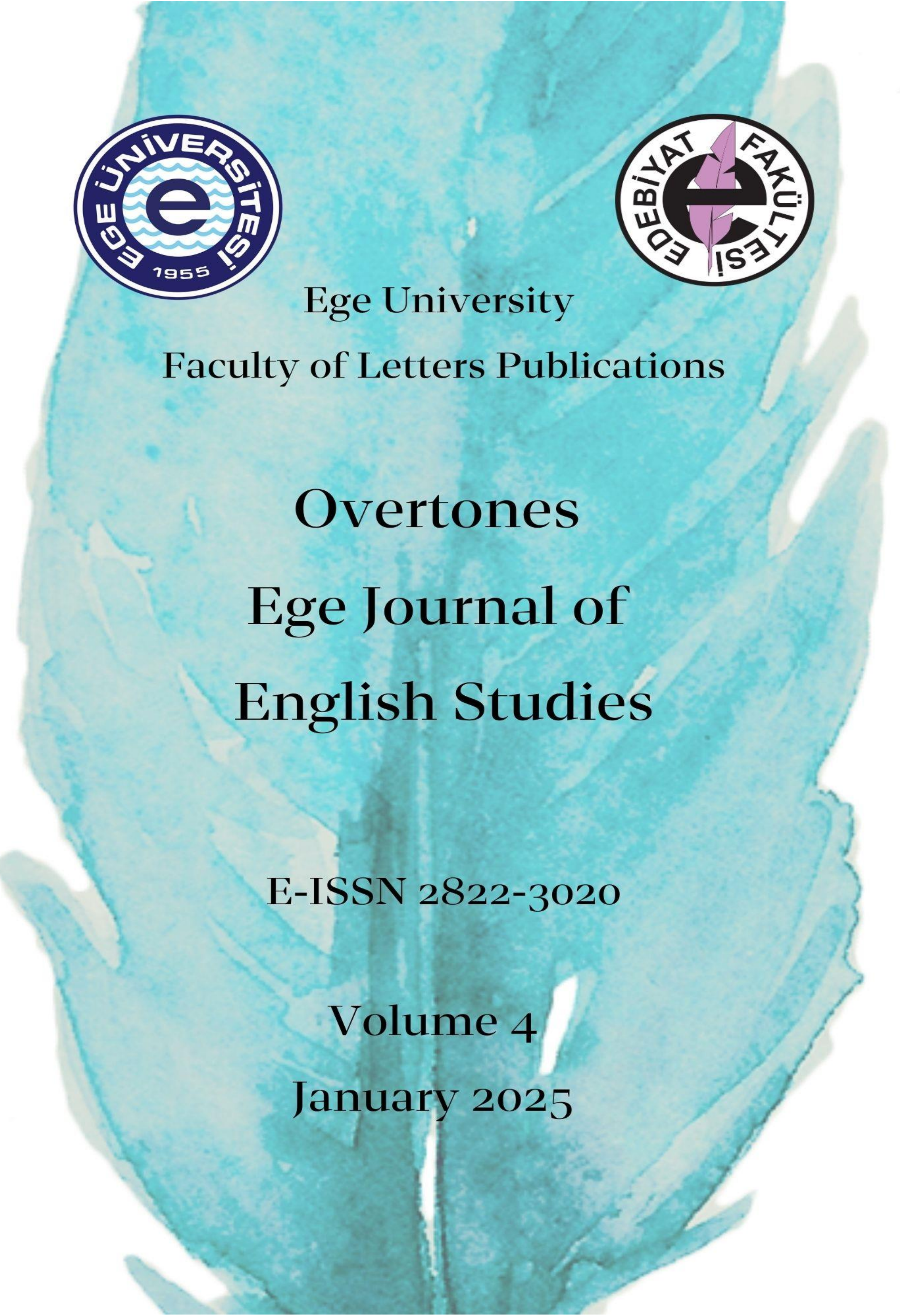

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Corresponding Author: Pelin Gölcük Mirza, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Karabük University, Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0003-3808-5065

A Heideggerian Approach to Female Scottish Identities in Nat McCleary’s *Thrown*

Pelin Gölcük Mirza

Abstract: This article explores the representation of female Scottish identities in Nat McCleary’s play *Thrown* through the lens of Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness” in *Time and Being*, which aligns with the title of the play (174). Premiered in 2023 at the Edinburgh International Festival, *Thrown* portrays the ideological and existential struggles of five Scottish women who, despite their diverse backgrounds, are united by their Scottish heritage and gender. Heidegger’s notion of “thrownness”, which signifies human existence’s situatedness within a specific context, provides a theoretical framework to analyse the characters’ struggles with their identities and the societal expectations imposed upon them. The play delves into the navigation of female/Scottish identity within the constraints of their thrownness, by revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and predetermined life conditions. Depicting their journey of self-discovery and fulfilment, *Thrown* profoundly explores the existential dilemma of being trapped between the desire for freedom and the awareness of existential limitations. Within this light, the main aim of this article is to illuminate how McCleary’s representation of Scotland’s cultural, historical, and environmental contexts varies among the characters by shedding light on the complex dynamics of identity formation in contemporary Scottish society.

Keywords: Nat McCleary, *Thrown*, Heidegger, thrownness, Scotland, identity, freedom, finitude

Introduction

Nat McCleary’s *Thrown* (2023) premiered at Victoria Hall, Dunblane, and was subsequently performed at the Traverse Theatre during the 2023 Edinburgh International Festival under the direction of Johnny McKnight. This production, staged by the National Theatre of Scotland, drew significant attention and became one of the well-received national plays of the festival. McCleary describes *Thrown* on the *YouTube* channel of the *National Theatre of Scotland* as “an attempt to do a deep dive into the reality of difficult conversations, of finding a sense of belonging and unity when you disagree fundamentally with the people that you are trying to engage with or belong to” (n.p.). Given this definition, the play exhibits interpersonal and societal tensions on stage by emphasizing the individual challenges in achieving team unity, which eventually evolves into Scottish female solidarity despite the substantial differences among the characters. It invites the audience to consider how Scottish society is eroding fundamental human virtues such as tolerance, curiosity, and empathy while also calling for an

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egalitarian mindset in contemporary Scotland. Through the metaphor of backhold wrestling in folkloric Highland Games, the play portrays Scotland as a battleground where female characters tussle with societal and ideological problems. Therefore, it reflects McCleary's assertion that the "beauty of disagreement" is being uncompromised (2024, n.p.).

The play is performed by five women of diverse backgrounds and ages, who are metaphorically and literally engaged in the traditional backhold wrestling in Scotland. Each character in the play is driven by different motivations to join the team which reverberate their backgrounds and personal aspirations. Chantelle, a white young woman from a working-class background, is motivated by the hope of achieving online fame and easy financial gain. Jo, who has a Black-Scottish hybrid identity, joins primarily to support her oldest friend, Chantelle. Imogen, a Black woman, views the team as an opportunity to reconnect with her Scottish heritage following her move from London. Helen, a middle-aged white woman, is inspired by the chance to explore something new and different in life. Leading the group is Pamela, a white androgynous individual, whose determination and confidence mask her inner struggles with identity and self-perception. These characters are presented as those who have distanced themselves from their own existences with their personas shaped by societal impositions and ideologies. The stereotypes, labels, high standards, expectations, and prejudices imposed on them push them into conflict with one another. However, through meaningful dialogues, and even monologues in direct address to the audience, each character has to face their own existence, identity, and physical body. This confrontation ultimately encourages the characters to understand what sort of society they have been thrown/born into.

Moreover, Scotland itself, as depicted in the play, is a place whose language and identity have been stigmatized, transformed and fragmented over time. This national marginalization, from historical perspective, is mainly due to its perceived economic and cultural subordination to England in the aftermath of the Union of Parliaments in 1707[1]. Andrew Fletcher, a key figure of debates on the union of England and Scotland, views this union as a legal forfeit for the Scottish people, intentionally established by England to keep them in perpetual subjugation and under English control (Robertson, n.p.). This historical context of instability and conflict in Scotland is reflected in the play and the tension of complexities in Scotland's past situates the characters in a difficult predicament which causes a profound deadlock for each of them. Although the title of the play is associated with backhold wrestling as a physical movement, being thrown to the ground, it also contextually draws parallelism with Martin Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit), which describes the human condition of being thrust into existence by an unknown power in a random place without any guidance or purpose (Cowles 6; Heidegger 174; Withy 2). Within this light, this article will explore how these women, unprepared for Scotland's socio-cultural and economic complexities, find themselves trapped between their desire for freedom and their awareness of existential limitations in their journey of self-discovery and fulfillment.

Thrown to the Existence

Martin Heidegger introduces the concept of "thrownness" within his exposition of Being-in-the-World, or Dasein, in his seminal work *Being and Time* (2001). Dasein, derived from the German term meaning "Being there", signifies human existence or presence in the world (Heidegger 28). Heidegger holds the view that thrownness embodies the knowledge and acceptance of Dasein's innate randomness and contingency. This condition of thrownness includes all of the annoyances, pains, and obligations that people are forced to accept due to social norms, familial ties, or external obligations. These predetermined conditions are what Katherine Withy refers to as "situatedness" of human kind (62). Thrownness, in this sense, is an existential condition that refers to the fundamental path in which human beings find themselves inserted into the world without their volition. Heidegger posits that human existence is situated within a specific context, which he terms as Dasein's "Being-in-the-World" (53). This concept underpins that individuals are thrown into a pre-existing set of circumstances, environments, and historical contexts that profoundly shape their experiences and identities.

Despite its ambiguity, Heidegger uses thrownness to illustrate the pre-given nature of human existence. Thrownness signifies that individuals are delivered over to their Being, subject to the "*facticity*" of their existence

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[1] The historical aspect of national marginalization has been traced in further detail in works such as *Scottish Literature*: *An Introduction* (2022) by Alan Riach and *Contemporary Scottish Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (2009) by Matt McGuire.

(Heidegger 174) (emphasis original). This facticity refers to the concrete details and conditions of one's life, including cultural norms, societal structures, and historical events, which are not chosen but must be navigated. Heidegger articulates this by stating that "[a]n entity of the character of Dasein is its 'there' in such a way that, whether explicitly or not, it finds itself [sich befindet] in its thrownness" (174). This implies that human beings are always already in a world that has shaped them before they become aware of it. This thrownness into a world is a central aspect of the human condition, where individuals are continuously interacting with and being influenced by their surroundings. However, Heidegger does not regard humans as merely passive recipients of their circumstances. According to Withy, Heidegger emphasizes the active role of individuals in interpreting and making sense of their thrownness instead (62). This interpretation and understanding of one's thrownness involve an existential engagement with the world where individuals recognize their limitations.

Furthermore, thrownness is closely related to Heidegger's idea of "facticity", which refers to the aspects of existence that are given and unavoidable. Although the conditions into which a human being is thrown at birth are not within their control, Heidegger does not adopt an entirely pessimistic or deterministic stance. Despite these given conditions, Heidegger argues that individuals have the capacity to transcend their facticity through what he calls "projection" or rather the process "of one's own Being-towards-oneself 'into something else'" (Heidegger 162). Projection involves envisioning and striving toward future possibilities that are not dictated solely by one's past or present conditions. This capacity for projection highlights the dynamic interplay between freedom and limitation in human existence. From this and other aspects, Heidegger's concept of thrownness encapsulates the dual nature of human existence: Being thrust into a world of pre-existing conditions and simultaneously possessing the capacity for self-understanding and projection beyond those conditions. It highlights the tension between determinism and freedom, past and future, and the continuous process of becoming within the constraints of one's facticity. This complex interplay is central in understanding the existential condition of human kind and the profound challenges and possibilities in identity formation.

