 21 Jan. 2023.

Willett, Laura Lee. 1991. *Chiaroscuro in Late Sixteenth-Century Literature and Painting*. University of California.

WRITING IN RED
(BOOK REVIEW)

Dmitry Shlapentokh

Associate Professor
Department Of History
Indiana University South Bend
USA

dshlapen@iu.edu

Abstract: Book review.
Nergis Ertürk. 2024. *Writing in Red*. Columbia University Press.

Keywords: history, politics, sexuality, feminism, intellectuals, USSR, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

One could hardly accuse the author of the book's author of lacking erudition. She assembled a huge amount of material, indicated by an extensive bibliography in English, Russian and Turkish. She also demonstrated erudition and good knowledge of world culture. The subject of the monograph is also engaging. Her book focuses on an interesting subject: how Turkish intellectuals, mostly on the radical/left side of the political spectrum, approached the Soviet regime and its culture.

Some parts of the narrative are sound, if not completely original, at least from the reviewer's point of view. The most interesting, or at least potentially interesting, is the part of the narrative dealing with Turkish intellectuals and their interaction with Soviet cultural reality. Here, however, the problem emerges.

The study of the subject implied elaboration on the social and political context and, therefore, on the nature of the Soviet regime. There is an enormous amount of works published in the West on

the subject and main trend changes as time passed. Still, two major views on the regime have dominated for much of history. In an oversimplified fashion, it could be defined as follows:

For the left, the USSR was a great historical experiment; it boasted full employment, free medical service, and education. The Soviet State ensured that numerous ethnicities lived in peace.

For the right, the regime was a product of an unworkable utopian paradigm. To them, the millions killed and starved was the only result of an experiment doomed from the start. For Professor Nergis Ertürk, history and, in particular, the USSR and her native Turkish history, is distinctly a conflict of genders or, to be more precise, reproductive organs. Indeed, the word "phallocracy" emerged as an explanatory model which defined the nature of the regime and provided the framework for historical evolution. The male reproductive organ emerged in her narrative as the major symbol of social, political, and cultural oppression. She implicitly engaged the male reproductive organ in mortal conflict with the female reproductive organ. It was this conflict that defined the evolution of any regime, and, implicitly, world history in general.

Definitely, the word "phallocracy" refers to the phallus, the male sexual organ. The author does not explicitly address what opposes a phallocracy, and therefore the phallus. Still, even those with the most rudimentary knowledge of human anatomy know that the female sexual organ is the "vagina". In the author's view, assuming you take Ertürk's definition literally, history is nothing but a mortal conflict between "vagina" and "phallus". Through this lens, Ertürk defines the evolution of any regime or country, whether it be the USSR or her native Turkey. In this narrative, whereas "phallus" and the related "phallocracy" represent everything negative and repressive, "vagina" and "female" represent liberation and freedom. According to Ertürk, "The feminine structure marks the establishment of a fundamentally different relationship to the master signifier" (146). While female sexuality is true and wholesome, the story is different for male sexuality. Indeed, Ertürk asserts that "phallic jouissance is masturbatory, finite, and

dissatisfying" (146). How could one detect the malicious "phallocracy"? While detecting specifics of male sexuality might not be easy, due to the private nature of the act, Professor Ertürk indicated that it can be easily done. The author provides a clear answer: Phallocracy manifested in the traditional family. It dominated pre-revolutionary Russia and, implicitly, underscored the oppressive nature of the regime. In the author's view, the beginning of the Bolshevik regime provided the hope of liberation. It was manifested, for example, in discarding the notion of the nuclear family, the major stronghold of "phallocracy" and implicitly all forms of oppression or one of the major manifestations of oppression. And it was Alexandra Kollontai, the female Bolshevik, who advocated for "free love" and implicitly the end of "phallocracy" manifested in traditional families. Still, the era of liberty was short-lived, and Soviet society lapsed into its "Thermidor" – a term taken from the history of the French Revolution and quite popular among Trotskyites and Mensheviks. Stalin restored the nuclear family and the dreaded "phallocracy". Indeed, "sexual Thermidor" was marked by the "ascendance of the heterosexual reproductive family and end of the Bolshevik dream of sexual revolution" (179). This return to the traditional family model was apparently the major crime of the regime, and it truly horrified progressive Turkish observers: "Dĕrviş refuses to model a communist collective on the heteronormative, phallocentric family" (141).

Terror and starvation of countless numbers of "phalluses" and "vaginas" alike are basically ignored. The party's ideological revolution, for example, the rise of "National-Bolshevism", the regime's functional ideology since the 1930s, was also ignored. At least, there was no attempt to connect it to Soviet cultural expression and its influences on the Turkish intellectual elite. There was not much discussion of anything beyond the Stalinist era. One could assume that Nikita Khrushchev's actions — the end of the terror and liberation of political prisoners — were not important for the "phallocracy" to remain intact. Not just

Russian-Soviet history, but the history of Ertürk's native Turkey is seen in the context of the battle between "phallus" and "vagina". And, as is the case with Russia and the USSR, reactionary "phalli" and progressive "vaginas". The Ottoman Empire was based on "imperial phallocentrism" (95) and, apparently, a dominant group of Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals "support the preservation of the phallocentric order" (105). The end of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic did not bring about much change. Instead, the 1926 Turkish Civil War "granted women new rights pertaining to divorce and child custody – an emancipation unaccompanied by the anything resembling a sexual revolution, because women were simply reimagined as mothers of a new nation" (89). How could one validate Professor Ertürk's work? One of course could explore any subject and profess any views. Still, interpretation shall be lodged in reality and not be totally constructed. Some novelty of interpretation and avoiding worn-out clichés are also expected. Still, it is not the case with the reviewed work. Let's look at some examples.

Professor Ertürk noted the emergence of Turkish literature with explicitly sexual themes, such as, for example, sadomasochism. She implied that this was done because of the influence of radical Russian writers and had a sort of emancipatory aspect. It is not always the case; the explosion of sexually explicit, or often semi-pornographic literature in the late Soviet era – such as the works of Eduard Limonov — was hardly a harbinger of female liberation at a time when the Soviet regime was about to collapse. As such, "phallocracy" emerged in its most ugly form, and women were mercilessly sexually mistreated and exploited, especially by the rich and powerful. Kollontai, as a radical Marxist, wanted to liberate women from household chores and taking care of children to help them be active participants in Soviet society. Her enemy was not the abstract "phallus"/male but the capitalist socio-economic system. The nuclear family's way of rearing children was not Kollontai's enemy. She herself was married. The

author's juxtaposition of "vagina" and the brutish and oppressive "phallus" is also hardly based upon fact.

The Bolshevik Revolution, as well as the French Revolution and, needless to say, the Nazi regime, knew quite a few brutal females – some truly sadistic. The major problem with the author's ideological framework is not that it has too often warped interpretation unrelated to fact or extravagance of interpretation — the evaluation of the views is, of course, subjective and the reviewer is aware of this — but in the other aspects. The roots of Professor Ertürk's radical feminism are clear: it is French postmodernism, particularly Jacques Lacan and other neo-Freudians. These radical and challenging ideas were a novelty in the 1960s, more than 60 years ago. They were imported from France and were eagerly consumed by American academia. Though Professor Ertürk's narratives could well please a visible segment of Western academics, it hardly helps the humanities' popularity among taxpayers, particularly in the US. And this hardly helps the humanities overall.