Thrown to Scotland

In *Thrown*, Nat McCleary presents five characters, Jo Buchanan, Chantelle Watson, Pamela Clark, Imogen Ngwenya, and Helen Macleod, who embody the physical and existential aspects of thrownness. The play manifests their struggles to fit into a society that marginalizes them based on gender, class, and race. These characters are brought together by the playwright in the context of the Highland Games, a traditional Scottish event. McCleary introduces her characters with specific criteria at the outset, including gender, ethnic background, class, weight, age, and personality traits. Within the framework of Heidegger's philosophy, these characters are arbitrarily thrown into the world, specifically into Scotland, as their place of origin, without any guidance or reason. This concept is depicted in the play by withholding explanations from the audience regarding how and why these women are selected and team up for wrestling in the Highland Games. The ground on which they wrestle is not merely a physical space; it constitutes a symbolic arena which is rich with historical, cultural, and socio-economic significance. In line with this, the sweat, conflict, and struggle to capture a sense of belonging to Scotland, chosen by the creator/playwright, lead Helen to the realization that: "That patch of grass that you fight on. That land. It's just a random bit of ground in a random field" (McCleary I. iix. 73). Helen's remark contrasts sharply with Jo's assertion of the land's profound historical and emotional significance. Jo responds, "[t]hat is, until you stand on it, and your bare feet feel it. You feel it. The energy of history. The story of past fights, past struggles, past victories" (I. iix. 73). This difference in remarks highlights the tension between the characters' arbitrary placement in the moment and their subsequent experience of being overwhelmed by imposed identities, legacies, ideologies, and struggles. The juxtaposition between Helen's perception of the land as a random, insignificant space and Jo's view of it as a site imbued with deep, existential meaning puts the emphasis on the play's exploration of the tension between the superficial and profound understandings of place and identity.

Nonetheless, although the randomness involved in the concept of being thrown is beyond the choice and will of the individual, it is not a destination in a person's life journey. As Katherine Withy states, "[t]o be thrown" is rather "to have a starting-point, somewhere we are located" (62). Therefore, Scotland represents a starting point of those athletes in the play, and it turns out to be "facticity" of the characters in Heidegger's term, since "[t]he facticity of Dasein is meant to capture the 'fact' of our existence: 'that' we are" (Cowles 18). Just as Heidegger's concept of facticity implies an undeniable and unchosen starting point, being born and existing in Scotland is an inescapable fact for these women. Even though they have serious conflicts and hatreds within the group, the characters cannot leave the team. They have a special bond with the team which becomes a microcosm of Scotland where there is no exit or escape for the characters. While this might initially seem negative, as it chains the characters to one place, it also has a positive aspect. The team functions as an ultimate leveller of all discrepancies and evokes a sense of belonging. This positive effect is observed when they hear music, such as Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart" (McCleary I. i. 58). At that moment, the tensity among the characters turns out to be team solidarity and enthusiasm. This camaraderie later develops into a deeper sense of national and cultural solidarity, especially among the Scottish women in the play. Helen expresses this feeling as "nice to be connected to family, tradition" (I. i. 58). This sense of belonging and cultural unity draws parallelism with Benedict Anderson's term "imagined community" which Richard Zumkhawala-Cook uses to argue that "nations depend on an unrelenting fiction of wholeness and unity, to maintain a 'self' that is at once different from other nations and sovereign in its own identity" (13). This argument, when bearing the characters' constant separation but ultimate striving for unity in mind, illustrates how Scotland's (female) characters are connected to an existential thread to the society that roots both their existence and their personalities in it. This is confirmed by the self-affirmation of Pamela, the team's coach, who grounds the team members in their shared reality with a simple declaration that "[w]e're here" (I. i. 59). All things considered, these moments show how personal and national identities are shaped by collective experiences and cultural narratives that bridge individual differences.

Understanding how the representation of Scotland's cultural, historical and environmental contexts varies between individuals is crucial to illuminate the complex dynamics underlying the interpersonal conflicts between female athletes. McCleary's representation of Scotland is indeed quite ambiguous. Throughout the play, she persistently includes stereotypical symbols of Scottish heritage such as haggis, kilts, tartan, legacy, Gaelic, and Scots. These cultural markers, however, are presented in a hyperbolic and almost caricatured manner, transforming them into inflated symbols that detach them from their authentic origins. Therefore, despite McCleary's attempts to familiarise the characters with their existence and their state of being thrown by using cultural symbols of the places from which Dasein is thrown, these exaggerated symbolic repetitions create a disconnection between the characters and Scotland. This detachment is epitomized by the exaggerated contender names like "Tartan Terror" and "The Haggis Horror" which Chantelle describes as "OUT OF CONTROL!" (I. i. 5). The repeated invocation of terror evokes an overwhelming sense of oppressive fear. By amplifying these symbols to the point of absurdity, McCleary explicitly satirizes the reduction of a rich, multifaceted culture to mere marketable icons which are devoid of their historical and existential significance. It highlights the commodification and superficial engagement with cultural heritage by reflecting the characters' struggle to reconcile their authentic identities with these imposed, commercialized versions. This kind of political stance that McCleary adopts in the play can be considered as a deadlock of cultural/historical heritage within the postmodern context. Zumkhawala-Cook explains this complexity by referring to Scottish culture and heritage through the following lines:

> Not exactly culture and not exactly history, heritage describes a privately experienced affective link to past communities mediated both by bloodlines and a consumer relationship to the symbolic artifacts of a previous society. In other words, in heritage we see the particularly postmodern construction of difference and identity as individually administered and self-fashioned, imagining itself separate from contemporary local practical human relationships. "Finding one's roots" through genealogical studies, stories of patriarchal family traditions, or participating in cultural festivals may seem harmless in themselves, but in practice they propose an exclusivist version of cultural subjectivity that can disregard the historical realities of power and privilege that have made, and continue to make, these identities possible in everyday life. (24)

McCleary's *Thrown* delves into the themes of heritage in a way that reflects the postmodern identity construction described in the given quotation. The play explores how individuals connect to the past, not simply as a matter of culture or history, but as a complex link to the past communities, shaped by both familial ties and national icons. Through the characters' interactions with traditional Scottish practices such as backhold wrestling, the selling of cultural food like haggis, wearing kilts and tartans, and their encounters with a fierce audience, McCleary highlights the dichotomy between celebrating heritage and confronting the exclusivist and reductionist tendencies it can foster. When approaching to the play through the lens of Heidegger's thrownness, this fosters the complexities of identity formation in a world of imposed cultural narratives and commercialized heritage. The tension between the characters' superficial engagement with their cultural symbols and their deeper existential search for authenticity reveals the play's sceptical stance on national pride and the playwright's comment on the reductionist approach to cultural identity.

In *Thrown*, McCleary, while repetitively incorporating cultural symbols, deliberately distances her characters from rigid or stereotypical definitions of Scottish national identity. This approach facilitates a more dynamic conceptualization of Scottishness. The play illustrates that being born in Scotland and participating in the Highland Games is an element of the characters' experiences and yet it does not fully define their identities. The women in the play are categorized as part of the registration process for the games, which serves as a catalyst for the recognition of their tangible, socially classified existences. The derogatory labels used by the audience of the Highland Games such as "Paki lover", "doormat", "lesbo," "virgin", "half-caste", "posh bitch", "pathetic", "Scottish", "not Scottish", "gold digger", "gobby", "typical woman" focus the attention on the diverse physicality and political engagement of these women (McCleary I. xxi. 31). These slurs, hence, highlight the political and cultural variety within Scotland which, challenge the notion of a singular Scottish identity. The exchange between Imogen and Jo further illustrates the satirical comment of monolithic perceptions of Scottishness:

> IMOGEN. I still can't believe we almost doubled the number of female wrestlers.
> JO. Aye, I thought there would be more of us.
> IMOGEN. I thought there would be more of 'us' too.
> JO. I didn't.
> IMOGEN. All Scotland can't be that white surely? (I. xxv. 36)

This dialogue accentuates the play's broader thematic exploration, wherein the characters' expectations are subverted by revealing the multiplicity of identities and experiences that constitute contemporary Scottishness. The reference to "white Scotland" interrogates the racial and cultural assumptions tied to national identity, thereby emphasizing the play's stance on the homogenization of Scottish identity.

The huge gap in the perception of Scotland is also made explicit particularly when the characters go to buy kilts for the competition. Almost every character reacts differently to these symbolic clothes, which can be considered sacred icons for some nationalist groups. While Imogen, Jo, and Chantelle, as representatives of the new generation, point to the expense or banality of kilts, Helen, who comes from an older generation, reminds the girls of the historical oppression of Scottish identity and asks: "Did you know that the Act of Proscription in 1746 made kilt-wearing punishable by death" (McCleary I. ii. 60). The Act of Proscription of 1746 that Helen refers to in the play was historically introduced by England in the aftermath of the Jacobite defeat at the Battle of Culloden. Through the given act, it was intended to suppress Highland culture and prevent further rebellion. Therefore, the legislation banned the wearing of traditional Highland dress, including tartans, kilts, shoulder belt, which were viewed as official attire of Jacobite identity since "[n]othing considered outwardly Highland could be visible" (White 46). By erasing the visibility of highlanders, the act not only stripped them of their cultural identity but also sought to assimilate them into British culture. McCleary's *Thrown* harmonizes these historical realities with contemporary attitudes by demonstrating how national symbols, such as a kilt, carry different meanings across generations**.** Within this context, this reminder of Helen's indicates how when you were born as well as where you were born influences one's perception of Scotland as well as one's identity. Here, even though these symbols represent the devotion and sacrifices made in the past for independence and freedom as reflected by Helen, the new generation views them differently. As a response to Helen's statement, Imogen says, "Only back then, Helen?" (I. ii. 60). She hereby reminds Helen that the value judgements of the past and today's living conditions are not the same. Born into a capitalist system, the new generation is inclined to perceive these symbols as ordinary products of industrialization. Their spiritual value has diminished, and those cloths are now considered as commodities or as a part of the capitalist production mechanism rather than a special element of identity. This diversity reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of Scottish history, as each wrestler is depicted as being thrown into a different Scotland. Thus, each character comes to represent a different era of Scotland, showcasing the broad spectrum of identities within a single national context. This interplay between individual experiences and collective identity underscores the complexity of defining what it means to be Scottish in contemporary society. Thus, each character comes to assume a different Scotland and represents a different age of Scotland.

Another significant aspect of thrownness is that it determines the scope of possibilities available to Dasein. As Darshan Cowles argues, "[o]ur thrownness limits our projection, in that our project remains tied to or grounded in it. We already find ourselves in a particular way, and this in some way determines the possibilities we project into, the possibilities that we are” (32). This projection is interpreted by Withy as freedom but even in this case freedom is bounded by the circumstances of where people are thrown to (61). In line with Heideggerian account, the play reinforces political factors such as race, class, and historical background in identity formation. At its core, the play revolves around the contentions of privilege by portraying how unequal opportunities lead to unfair systems. By connecting this within the context of an Anglo-centric, class-conscious, and male-dominated Scottish society, the play illustrates how privilege supports social inequalities and worsens the struggles of people who are marginalized because of their race, gender, and/or class. The three characters in the play, Imogen, Chantelle, and Jo, navigate their identities within the constraints of their thrownness and inherited opportunities in Scotland. Imogen, of African origin and upper-class Scottish, grapples with the dualities of being black and rich. Chantelle, a working-class Caucasian Scottish female, aspires to rise above her status and become an influencer, yet her identity is deeply rooted in racial pride most probably due to her desire to be superior among her friends, but particularly superior to her black teammate, Imogen. Indeed, she is not blind or unaware of hegemonic relations between races and classes as she suffers a lot from the lack of opportunity. Despite humiliating Imogen’s blackness, she discloses her sense of world within the following words: “‘More than one kind of privilege.’ Don’t I fucking know it. But only one kind matters these days.” (McCleary 40) Thus, their jealousy invites the audience to ponder on the concept of privilege and its intersectionality. Imogen also humiliates Chantelle due to her economic superiority but acknowledges that,

> Money talks, but don’t kid yourself that you’ll like what it says. I’m sorry people are poor. I am sorry black people are poor. But I’ll always be black first, rich second. At least people are racist to your face when you are poor. It’s worse watching them swallow it, choke it down when they realise what you bank. But I was born Scottish. Being Scottish, that comes for free. Money shuts the fuck up. (I. xiiv. 53)

The given excerpt highlights the persistent influence of race which comes from birth despite the earned wealth which reflects the struggles within a constrained framework of thrownness. In other words, the direct address of Imogen to the audience underscores the complex and enduring impact of race, which remains a defining element of identity regardless of acquired wealth. This tension between inherited racial identity and achieved socioeconomic status reflects the struggles within an existential framework of thrownness where one’s starting point in life is not a matter of choice but profoundly shapes one’s experiences. In line with this, Imogen articulates the double-edged sword of wealth as it intersects with race. While money may offer power and privilege, it cannot erase the racial identity that society often weaponizes against individuals, even as they climb the social ladder. Her remark “being Scottish, that comes for free” also lays bare the inescapable reality of racial identity with the assumed national identity (I. xiiv. 53).

Jo, who is of African-Caucasian origin, is caught between Chantelle and Imogen’s worlds in the play. Chantelle and Imogen represent two conflicting identities or cultural expectations, both demanding Jo’s loyalty. This polarization takes a significant toll on Jo’s psychological well-being and how she perceives herself. Jo ultimately expresses her inner turmoil to the audience by describing this conflict as a “[t]ug of war. Two opposites. Dichotomy. No middle ground. […] I wonder how long a rope can bear up under that before it snaps” (McCleary I. xxiv. 35). The vivid metaphor of a rope under strain symbolizes the internal and external pressures Jo faces, torn between two opposing identities in a binary world where she is constantly pulled in different directions. Jo’s dilemma holds the mirror to the audience to reflect the broader experience of individuals who navigate multiple identities, often without the comfort of a stable or reconciled sense of self. Her fear of the rope snapping suggests the potential for breakdown or crisis when the tension becomes unbearable. This anxiety discloses the existential struggle of belonging, the search for a middle ground that remains elusive, and the emotional burden of maintaining a balancing act between disparate worlds that rarely acknowledge the complexity of her identity.

Helen and Pamela, on the other hand, experience the frustrations of being female in a patriarchal society. Helen’s character, depicted as weak and vulnerable, and implied to have suffered domestic abuse, similarly represents the constraints and limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. Her avoidance of conflict, along with Pamela’s actions, can be seen as a mature acknowledgment of their thrownness or rather their acceptance of the circumstances into which they were born, while still grappling with the implications. Both characters embody a deep engagement with the societal expectations placed upon them and seek ways to push back or resist these pressures. Pamela is also at odds with biological determinism and presents gender dysphoria by using hormone suppressive drugs. She reveals her distress in her silence during the team conversations and in her own monologue, she defines her own condition with the following lines:

> PAMELA. The weigh in. Where, before you validated to compete, you step onto the scales and find out which group you fit into. Where something arbitrary determines how you are categorized. And categories are helpful things. Help us understand what something is. They bring order; prevent chaos and confusion, they bring control. And with control comes freedom. Safety. Peace. Peace of mind. Because there's no negotiation; no grey area, the parameters are set. It's black and white. Therefore, everyone can be easily categorized. And the scales can be trusted, right? Universally accepted, right? Fairness established, right? (McCleary I. xxi. 31)

According to Pamela, the process of stepping onto the scales, where an arbitrary measure determines one's category, parallels the way society enforces gender roles and expectations based on superficial criteria, such as biological determinism. Pamela's struggle with gender dysphoria and her use of hormone suppressive drugs reflects her resistance to being confined by these rigid categories, challenging the idea that one's identity must conform to predetermined societal norms.

Furthermore, as previously noted, the Heideggerian term *thrownness* represents merely the initial condition or starting point of an individual's existence. Following this initial state, Heidegger posits that the individual engages in the process of projection whereby they actively shape their future by envisioning and pursuing their aspirations, desires, and goals. This act involves a forward-looking orientation that transcends the constraints of one's initial circumstances and thereby allows the individual to create meaning and purpose in their life through the continuous unfolding of their potentialities. Nevertheless, the projection of identity into the future is a painful process because, after being thrown, the human being is constantly "absorbed" by the space where they are placed and is forced to grapple with things (Heidegger 146). Therefore, what matters for humankind is the process after being thrown. In the play, this existential struggle after being thrown is categorized and classified differently by each woman. The following excerpt articulates the potential risks and challenges each woman might experience, or has already experienced, after being thrown:

> PAMELA. Fifth. The throw.
> JO. That moment of feeling in freefall. Out of control. Waiting to see who lands first. Waiting for a resolution.
> PAMELA: And the risks?
> HELEN. Personal injury
> IMOGEN. Disqualification.
> JO. Humiliation
> CHANTELLE. Failure
> PAMELA. The gain?
> ALL. Validation. (McCleary I. ii. 11)

Each response, as demonstrated by the quotation, encapsulates a different aspect of the human condition in the context of their existential and socio-cultural thrownness. For Jo, it is the fear of being humiliated or anxiety in making the wrong choice in showing her stance either with her white or her black side. Helen's mention of personal injury evokes the physical and emotional toll of grappling with male-oriented marital life. Imogen's concern with disqualification points to the fear of societal rejection and the harsh judgments imposed by external standards. Jo's mentioning of humiliation reflects the internalized fear of failure and the impact of societal expectations on self-worth. Chantelle's reference to failure captures the ultimate dread of not meeting the imposed standards and the internalized pressure to succeed. However, the unified response of "validation" as the gain signifies the collective yearning for acknowledgment and affirmation in the face of these existential challenges (McCleary I. ii. 11).

Conclusion

Thrown by McCleary demonstrates how Heidegger's concept of thrownness manifests through pre-existing conditions and societal expectations that profoundly shape one's understanding of self, choices, and path in life. The play reveals that personal agency and external thrown factors interact dynamically, continually influencing the characters' perceptions and actions over time. Despite sharing the commonality of being born in Scotland and participating in the Highland Games, the women in the play exhibit diverse reactions, experiences, and engagements with the world. This diversity leads one to the idea that identity is not monolithic but rather a complex interplay of individual experiences and broader socio-historical contexts. Furthermore, each character's journey reflects the struggle to wrestle with the contradictions between their personal aspirations and the roles imposed upon them by society. The wrestling ground plays crucial role in the play in terms of theatrically denoting this existential struggle. It is a physical space where characters confront not only each other but also their own internal conflicts and societal expectations. Each character must grapple with the predetermined conditions of their existence while striving to assert her personal agency. In this sense, *Thrown* overall offers a profound exploration of the human condition by reflecting Heidegger's belief that thrownness is an inescapable aspect of existence. It emphasizes that while individuals are thrust into pre-existing conditions beyond their control, they also possess the capacity to navigate these conditions and shape their paths. The play encourages the audience to reflect on their own experiences of thrownness and consider how they, too, can find meaning and agency within the limitations of their circumstances. Thus, McCleary's *Thrown* serves both as a mirror and a lens, allowing us to see ourselves within the struggles of its characters and inspiring us to confront our own existential dilemmas with courage and insight.

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Corresponding Author: Duygu Koroncu Özbilen, School of Foreign Languages, Yıldız Technical University, Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0003-0018-6389

A Newly Emerging Genre: *X* Fiction in English Literature

Duygu Koroncu Özbilen

Abstract: *X* fiction, a recently recognized form of literature in the English language, is a blend of social media and traditional storytelling. It is brief but powerful, using a 280-character limit to create impactful stories that appeal to its audience. These tiny tales often utilize symbols, ironies, or texts from other works to represent multifaceted ideas in current information-overloaded societies. The easy accessibility for many people significantly influences the popularity of *X* fiction, which is enabled through social media platforms, allowing different voices to participate in shaping modern literature history. Moreover, this genre also fosters live interaction between storytellers and their readers, creating a sense of engagement and involvement through immediate responses during communal discussions on various narratives shared online at different times. This article discusses the features of *X* fiction by examining texts by David Mitchell and Jay Bushman, emphasizing this emerging genre’s interactive nature, which keeps the audience engaged. By looking at exemplary works coupled with reader-author dynamics, this article aims to illustrate how much more can be done within these limits and how to broaden what constitutes literary work across media forms, mainly through *X*.

Keywords: English fiction, technology, social media, digital narratives, digital fiction, *X* fiction, contemporary literature, literary theory

The free social networking site *X* is pivotal in promoting *X* fiction, a unique form of literature that has emerged in English. *X* combines the features of a blog and an instant messenger app, enabling registered members to post, share, like, or reply to short messages. This platform, founded by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass Biz Stone, and Evan Williams in 2006, has more than four hundred thirty-six million global users. The search bar can be used to look up people’s names or topics, and the platform has created a symbol to show verified accounts to reduce fake profiles. Unlike LinkedIn or Facebook, users do not have to wait for approval before following others on *X*. The post can be searched but it is possible to add hashtags, making the post searchable under that keyword. *X* Deck allows users to manage multiple accounts and schedule future tweets, among other functions. On *X*, this includes responding, commenting, liking, and sending links and messages via direct messaging, which promotes interaction

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between people here. Anyone can send private messages; hence, followership is unnecessary before one starts a conversation with another person on this site (Hetler, "What is Twitter", n.p.).

Studies on the subject have begun in the field of literature and various studies have been produced. One of these was conducted by Al-Sharaqi and Abbasi. In their study, Al-Sharaqi and Abbasi mention that the advent of *X* fiction has wholly changed how authors produce and share stories, as it allows readers to be actively involved in the development process of their works (16-7). Al-Sharaqi and Abbasi argue that the task of writing the shortest story, which is said to begin with Ernest Hemingway's "[f]or Sale: baby shoes, never worn"[1], has evolved, and now *X* fiction is a treasure for any writer (16). This interactive art performance on literature lets writers play around with structure and present it to the readers directly for them to retweet or comment. Readers are kept in suspense by the unpredictability of *X*, which has made them wait for tweet installments. Nevertheless, *X* fiction is complicated beneath its innocent facade, as some tales seem simple but contain mythologies in their small words. As an example, some words, sentences, or even *X* hashtags can have deeper, more universal cultural or mythological meanings. For example, a tweet about a "white whale" can immediately bring to mind Moby Dick songs, implying passion or fate without saying so directly. Or, saying something as simple as "the storm is coming" can have apocalyptic or existential meanings, based on the situation.

Good *X* stories are like impressionistic paintings where you get one critical moment and then carry home something memorable. To make everything fit into 140 characters and achieve an arc of a successful story, much of the content must be left out because the reader is expected to fill in those spaces. Any *X* story should not deviate from the topic, using brevity in artistry so that it does not become longwinded, thereby losing focus or moving away into other areas unconnected with its main plot. Though a few critics such as David Biespiel and James Wood argue in their interviews that technology—in this context *X* fiction—may be responsible for the deterioration of literature in the 21st century, this genre resuscitates the literary presence of today (n.p.). Traditional definitions do not consider *X* fiction a complete piece because all five essential elements of a narrative – setting, character(s), plot, conflict, and resolution – cannot be contained in such limited space. Accordingly, scene-setting or preamble is irrelevant to flash fiction since it turns into non-narratives without plots due to the character limit set at 280 characters. This popularity stems from tweets being brief enough to "resonate with the one byte and go culture of the modern age" and offering an easy alternative to polish an edited fifteen-page story, which many writers would prefer (Sharaqi and Abbasi 17). *X* is too immediate for many users to ignore, and some are pushed by the notion that what they write there could be developed into larger, more ambitious works than the printed word allows. Technology has changed how people write and distribute their work, and *X* fiction has different goals. It can help market well-known authors or contribute to a writer's success who is not recognized by launching them into the limelight using the *X* platform. Writers who publish individually mark their stories with appropriate hashtags. For this reason, there has been an increase in the diversity of readership and interactive storytelling through *X*, resulting in a boom in *X* fiction. The conventional standards of storytelling have now made way for X fiction, where a masterpiece may consist of 45 words written in 15 minutes and then sent via hashtag on *X* (Al-Sharaqi and Abbasi 17).

Statistics show that people in the UK use social media for an average of one hour and fourty-nine minutes daily on all their devices (Guttmann n.p.). The rise of new technologies and social media is often blamed for young people losing interest in reading for fun instead of necessity (Guo 375). According to a recent report from Arts Council England, sales of literary fiction have dropped sharply in the last fifteen years (2). The report reveals that the rise of smartphones is to blame for this phenomena. The report is also pessimistic, indicating that "literary fiction is often 'difficult' and expensive: it isn't free and it requires more concentration than Facebook or Candy Crush" (21). Traditional writers who write long, detailed books might think that the rise of very short forms of storytelling like "*X* fiction" (most likely *X* fiction or microfiction) makes their work less valuable. Building worlds, developing characters, and putting complex plots together takes a lot of work when writing long-form fiction. As short stories become more popular, they may seem to "cheat" these rules by appealing to people with shorter attention spans. People who like long, detailed stories might think that the move toward shorter, snappier stories gives up depth for speed. As unfair as it might seem, current trends should not keep these readers from having the rich literary experiences they value. Some might think that the change is not fair to the traditional literary standards, which values complexity and thematic depth. Some critics might say that microfiction makes these long-held ideals less important.

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[1] In his "The Short Story Just Got Shorter: Hemingway, Narrative, and the Six-Word Urban Legend", Frederick A. Wright explains in detail how Hemingway's "six-word text" has turned into a popular myth within the short story genre (327).

Starting as early as 2009, authors such as Neil Gaiman began using *X* to write short stories that could fit in a single 140-character (now 280-character) tweet (Flood n.p.). Like flash fiction, a short story of up to 100 words, *X* fiction tests how well a writer can fit a whole story or feeling into a word count that seems impossible. In the same way that a short tweet can sum up a person's day, mood, or an important event, *X* fiction tells a whole made-up story. In the past few years, between 2012 and 2015, *The Guardian* has put together several short-story collections and invited many writers to participate. Of course, you do not have to be a famous author to join the challenge of *X* fiction. For example, an *X* author called Nanoism[2] posts weekly stories within the 140-character limit, even though *X* changed this to 280 characters. If you want to write your own *X* stories, you can send them to Nanoism along with a short bio of yourself as an author. You can send it in if the style, theme, or subject does not exceed the limit. As it is apparent, *X* writers did not develop the idea of tiny stories. People continue to experiment with six-word novels and one-liners, a form of storytelling that includes both timeless classics and modern adaptations through platforms like Twitter. The aforementioned famous six-word story, "[f]or sale: baby shoes, never worn" attributed to Hemingway, remains an iconic example (Fershleiser and Smith vi). Lea refers to Gaiman as one of the prominent authors who frequently uses *X* even though Gaiman criticizes himself for being too dependent on social media and announced that he was going to take a six-month break from his online community of fans and friends (n.p.). Neil Gaiman shared an exciting tweet on his *X* account (@neilhimself) with his 1.2 million followers: "Sam was brushing her hair when the girl in the mirror put down the hairbrush, smiled and said, '[w]e don't love you anymore" (in Flood n.p.). Extreme care must go into writing a story that is so short but still has such an effect. There should not be much conversation or too many details about treetops and eye colors. Each word is essential to the story's overall structure, and characters cannot be spared extra adjectives. One of the most beneficial applications of *X* is to promote long-form nonfiction by disseminating a summary that links to the full text (Frere-Jones n.p.).

X fiction is a remarkable improvement in language learning that deals with original self-contained stories *X* users publish. According to Carla Raguseo, "[t]he 140-character space limitation has" led to "two approaches": Crafting stories exactly 140 characters long or using the "constraint" creatively to inspire storytelling ("Twitter Fiction"). *X* stories do not have titles, hence emphasizing their fragmentary presentation. They appear in reverse chronological order on the author's profile, thereby making the length driven by the creative process. This method has practical implications for composing free-form poetry and haikus. Current technologies such as *X* exploit "weightless materialization" and "viral" communication of novel literary forms where readers' voices mingle with writers' voices amidst participatory-surfed digital literary circuits (Raguseo, "Twitter Fiction"). User-generated content has been made possible through Web2 architecture, which permits people to share content online as they adopt different social, cultural, or literary forms. *X* fiction is not part of a coherent scholarly literary movement; instead, it develops randomly from individual and collective experiments on the internet. In terms of genres, for instance, it can be considered diverse, encompassing different forms from "short stories and thrillers to haiku-style poems", among others such as the aforementioned example. Moreover, this phenomenon seems to have extended "beyond its original web application to other electronic publications", such as X and electronic books, which are some examples of those publications (Raguseo, "Twitter Fiction"). *X* fiction, previously known as "Twitter fiction", includes 280-character stories, as well as things like fan fiction, a retelling of the classics and legends, *X* novels, and collaborative works (Rosen and Ihara n.p.). James Mark Miller, Sean Hill, and Arjun Basu, for instance, have all written 280-character stories, while some X accounts are developed for film characters or TV series a writer might have seen. The latter can be retold through character tweeting and interacting or in tweet form, which is often modern language using slang. An *X* novel can go on for hundreds of tweets to tell a story over several days. Often, the author of these types of novels is unknown to those reading them, thus lending them more credibility. This name may often be an alias or a figure from within the plot. "Small Places" by Nick Belardes and

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[2] "*Nanoism* (edited by Ben White / @benwhitemd) is/was an online venue for Twitter-fiction" which "ran from 2009-2013" (White n.p.).

The Twitstery Trilogy series by Robert K. Blechman are vivid examples of *X* novels which are also called Xature or Twitterature (Rizer n.p.).

David Mitchell, the author of the acclaimed novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), is using *X* to tell a new story titled "The Right Sort". The 140-character short story about a boy taking his mother's Valium pills is released as several tweets over seven days. Mitchell created a new account on *X* (@david_mitchell) to tell the story, which he describes as "a diabolical treble-strapped textual straitjacket" (Flood n.p.). A boy who likes Valium because it allows him to compress the world into bite-sized staccato pulses narrates this story in the present tense. That way, according to Mitchell in his interview with Jill Krasny, one can tell if its use by him was necessary or not (n.p.). The next novel by David Mitchell is set in 1984 and belongs to the same universe as *The Bone Clocks*. Writing fiction for *X* is described as a "diabolical treble-strapped textual straitjacket" because of its limitations such as 140 characters and "visually sequential" tweets altering how the text is read (Flood n.p.). Mitchell argues that narrative tweets have an inherent balance and "propellent", being self-contained entities that could spin plates of "character development", "mood", "plot", or "idea" around them (in Flood n.p.). Every morning at seven and evening at five, for one week, twenty posts containing parts of this book are revealed (Flood n.p.). "The Right Sort" is about Nathan, a young British teen who goes to a party at the strange townhouse of Lady Briggs with his mother. Nathan takes one of his mother's Valium to calm down. At first, the story is about a teenager's angst as he thinks about being a stranger and how he and his mother feel out of place at the house of an aristocrat. However, things get scary and supernatural when time speeds up, and fears come true. Mitchell has always combined genre fiction with literary fiction to create new methods of writing. In this case, Mitchell uses the rules of a horror story. When you read, you do not feel disconnected and split up; instead, you feel connected in a way that surprises you, and you get lost in the story and the scroll. Reading tweets one after the other does not change the effect much, even though *X* is always live and changing. When reading any digital text, zooming in, making the text bigger, and scrolling all the time make the experience lively and personal, putting the screen close to your face and your eyes close to the words. Mitchell's story is like looking out of a small window on a fast-moving train through a countryside with many tunnels and dark and light bands (Mitchell, "The Right Sort" n.p.). *X* can be viewed as a handy tool for fiction writers, but it must be used in the work. *X* can be used for different stories, as shown in "Black Box" by Jennifer Egan and *Collaborative Stories* by Neil Gaiman (Sardar 33). Another author, Teju Cole, used retweets to create a short story entitled "Hafiz" which was composed of unrelated tweets posted by various different X users at various times (Rizer n.p.). Cole managed to retweet these posts "in a specific order" that "created a narrative" (Rizer n.p.). Narrative can manifest through actions on social media platforms, such as sharing posts to amplify a message, liking content to show approval, blocking users to create boundaries, or unfollowing to signify disengagement or disinterest. Characters can use different *X* names or subtly live in a single account. Stories of lost love, loneliness, and sadness can be found in the archive of work written for the *X* Fiction Festival (Crouch n.p.). These stories are examples of this type of writing. It is possible that *X* is not the best place for deep fiction, but another kind of fiction uses *X*'s everyday features and real-time moves. This kind of fantasy is made up on the spot and it is full of strange side stories, "breaking news", "animal videos", and "sad", "unfaved tweets" (Crouch n.p.). It has the first true-story narrator who writes in a way that seems like an honest "nonfiction opinion" at the time (Crouch n.p.). "One day at a time", someone might be "tweeting", "retweeting", and "subtweeting" the "Great American Novel" (Crouch n.p.).

David Mitchell's *Slade House* opens with a gripping and mysterious scene: A sign reading "SLADE ALLEY" on the wall of a building that forms part of the alley's narrow entrance. This striking opening immediately sets a tone of suspense and intrigue, combining the eerie name with the old-fashioned aesthetic of the sign. The alley's placement between two houses creates a sense of confinement, hinting at hidden secrets or unusual occurrences waiting to be uncovered within this mysterious location (*Slade House* n.p.). The dialogue between the narrator and his mother introduces a layered family dynamic. When the narrator remarks, "I thought lying was wrong", his mother's response, "It's called creating the right impression," reflects a pragmatic, if morally ambiguous, perspective on social interactions (*Slade House* n.p.). This interplay highlights the tension between innocence and experience, suggesting that the mother is attempting to teach her son how to navigate the complexities of social niceties. The exchange subtly establishes themes of truth and perception that recur throughout the story. As they proceed, the narrator's mother adds a comment about the family's financial difficulties, referencing the narrator's absent father and his unpaid financial obligations. This remark provides insight into their economic struggles and hints at familial tensions, which contribute to the deeper characterization of the family and the challenges they face. The mention of a passing lorry situates the story within an urban setting, grounding the narrative in a recognizable reality for readers (*Slade House* n.p.). The description of Westwood Road reinforces the sense of an ordinary middle-class neighborhood, with its red-brick houses and mundane details like dustbins and small driveways. This mundane setting starkly contrasts with the mysterious atmosphere surrounding Slade Alley. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the uncanny underscores the narrative's tension, foreshadowing the unsettling events that will unfold.

Further interactions and observations deepen the mystery and psychological tension. When the narrator overhears crude remarks from a peer, the moment captures a sense of discomfort and social unease, reflecting the awkward dynamics of adolescence. As the story progresses, other characters, like Jonah, introduce further layers of complexity. Jonah's pointed question about recurring nightmares, coupled with his observation of the narrator's "hunted look", not only hints at deeper psychological themes but also suggests that Jonah possesses an unsettling level of insight into the narrator's inner world. This dynamic contributes to the growing sense of unease, reinforced by evocative descriptions such as the swaying foxgloves that seem to move without any visible cause.

The narrator's physical scars become another focal point, symbolizing past trauma that they are reluctant to share. This reluctance is evident when the narrator instinctively conceals their scars upon Jonah's inquiry. The scars represent both a literal and metaphorical burden, hinting at events that have shaped the narrator's identity and highlighting the theme of vulnerability. To situate Mitchell's work within the broader context of contemporary literature, it is helpful to explore the evolution of storytelling in digital spaces and its influence on traditional narrative forms. Purcell discusses the integration of new media and traditional literature in what he terms "Diamedia Literary Practice" which illustrates how digital platforms influence narrative techniques and reader engagement (119). Similarly, Raguseo explores microfiction's rise in social media, offering insights into the structural and thematic innovations that align with Mitchell's use of concise, vivid imagery and layered character interactions ("Twitter Fiction"). These perspectives enhance our understanding of *Slade House* as both a work of literary fiction and a reflection of contemporary narrative trends.

The narrative tension reaches a peak when the narrator expresses paranoia about Jonah's potential actions, imagining scenarios where Jonah is lying in wait to ambush him. This moment captures the narrator's growing sense of isolation and unease. The relief the narrator feels when their fears remain undiscovered reflects a complex mix of fear, shame, and the need for privacy, emphasizing the psychological weight of their experiences: "Could Jonah have seen? I hope not. Probably not. Probably…" (Mitchell 2015). However, now they start questioning whether Jonah saw what happened during this period. These new doubts only increase his fearfulness, as he no longer trusts his environment.

These tweets show us just how traumatised someone can be psychologically after experiencing hallucinations. It also reveals some parts of oneself that we would rather keep hidden from others, including ourselves, leaving room for self-analysis or discovery. The way David Mitchell tells it causes comedy mixed with great images of conscience while keeping us engaged until the end. He talks about reality versus imagination very well so that readers are left curious about whether he is mad or not yet worried too much because everything seems like truth either way until they question their minds again.

The novel's story on *X* is unique because it can only be 140 characters long (now 280 characters). Mitchell has become skilled at creating short but powerful tweets to overcome this obstacle. Often, these tweets suggest the existence of other stories that are left to the imagination of readers. Mitchell breaks things down into fragments in his works, presenting them as snippets or moments instead of following a linear narrative structure. Nevertheless, this method resembles his strategy in novels like *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten*, where various narratives unfold through different periods and perspectives. Also similar to these longer pieces by David Mitchell, many subjects are touched upon in his *X* fiction, such as identity, memory perception, or even how we are all interconnected in this life. What makes Mitchell's use of *X* for storytelling an exciting approach is its willingness to experiment with form and structure. It blends traditional narrative techniques with those from the digital age by utilizing social media's instant nature and universality, which enables it to reach out to a broader fan base than ever before while also engaging them in a different manner. Still, though brief in size, each tweet packs much detail about people's personalities or places where events occur, among others, thus painting colorful pictures within limited spaces. The interactive capacity offered by platforms such as *X* allows authors like David Mitchell to interact directly with their audience and create communities around their works through replies, retweets, and likes. Real-time conversations fostered by this kind of engagement deepen reader connection beyond what is possible under conventional publishing formats. Another significance of Mitchell's *X* fiction lies in its nature, which is part of a broader trend towards exploring new literary territories using digital devices. It challenges established ideas concerning how stories should be told or shared- revealing possibilities for adaptation within our current stage of technological development where everything seems possible except sticking rigidly into some old-school notions about what constitutes proper storytelling procedure.

Another prominent *X* fiction writer is Jay Bushman, who released his short story "The Good Captain", based on *Benito Cereno* by Herman Melville. Although some of Melville's readers believe that *Benito Cereno* can be considered "one of his greatest works", others believe it is exaggerated (Phillips 188). Some critics called it a slavery uprising (Van Wyck 423-5). Works such as Nicholas Belardes's "Small Places" and Jay Bushman's "The Good Captain" are considered to be the first X novels to be tweeted (Ceyhan Akça 71). The novella begins with a story that may appear as a straightforward account of American heroism but is tragic and morally intricate. Both readers during Melville's time and contemporary audiences of its movie adaptation, might have felt like both stories are only adventurous tales that applaud the triumph and goodness of the American power; however, this is directed towards people who watch or read attentively by asking them to think critically on whether justice is served by American power (Danoff 50-1).

Herman Melville's novella examines the complexity of good and evil within individuals and how these traits intertwine when determining moral character (Danoff 51). The story resonates deeply with Americans because it continues to provoke discussion and analysis among critics, underscoring its lasting relevance. While Babo ultimately faces execution for his actions, the successful mutiny he orchestrates brings attention to the horrors of slavery as an institution. At the same time, the narrative challenges us to consider Captain Delano's perspective—a seemingly benevolent Northern Yankee whose "naïveté" and complicity reveal a darker, willfully ignorant side (Danoff 51). In contrast, Captain Benito Cereno, portrayed as frail and unwell, commands a slave ship carrying valuable human cargo. Melville's use of Delano's perspective implicates readers in accepting slavery as a normalized reality. We may sympathize with Cereno because of his captivity, but this sympathy does not absolve him of his moral failings. The novella ultimately explores how ignorance can render individuals complicit in evil. It demonstrates that while ignorance itself is not an endorsement of wrongdoing, it can lead to dangerous consequences when confronting the evils of slavery. Delano's inability to fully comprehend the mutiny's significance reflects this theme. His attempt to ransom or negotiate with Cereno underscores his misunderstanding of the deeper moral implications of the events. This misstep, rather than offering clarity, highlights his failure to grasp the structural evil of slavery, making his account a crucial yet flawed lens through which the story's facts unfold.

Benito Cereno brings to light critical intellectual and social realities that Delano's retelling cannot fully reveal, as he is inherently part of the structures and biases they expose. Melville alters certain details, such as the historical name of the ship *San Dominick* and the precise date of the events, to provide deeper narrative context and heighten the thematic significance of the story. These changes, along with Melville's literary devices, illuminate the social failures and challenges stemming from the varied American perspectives of the time. Melville's skepticism about prevailing societal attitudes was well-founded, and *Benito Cereno* reflects this by instilling a similar skepticism in its readers. In this story, Delano symbolizes a broader American mindset—one shaped by racial blindness and moral complacency. Insightful readers who grasp this connection can see how Melville critiques and exposes these societal flaws. This achievement demonstrates Melville's success in confronting the racial and intellectual prejudices of nineteenth century America through *Benito Cereno* (Kaiser 15).

X "does not necessarily" signal "the end for the novel in its print-published form – at least not yet and certainly not on its own" (Cole in Purcell 36). Because of this, neither *X* nor the story has reached the end of their development and their dialogue continues to evolve. Novelists, drawn to unfinished processes, will persist in seeking opportunities, addressing challenges, and navigating the dynamic tension between X and the novel. This interplay is evident in the works of authors such as Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin, who experiment with these forms in their writing. Purcell's concept of "Diamedia Literary Practice" offers a framework for understanding this evolving relationship between traditional literature and emerging digital platforms like *X*. It refers to a practice that blends multiple media, such as print and digital, to explore new modes of storytelling and interaction. This approach examines how the boundaries of literature shift when narratives are shaped by social media's brevity, immediacy, and connectivity. As Purcell argues, "Diamedia Literary Practice" provides a meaningful lens for studying literature and media studies today and into the future, as it captures the ways in which these forms influence and reshape one another (37).

Jay Bushman explains that since he started using *X* in 2007, social media has been a significant part of his storytelling approach ("The Lizzie Bennet Diaries" n.p.). Bushman's "The Good Captain" is considered to be among the first examples written on *X* (Belardes n.p.). Bushman quickly realizes that "social tools felt more effective when used to express strong character voices", particularly in "dramatic" stories rather than traditionally written "prose fiction" ("The Lizzie Bennet Diaries" n.p.). He acknowledges the importance of distancing from social media as extensively as possible before telling stories and notes that issues with replayability make it increasingly challenging to reach an audience, and platforms are evolving in less supportive ways of such creative projects (n.p.). He expresses his frustration that *X*, his initial favorite social media platform, has become nearly unusable since it began focusing on celebrity broadcasting (n.p.). He also laments difficulties in discovering new projects and videos on *YouTube*, attributing this to the platform's prioritization of top artists (n.p.). He observes a shift in social media, noting that individuals are increasingly valued over content, which heightens the pressure to post regularly in order to "build a brand" continually (n.p.). He emphasizes his preference for crafting complete stories rather than constantly generating material or focusing on brand-building—an approach that is in conflict with the current structure and demands of social media platforms (n.p.)

> Our mining on Dioretsa has been productive, so I tell her to load some of our ice in case they need it.[3]
> Waverly doesn't like the idea. I tell her she can come with, to make sure there are no bogeymen on board. She details five more to join us.[4]
> I order Waverly to prep a rovership. We'll go over and see what's happening. Maybe we can help pilot her to a safe orbit.[5]
> This is clearly a ship in trouble.[6]
> As if reading my mind, the ship changes its course. But now it's going to overshoot Dioretsa completely.[7]

Readers are drawn into a futuristic setting in the opening lines where operations have been happening in the mines on the planet Dioretsa. When productive mining is mentioned, it builds up a background of industry and economic considerations in space. In their interactions, Waverly and the narrator (probably the protagonist) show each other facets of their characters right from the beginning. Her mention of "bogeymen" and lackadaisicalness towards loading ice adds color to her character and hints at future confrontations or fears. From routine mining operations, it quickly proceeds to an abrupt crisis on another ship. Deciding to prepare a rovership and look into what was happening with the troubled vessel creates an atmosphere of action and suspense. The narrator depicts urgency and responsibility, signaling that he/she is morally or ethically motivated. The ship's change of course, which might take the ship beyond Dioretsa, signifies ambiguity and imminent danger. This raises questions about what was wrong with the ship and who would be affected, among others. The nature of its problem may be inferred, but nothing is narrated for now. Bushman's style in this introduction is brief but effective in establishing the setting, introducing characters, and early conflict. The narrative momentum is enhanced through direct commands and statements that give rise to urgency and authority. It deftly combines sci-fi elements with the interplay between people facing a disaster that foretells possible themes for exploration afterward:

> -That the generous Captain Lockham remained on the ship all day, until he left after having guided them into safe orbit;

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[3] Each line here refers to a different tweet consecutively posted by Bushman to create his story on *X*. The links are provided for each one in footnotes. https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/689039385275289600.
[4] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/689038125637722112.
[5] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/689036866025336832.
[6] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/689035606521999362.
[7] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/689034347014418432.

> -[Further recounting of the fictitious story Deponent gave to Captain Lockham, as well as Captain Lockham's offers of assistance;]
> -That of those who survived, may more perished from the radiation poisoning;
> -That coming through the Kuiper Belt they sustained heavy damage, killing many of the crew, passengers and artificials[8]

The story clearly highlights the events about Captain Lockham and the troubled ship. This further highlights the character as caring and does not abandon his vessel until it reaches a safe orbit. This adds another dimension to his personality, showing his commitment to helping others in trouble. The fictional story of the Deponent's account of the captain intrigues and complicates the text. It insinuates that there may be hidden layers within these events, perhaps even motives or other intentions that could affect the direction of such an occurrence. Captain Lockham's offers further play into themes such as compassion and rescue during emergencies. In addition, the reference to radiation poisoning, together with the heavy damage suffered upon passing through the Kuiper Belt, underlines the high levels of danger experienced by the characters, thus stressing their risk-taking capacities. On top of all, information about radiation poisoning, together with many deaths after covering distances across the Kuiper Belt, heightens anxiety levels among readers. These parts increase tension and risk, creating more conflict between characters to move forward in the storyline and involve the audience deeper into the process. Using X's format by Bushman facilitates efficient narration while exercising brevity in storytelling. Every tweet is brief enough for the reader to piece together what is happening occasionally while maintaining immediacy within this unfolding narrative. This quote demonstrates competent storytelling techniques such as character development, plot progression, and thematic exploration. It engages readers through its mix of science fiction elements, interpersonal dynamics, and moral dilemmas that promise more depth as the book progresses.

> Dziga: "In one moment, I lost all my officers, most of the crew and passengers. About half the artificials were destroyed.[9]
> Dziga: "Coming through the Kuiper Belt, we collided with a comet. It caused a reactor to explode and the hull to be breached.[10]
> Dziga: "Some were his personal property, but most were to be delivered to the in-system markets.[11]
> Dziga: "One of these passengers, my good friend Vassily Antonovich Kaminov, had a cargo of about 300 artificials.[12]

The last part of the story reveals how big the disaster experienced by Dziga and their ship was—including but not limited to a comet that hit them, leading to a reactor explosion and killing all officers, crew members, passengers, and even artificials, which suggests devastation and calamity. This final revelation shows the high stakes in the narrative and how emotional it could be. Dziga's close friend, Vassily Antonovich Kaminov, has also been identified. The significance of the 300 artificials that Kaminov carries signals the magnitude of what he was involved in and the long-term effects on personal lives.

Bushman's tweets preserve an ending for every significant event in the story, summarizing the catastrophic event and its aftermath. This provides clear evidence that readers are given ample time to reflect on what happens after the events conclude, as well as on those involved, particularly Dziga and their colleagues. Themes of survival, loss, and fortitude are central to the story. The collision of a comet triggering a reactor detonation functions metaphorically to illustrate the sudden difficulties one must endure with resilience. Additionally, the use of artificial cargo emphasizes the intersection of technology, morality, and the human cost (or instrumental cost) associated with space expeditions.

X is shown here through concluding passages as though it were closing out the main parts of the stories with series or tweets summarizing terrible situations followed by an aftermath description involving chaotic activities that occur later after everything has come down. This denouement enables one to contemplate the action outcomes and emotional journeying that characters undergo while dealing with people like Dziga and other crew members who took part in it all. Throughout his story, Bushman investigates survival struggles, including death tolls, recovery exercises, etc. Furthermore, the life lesson of when faced with unanticipated challenges at times, one has to become more resilient for life to go on is symbolized by the explosion of a comet with its attending reactor. The list underscores technology, ethics, and the human (or artificial) cost of space flight and exploration by including artificials as cargo. He uses *X* as an effective medium for delivering a concise yet poignant science fiction narrative. While each tweet contributes to fragmented storytelling, this happens in one section but is still cohesive, thereby involving suspenseful revelations from characters' lives, which are needed for reader engagement. The short story, using *X* accounts towards the end, demonstrates that writing can be turned into tweets that say a lot with a few words. It deals with disaster, personal loss, and dilemmas that could quickly occur when exploring other planets in the future.

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[8] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/688850424477171713.
[9] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/687950549673730048.
[10] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/687949290010992640.
[11] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/687948030172094465.
[12] https://x.com/goodcaptain/status/687946770492559360.

X fiction is a unique type of writing that combines traditional stories with social media. This takes advantage of *X*'s new 280-character limit to write powerful fictions that engage with its readers. It opposes the rules and demands intelligent, artistic word choices. *X* fiction writers in societies full of too much information often use symbols, puns, or texts from other works to display intricate notions. One big reason why *X* fiction is popular is that it can be found easily on social media sites. It allows different voices to shape the history of modern writing. *X* fiction is interactive; as such, people can respond immediately to community discussions about various stories shared online, keeping people interested. Writers now write stories differently due to this type of fiction, which also makes readers more involved in all aspects of the text. A good *X* story is like an impressionist painting; it is aptly brief so as not to become verbose or lose its grip on the central theme. Twitter fiction is becoming increasingly popular due to its brevity, which aligns with today's fast-paced, "bite-sized" culture. It offers a quick and accessible way for individuals to engage with storytelling without committing to lengthy narratives. By convention, however, *X* fiction is often seen as incomplete because its limited format makes it difficult to include all five essential elements of a traditional story. Nevertheless, the rise of *X* fiction has diversified literature, fostering more interactive and experimental storytelling.

Over the past fifteen years, literary fiction sales have fallen along with leisure reading due to new tools and social media (Milliot n.p.). Even still, many of readers read for pleasure at least once a week, demonstrating the necessity for literature to evolve and stay relevant. *X* fiction has challenged authors to tell intriguing stories or to transmit significant concepts in extreme brevity since 2009, making it a fascinating challenge and an inventive addition to modern writing. Many genres of literature have emerged from this format, making site reading and storytelling more diverse and engaging. As new gadgets and social media have made people read less for pleasure, *X* fiction may help solve this problem. Challenging authors to simplify complicated concepts, *X* fiction stimulates experimentation and innovation, making literature more accessible and entertaining for all.

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Corresponding Author: Dominic Richard, HSBC Business School, Peking University, China.
ORCID: 0009-0000-2729-0974

A Proverbial Paradox: Language, Isolation, and Change in Robert Frost's *North of Boston*

Dominic Richard

Abstract: This article explores the role of proverbs in Robert Frost's *North of Boston* and examines the ways in which it affects personal relationships. It argues that proverbs constitute pre-fabricated ways of knowing that is shared by people within a specific community and, as such, also constitute a kind of membership to that society. Use of proverbs, then, perpetuate and solidify that community and its ways, excluding those who do not subscribe to the wisdom of their proverbs. It examines this dynamic at play in poems such as "Home Burial", "The Black Cottage", "A Servant to Servants", and "Mending Wall" in order to demonstrate – unlike previous scholarship – that the presence of proverbs in *North of Boston* is more than an aesthetic mannerism but rather serves as social commentary of the place and people it dramatises.

Keywords: proverbs, tradition, miscommunication, exclusion, isolation, Robert Frost, modernity, colloquialism

In *Names, Proverbs, Riddles, and Material Text in Robert Frost*, Timothy O'Brien makes the point that despite "the sophisticated body of commentary on Frost's poetry, politics, and life", studies regarding Robert Frost's use of proverbs in his poems "have been largely ignored" (O'Brien 2). Commentary on the topic, as it were, has been confined to brief passages in Robert Faggen's introduction to *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* and, more recently, expanded to include a single chapter in O'Brien's work mentioned above. Interpretation and analysis of this phenomenon, then, has been sparse. In Frost's poetry, however, the case is different altogether. Proverbs seem to abound. Faggen even goes so far as to suggest that it is "[t]he power and lure of his aphorisms [that] has made him both one of the most remembered and yet widely misapprehended of modern poets" (xx). The proverbs, in other words, stand out and ring and reverberate in the readers' ears. By the same token, they offer plenty of food for thought. Yet, they have evaded critical attention nonetheless. Faggen, as mentioned above, briefly touches upon them and suggest that Frost uses them almost as writing tools to inspire turns of phrases and situations. O'Brien, on the other hand, underlines that for Frost, the proverb at once describes and provides the solution to "a human problem" (2). Over the years the scholarly focus, as it were, has shifted from the poet to the poem, from the toolbox to the artwork. In that sense my work follows along the lines of O'Brien's, but the path I am interested in taking, however, ultimately diverges from his. Where O'Brien believes Frost uses proverbs and proverbial language as something to be dismissed and safely return to when needed: as an affair that "unfolds as a repeated pattern of avowal and disavowal" (O'Brien 3); I see Frost's use of proverbs as more social. I argue that

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Frost's use of proverbs underlines a paradox, a reality which the people portrayed in *North of Boston* are confronted with. That paradox is the conflict of tradition in the face of progress and these people's place and relation to it.

On the subject of place, *North of Boston*, as its title suggests, points to an area more than any particular place. It gestures to Vermont, New Hampshire, and even Maine, and, as such, it posits itself against Boston. It characterises itself as what Boston is not. As a result, it locates itself as being "simply out there, provincial and exposed" and as Sanders adds, this location – or lack thereof – "suggests the fortitude of its people by hinting at the cold and emptiness that they face" (103). They do not belong or identify so much to a locality, but rather to an experience: The experience of braving that which afflicts what lies beyond Boston, beyond the protection of the definite. Reading the poems, we discover that there is much to that effect. More precisely, the poems seem to be about different flavours of failure, ranging from the already failed to the failing farms, and the families that those failures affect (Sanders 103). This struggle, however, is not only fictional. *North of Boston* was published, as Donald G. Sheehy reminds us, in "a cultural climate deeply conflicted over the vitality and values of such a way of life" (217). That "way of life" is one that can only operate outside the metropolis, one that lies outside the city. At the time, people were conflicted about this way of life because they were beginning to see "a decline" in the quality of that life on "economic, social, and moral" fronts (217). In this sense, though the location is vague, and its people are often nameless, *North of Boston* portrays real people and dramatises a real, human struggle, which fuels the paradox posed by proverbs.

Another layer to Frost's realism, so-to-speak, is his ability to capture the vernacular of these people and transmit it onto the page. It is not shocking to the seasoned reader to remark that *North of Boston* is written in "colloquial diction" and that it often catches the speakers' "hesitations, repetitions, and second thoughts" (MacGowan 169). Reading Frost's poems, we can hear the people as they sound and as they would express themselves. Part of this colloquialism includes proverbs and sayings that belong to them and their community. These proverbs and sayings, for our purposes, constitute the intersection between tradition, progress, and the existential threat one poses for the other. They are the very heart of the matter. Indeed, as O'Brien echoes: "[T]he poems in *North of Boston* often pivot on a saying or proverbial statement, [and] explore the ways in which such prefabricated ways of knowing interfere with and also preserve relationships" (8). Here, I propose to explore how the poems depend and pivot on these proverbs; how they interfere with and preserve relationships; and how, in addition, they reflect the threat progress poses to the way of life depicted in *North of Boston*.

In order to begin an investigation of proverbs in the poetry of Robert Frost it would be useful to define what I mean by proverbs and to examine their cultural dimensions. In its dictionary definition a proverb is a "short, traditional, and pithy saying; a concise sentence, typically metaphorical or alliterative in form, stating a general truth or piece of advice; an adage or maxim" (*OED* n.p.). Nonetheless, as O'Brien highlights, proverbs can be understood in a broader sense when summarised under the term "sayings" (52-3). In its broader and colloquial sense, the proverb "speak[s] from a sense of the shared, traditional, customary wisdom of a community rather than reflect individuality" (52). It speaks for the community because, as Kenneth Burke attests in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, "[p]roverbs are *strategies* [or attitudes] for dealing with *situations*. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure" (297) (emphasis original). In other words, proverbs provide a community's solution or prescribed reaction to a problem. Proverbs, in turn, are thus not only indicative of the community but, in some ways, sustain and perpetuate it by virtue of the shared and traditional wisdom they proffer. They also perpetuate it as a result of their form. Indeed, their "typical phrasing—concise, witty, memorable, and assertive—depersonalizes [sic] the problem" to the extent that they almost unequivocally invoke "a third perspective that implies the community's own unbiased judgment" (O'Brien 54). More to that effect, the "proverbial inclination, then, is generally to preserve the community at the expense of the individual desire" (O'Brien 54). This is one of the modalities that interferes between the characters of *North of Boston*.

We can observe this at play in the poem "Home Burial" in which the reader is given a glimpse into the life of Amy and her partner as they try to come to terms with the passing of their child. The poem hinges on the couple's apparent inability to communicate. The opening sentence of the poem immediately introduces separation and miscommunication as it places—metaphorically and literally—the couple on different levels. The opening sentence of the poem reads: "He saw her from the bottom of the stairs / Before she saw him" (43). To put it plainly, and perhaps facetiously, one could say that the couple is not seeing eye to eye. This can be interpreted as an early clue of their disjointedness, a disjointedness which progressively takes form in the poem. In the lines that follow, the man moves upstairs to see exactly what Amy sees and asks her: "What is it you see / From up there always—

for I want to know" (43). The word "always" implies that this is not the first time Amy has stood there looking out the window. It implies, too, that despite the fact that this has happened before they have never successfully communicated what is the "fear" Amy looks back at. The next few lines lend further support to this interpretation:

> He spoke
> Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
> From up there always—for I want to know."
> She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
> And her face changed from terrified to dull.
> He said to gain time: "What is it you see,"
> Mounting until she cowered under him.
> "I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."
> She, in her place, refused him any help
> With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
> She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
> Blind creature; and a while he didn't see. (43)

Once he is upstairs, she lets him look out the window, sure that he would not see what attracts her attention, and sure that he would not understand why she fears it. Her attitude in this sequence suggests they could not communicate successfully even if they were to try. She does not answer him nor does she offer any help in making him understand. As it turns out in line 24, the window gives onto a "little graveyard" (44) where his people and their child are buried. Despite what Amy believes, he finally understands why she has been looking out the window and says:

> […] We haven't to mind *those*.
> But I understand: it is not the stones,
> But the child's mound—"
>   "Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried. (44) (emphasis original)

As it were, his attempts to speak of the problem are interrupted only for him to retort: "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" (45). Amy lashes out and answers: "Not you!" (45). The tirade continues and reveals that the crux of their problems is their inability to communicate:

> "There's something I should like to ask you,
>   dear."
> "You don't know how to ask it."
>
>   "Help me, then."
> Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.
>
> "My words are nearly always an offence.
> I don't know how to speak of anything
> So as to please you. (45)

This passage demonstrates that the reason they cannot communicate lies in the man's method of communicating, his way of expressing himself. Amy adds to make it even clearer: "You can't because you don't know how to speak" (47). The man's inability to speak, for Amy, is exemplified in his attitude after burying their dead child:

> I can repeat the very words you were saying.
> "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
> Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."
> Think of it, talk like that at such a time! (48)

Here, it becomes clear that she takes particular issue with the man's proverbial expression in such a situation.

Despite the fact that the proverb proffers sensible advice there are at least two main reasons why it is, in this case, inappropriate for Amy. On the one hand, "[c]ommunities do not depend on the truth of the vehicle in the proverb's metaphor; rather they depend on its applicability" (O'Brien 56). The situation explored in "Home Burial" is certainly a case where the impersonal nature of the proverb renders its applicability questionable. In fact, it is something Amy reproaches the man:

> Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
> What had how long it takes a birch to rot
> To do with what was in the darkened parlour.
> You *couldn't* care! (48) (emphasis original)

Just like the man did not initially see or understand what Amy was looking at, it is now Amy's turn to be in the dark about what her husband meant or what information the proverb might have been carrying. On the other hand, speaking proverbially generally "signals a lack of individual thinking, even perhaps a kind of ignorance" (O'Brien 55). In this situation Amy is trying to communicate with her partner, the father of their child, and the poem makes it clear that Amy feels the need to share and to communicate her experience with someone, with an individual. Yet, the man is not described as one in the poem. For one, he remains nameless and therefore stands as a figurative or archetypal figure more than an individual in his own right. Secondly, she thinks of him as a "[b]lind creature" (43) and later says that when she saw him digging the grave she could not recognise him:

> I saw you from that very window there,
> Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
> Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
> And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
> I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know
> you. (47)

The act of burying their child, an act so unthinkable to Amy, has rendered her husband a stranger. Coupled with the fact that he expresses his grief and, in a way, justifies burying the child himself using a proverb seems to further deprive him of personality. The use of the proverb, then, prevents communication because Amy disagrees with its applicability and its impersonality.

The broader implications of proverbial language hint at another source of tension. Namely, it questions and problematises Amy's place within the household and the community at large. As we have seen, the chasm between Amy and her partner is a result of their inability to communicate, but this chasm is sustained and in some respects widened by the cultural implications of proverbial speech. Reading "Home Burial" keeping in mind that proverbs prioritise the community over the individual sheds a new light on Amy's situation and the man's apparent cold and unfeeling attitude. Indeed, it alerts us to the fact that the man is part of a community while Amy is on the periphery of it, almost to the point of exclusion. At the beginning of the poem we find Amy at the top of the stairs in a position of "metaphoric superiority" (Faggen 218), but she soon moves to the bottom of the stairs and towards the exit. She spends a considerable amount of the poem on this threshold, threatening, as it were, to go to someone else with whom she can share her grief. Amy cannot communicate with the man and must leave the house which symbolises the community she is not part of. To put things into perspective, the house they live in has belonged to the man's family at least long enough for the house to have a family gravesite. As the man says while looking out the window, it is the graveyard where his people rest: "The little graveyard where *my people* are!" (44) (emphasis mine). He adds: "So small the window frames the whole of it" (44). The word "frame" and the image that it imparts defines the graveyard as an enclosed space—a space that is, according to the passage above, full, virtually leaving no space for Amy. Moreover, only the man is shown to have access to the graveyard, which is the site where a sort of communion with the child takes place. On this matter, Guy Rotella writes that "[t]he intimacies of this involvement, the homely placement of the family graveyard, and the dead child's accommodation within familiar patterns of life, death, and continuity all console him" (100). Indeed, they console him, but not Amy. In the same vein, he asks: "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"; and later: "A man can't speak of his own child that's dead" (45, 47). The emphasis is placed on him. Amy, on the other hand, watches from the window above, separated from her child and from her husband in more ways than one. In this light, it becomes apparent that the man communicates his grief using proverbial expressions because he is part of the community which is familiar with death and loss, as exemplified by the home cemetery and the fact that he seems to have no problem digging the grave of his own child. For him, grief can be expressed in a “human” (46) way if, and only if, it relates to the community rather than the individual. By using this expression, he can relate the inexpressible to something familiar and a prefabricated solution. Amy is portrayed as falling outside of this community and thus does not have access to this shared traditional wisdom. This is suggested by the fact that Amy finds no solace in proverbial language and is excluded or stands outside of the symbolic places of communion such as the cemetery. In other words, according to the effect of the poem, this is not her wisdom to share or have access to. Therefore, it is through the lens of proverbial language that we can see that the tensions between individual expression and communal wisdom problematise Amy’s position in the home and, by extension, the community.

Proverbial language in “The Black Cottage” also carries the sense of the community, but problematises and questions the role of this traditional wisdom in the face of change. The poem is for the most part a minister’s monologue addressed to his walking companion as he decides they should visit a decaying cottage they happen to pass. The reader learns of the widow who once lived there, of her life, her family, and of her idiosyncrasies. This woman, as the minister recalls her memory, represents a sort of unexamined fidelity to social and communal conventions. Indeed, as the minister says she spoke in “quaint phrases—so removed / From the world’s view to-day” (52). The more is revealed about the old lady, the more she becomes “regarded as an embodiment of outmoded, quaint innocence […] [which] nevertheless persists, [and] endures, almost as if she embodies the timeless force of proverbs themselves” (O’Brien 90). The timelessness of her proverbs, however, are not necessarily a sign of congruity. Instead both the woman and her phrases stand as relics of the past that appear out of touch with the present. The minister relates that he wished to change the words of the Creed to reach a wider audience, but reveals that he was reluctant to do so because of the woman. He tells his companion:

> Do you know but for her there was a time
> When to please younger members of the
>   church,
> Or rather say non-members in the church,
> Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
> I would have changed the Creed a very little?
> Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
> It never got so far as that; but the bare
>   thought
> Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
> And of her half asleep was too much for me. (53-4).

Here, keeping with the woman’s “quaint phrases” (52) excludes a large number of people. Unlike “Home Burial” where a single individual is excluded from the community, an entire group of people is in “The Black Cottage”. It reverses the situation found in “Home Burial” and showcases a different type of tension. If we take the cottage to stand as an embodiment of the old woman, her quaint phrases and her ways, we see that they are removed, inaccessible, and decaying. The characters of the poem only happen to encounter it by “chance” as it sits “well back from the road” behind thickets of leaves at the end of a path that is a “vague parting in the grass” (50). The woman’s children, the people whom should be invested in the condition of the cottage and which are emblematic of the new generation, the people who will eventually make up the community, do not visit or try to maintain it. Moreover, the interior of the place has been left as it was when the widow lived there. All these factors emphasise that the old ways and old phrases are not the vehicle of progress. Even the portrait of her husband—the only item that could be said to depict some form of life—is described as helplessly lifeless. Indeed, the minister questions whether the “crayon portrait on the wall / Done sadly from an old daguerreotype”, of “such unlifelike lines kept power to stir / Anything in her after all the years” (51).

Interestingly, “The Black Cottage” seems to offer the continuation of “Home Burial”. It seems to propose the natural or logical ending of the nameless man. The two are nameless and, in a sense, are unable to speak for themselves, regardless of their condition. It appears to be only a matter of time before the house and the cemetery are overtaken by the unstoppable march of time and progress. Perhaps to be visited by chance by another speaker in the future.

"A Servant to Servants" sheds the illusion that the inadequacy of proverbial language is simply a result of generational conflict and explores the ways in which the pre-formed stock expressions do not measure or even respond to the reality at hand. The cause of the woman's isolation in "A Servant to Servants" does not rest on her falling out of the community which uses and accepts proverbs. In fact, it seems quite the opposite. The poem's opening lines are as follows: "I didn't make you know how glad I was / To have you come and camp here on *our land*" (50) (emphasis mine). Here, the speaker's place in the home is certain. And to some extent, it is her integral place in the household which is the source of the problem:

> It's rest I want—there, I have said it out—
> From cooking meals for hungry hired men
> And washing dishes after them—from doing
> Things over and over that just won't stay done.
> By good rights I ought not to have so much
> Put on me (66)

Clearly the chores and work she must do around the house are a burden. She also admits that the men they house do not censure their speech when she is around as though she were one of them: "No more put out in what they do or say / Than if I wasn't in the room at all" (67). Despite the fact that these tendencies are undesirable they are nonetheless inclusive, so-to-speak. The question is not of social estrangement—it is a slightly more existential one. She has managed to share her situation with Len, her husband, however, his response to the way she feels comes in the form of a proverb. The woman relates:

> Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
> He says the best way out is always through.
> And I agree to that, or in so far
> As that I can see no way out but through— (66).

In the other poems we have observed so far, proverbial language served as a platform for disagreement whilst here the case is different. In "A Servant to Servants", the receiver agrees with the proverb, but only partially because the solution disregards the situation. The woman finds herself in a scenario that is similar to Sisyphus: her work will not stay "done" and thus never ends. She reassures the implied listener that were he to stay with them in the house rather than live out on the land the added work that this would entail would only make a minimal difference. After all, she says, she would fall behind but: "behind's behind. The worst that you can / do / Is set me back a little more behind. / I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway" (72). She feels as though she cannot get on top of things or even pull through thus the proverb "one steady pull more ought to do it" rings empty. It disregards the root of the problem and the reality which the woman faces. The inadequacy of proverbial language is something which she notices herself. She underlines the way proverbs try to force a solution upon a problem instead of deriving the solution from the problem. Her understanding is apparent when she talks about the asylum:

> You know the old idea—the only asylum
> Was the poorhouse, and those who could afford,
> Rather than send their folks to such a place,
> Kept them at home; and it does seem more
>   human.
> But it's not so: the place is the asylum. (68).

The "old idea" reminiscent of the widow's 'quaint phrases' pretends to proffer a solution. Yet it does precisely the opposite. Instead, it reiterates the quandary. The speaker as we come to learn has been prejudiced to the asylum as well and expresses from her personal experience that the home is the asylum. Contrary to the proverb's communal wisdom, this woman's personal, first-hand experience demonstrates that proverbial language is inadequate in situations where communication and mutual understanding are needed. She adds later in light of her brother's treatment: "I've heard too much of the old-fashioned way" (68). Again, this old-fashioned way she speaks of is a synecdoche of proverbial language. That which is supposed to provide a solution fails to do so. Instead of communicating, the proverb tries to force issues into a specific mould or form, while the fact of the matter is experience takes on many shapes and the proverb cannot account for that which falls outside of its mould or limits.

Proverbs then, as we have seen, are often inadequate ways of communicating between individuals, but in some cases they prevent conversations from taking place altogether. Proverbs provide solutions to the problem at hand and thus disregard the possibility that there could be anything more to say about the situation once the solution is offered. This dynamic—or lack thereof, I should say—is acted out in "Mending Wall". This is something which George Monteiro echoes in his analysis of the same poem. Monteiro writes: "What finally emerges from Frost's poem is the idea that the stock reply—unexamined wisdom from the past—seals off the possibility of further thought and communication" (127).

Indeed, in "Mending Wall", though we encounter the speaker's desire to communicate with his neighbour and ask him why exactly they need this wall between them; why they must continue to repair this wall which invariably comes down time and time again, only staying in place until their back are turned; that desire is never fulfilled within the stanzas. The speaker admits:

> Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
> If I could put a notion in his head:
> "*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
> Where there are cows? But here there are no
> cows.
> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offence.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down." (12) (emphasis original)

But he never puts any notion to his neighbour's head, nor asks him why good walls make good neighbours, nor what he is walling in or walling out. Even the fanciful and ultimately meaningless "Elves" (12) he could say to his neighbour remains unspoken. It remains nothing more than a possibility expressed in the speaker's mind in the conditional. In short, he never communicates with his neighbour. Instead, he keeps to himself, on his side of the wall, and continues placing the fallen stones where they once balanced momentarily. The poem ends on the repetition of the proverb and this repetition gives the sense that it is the end of the conversation altogether. To use Monteiro's term, it seals off the possibility of communication, the possibility of apple trees crossing over to the pines, and precludes any conversation, precludes any exchange whatsoever.

The proverb in this case seems to be a way of keeping the tradition of the neighbour's father alive more than anything else. The triviality of the task has already been established and the inadequacy of the proverb is being revealed line by line. Moreover, the poem suggests on more than one occasion that it is not an expression of individuality nor of individual thought or desire. Indeed, the speaker thinks he could say to his neighbour "Elves" are damaging the wall, but he would rather "[h]e said it for himself" (12). He would rather, in other words, have the neighbour think for himself and break from the spell of the proverb's prefabricated wisdom. This does not occur and the extent of the man's thoughts – as imagined by the speaker of the poem – is relegated to not going "behind his father's saying" and repeating "[g]ood fences make good neighbours" (12). Like there is something that does not love a wall and wants it down, there is something of tradition here, too, in the mending of the wall which will not be abandoned. As it were, tradition in the broader sense permeates the overall effect of the poem. Not only does the neighbour abide by his father's old idiom, but he is also compared to a prehistoric, Cro-Magnon figure: "I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed" (12). Here, the stubborn neighbour is not painted in the same soft light in which the old lady of "The Black Cottage" was, and yet both seem equally distant from the time being dramatised in *North of Boston*. To further cement the notion that tradition as expressed by stock phrases precludes communication, and, as a result, impedes progress, the activity of mending the wall is described as something cyclical like the passing of the seasons. It is, in this configuration of life, inevitable: A thing to be done for the simple reason that it has always been done before. Unlike spring, however, the mending of the wall, the proverb itself, does not bring new life or achieve anything.

Surveying the role of proverbs in *North of Boston* demonstrates that Robert Frost "explore[s] the ways in which these prefabricated ways of knowing" and of speaking affect human relationships (O'Brien 8). Depending on the situation, they sometimes preserve communities or sometimes exclude others from the very communities they are preserving. It also explores the interaction between these prefabricated ways of knowing and the relationship of its characters to time, space, and belonging. In this exploration, it seems that it captures the "contradictions of individual freedom within the constraints of social and national identity" (Faggen xxiv). Indeed, it captures the paradox of the proverb, the fact that it is at once applicable, useful, consoling, and representative, but also repressive and silencing. However, the underlying, common denominator of these poems is the isolation which these characters experience and the way in which proverbial language contributes to their own isolation or the exclusion of others. I would also like to suggest that the attitude towards proverbs and proverbial language in *North of Boston* is symptomatic of the changes rural New England was undergoing at the time. O'Donnell reminds us in his essay "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation" that New England was becoming "largely urban and industrialized", that "the strength of village culture [was diminishing] year by year," and holds that *North of Boston* should be read "against this social and economic disturbance" (50). As its title suggests, *North of Boston* is set against a definite, unambiguous and fully urban and industrialized locus—Boston. The area which *North of Boston* purports to portray is general and in the midst of change. Its boundaries and identity are vague. In that way, the fact that proverbs, which are in effect vehicles of traditional and communal wisdom, are portrayed as inadequate ways of communicating reflects that the community is ushering into modernity. Indeed, the break between the way the world is and the way which language expresses it—or in this case, does not—illustrates that there needs a language to express, to share, and to accommodate for new experiences, whether they are positive or negatives ones. This reading is especially compelling when we consider that the majority of the characters who are "victims", shall we say, of proverbial language are women, the mentally ill and/or the elderly. Thus, it suggests that since language mirrors the community, language must also change with the community or for the community.

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Corresponding Author: İsmail Onur Sonat, School of Foreign Languages, Haliç University, Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6483-749X

"As Hårga takes, so Hårga also gives": Approaching Trauma through the Lens of Carnivalesque in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

İsmail Onur Sonat

Abstract: This article scrutinizes Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar*, utilizing the theoretical framework of Dominick LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement and Mikhail Bakhtin's the carnivalesque as a means for recovery. The carnivalesque is based on the idea of subverting and destabilizing societal hierarchies, dogmatic thoughts, traditions, and institutions using humor, parody, and satire as well as embracing "grotesque" possibilities. Accordingly, the main character of the film, Dani, who has been traumatized by the tragedy of losing her whole family, is depicted in the beginning as being unable to manage the psychological distress, compounded by the apparent lack of empathy and support from her emotionally distant partner, Christian. During a midsummer festival in Sweden that Dani and Christian attend, a diverse array of bewildering customs and rituals related to death, sex, body, and relationships take place, initially causing utter shock, yet subsequently inducing a gradual feeling of acceptance that grows into a sense of healing purification in her. Thus, in *Midsommar*, the carnivalesque functions as empathic unsettlement for its traumatized protagonist, presenting alternative modes of healing through its subversion of power relations whereas putting an emphasis on the body, laughter, and role-play in the face of trauma.

Keywords: *Midsommar*, Ari Aster, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalesque, grotesque, Dominick LaCapra, empathic unsettlement, trauma

Introduction

Ari Aster's 2019 film, *Midsommar* begins with Dani, a psychology student, who stumbles upon a worrying email from her bipolar sister, Terri, while she is alone at home. Seeking comfort, Dani reaches to her boyfriend, Christian, an anthropology graduate student, who is spending time with his male friends. Reluctantly, Christian agrees to meet with Dani later that night. However, Dani learns that Terri has killed their parents and herself. Months later, Christian, along with his classmates Josh and Mark, is preparing for a trip to Sweden under the influence of Pelle, another classmate who is from Sweden. Initially planned as a male bonding experience with the allure of Swedish women, Christian has kept the trip a secret from Dani until shortly before their departure. Despite his hesitations, Christian reluctantly invites Dani to accompany them. Deeply traumatized and clinging on to her

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visibly crystallizing relationship, Dani accepts the invitation, and they find themselves at a summer solstice festival that occurs only once in every ninety years. This festival takes place in a secluded pagan commune located in the remote Swedish province of Hälsingland. However, they discover that the festival involves a sequence of ritualistic murders.

As my argument revolves around healing from trauma through the empathic unsettlement that carnivalesque provides, I employ both trauma theory and Bakhtin's the carnivalesque in this article. An interdisciplinary field that derives from psychology, literature and cultural studies, trauma theory examines representations and effects of trauma in narratives. Sigmund Freud, in his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* lays the groundwork for trauma theory by introducing concepts such as consciousness and repression. Upon observation, he realizes that a one-and-a-half-year-old child is playing a game called "fort/da" (53). During this game, the infant would throw a spool attached to a string from his cot, making an "'o-o-o-o' sound" when it disappeared, and then retrieve it by pulling the string, saying "*Da!*" which means "here" (Freud 53) (emphasis original). The child's mother, Sophie, explains to Freud that the "'o-o-o-o' sound" represents "*fort*" meaning "gone" conversely (53) (emphasis original). Analyzing the infant's reactions, Freud interprets this game as the child's unique way of coping with anxiety caused by his mother's temporary absence in the room (53). By controlling the object, which, in Freud's interpretation, represents the mother's safe presence, the child seeks to master the experience and find pleasure in symbolically managing her "comings" and "goings" (53). This symbolic satisfaction serves as a "cultural achievement", allowing the child to substitute immediate gratification of his desires for a more symbolic form of pleasure (53). However, as Freud notices, sometimes the boy abandons the "fort-da" game without completing it. Instead of retrieving the spool and continuing his game, he would throw it away and not even attempt to retrieve it. This, therefore, raises the question of how to explain this behavior if the child's aim is to gain mastery over the trauma caused by his mother's absence. In this context, Freud views trauma not as a merely consequence of fear but as a reaction to the intrusion of an unfamiliar event. Thus, trauma as far as Freud is concerned, stems from "the element of surprise" rather than the actual traumatic experience (51).

Cathy Caruth, likewise, in *Unclaimed Experience*, suggests that traumatic events overpower an individual's ability to fully grasp them when they occur (6). Hence, these experiences are immediately suppressed in the unconscious mind, only to resurface later. However, these suppressed memories continue to affect the person's mental well-being albeit retroactively. According to Caruth, trauma finds way to resurface through involuntary repetitions, flashbacks, or other expressions in the survivor's life, as the unresolved traumatic experience seeks to be acknowledged and comprehended (1991, 59-60). In pursuit of acknowledgment, the traumatized individual continuously edits past events. Similarly, Kirby Farrell defines trauma as a history that interprets and re-interprets the past, since trauma, "[l]ike other histories, […] attempts to square the present with its origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent, or remote: an artifact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation" (14). Therefore, one of the most prominent aspects of trauma is that it needs to be unveiled in a way that it is understood either by the survivor or by a witness. Trauma cannot be objectively represented as it, in its core, is a heavily edited recollection of the experience that may have lost its connection to the experience itself, but it yearns to be recognized.

From this standpoint, Dominick LaCapra puts forth the concept of "empathic unsettlement" which he describes as a sensitivity that is "responsive to the traumatic experience of others" (41). Apparently, empathic unsettlement involves both the victim and the witness, and brings down the barriers between the two through letting the witness put himself/herself in the victim's "position while recognizing the difference of that position" (78). LaCapra, thus, calls empathic unsettlement a "desirable empathy" since it functions as an outlet which "stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of victims" (109). This sense of desirable empathy serves as a protective mechanism for victims, enabling them to share their trauma with an empathetic witness without the risk of overidentification from either party.

Throughout the festival in Aster's *Midsommar,* Dani experiences numerous traumatizing events ranging from the deaths of her friends and his boyfriend's betrayal. Surprisingly, rather than traumatizing her further, these shocking instances gradually provide channels with which she can steer away from her own trauma regarding her parents and Christian. The underlying reason behind her unexpected process of healing is the fact that these events disrupt the binary of victim/witness and demonstrate that there might be other ways of working through the trauma without re-interpreting the past in a subjective way. At this juncture, Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnivalesque" becomes instrumental, as what Dani witnesses at the festival fits the carnival's temporary suspension of existing order and subversion of dominant ideologies. The carnival, according to Bakhtin "frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities" (49), and thus, in the case of Dani, watching these strange people, Hårgans, circle around the societal taboos of death, sex, and body, both literally and metaphorically, helps her come to terms with her trauma. For Dani, with each disturbing experience she goes through at the festival, comes a sense of objective understanding of her condition and a purification without resorting to a recollection of the original traumatic event she has repressed. Thereupon, in *Midsommar*, Bakhtin's carnivalesque functions as empathic unsettlement for its traumatized main character, presenting alternative modes of healing through its mockery and subversion of power relationships while putting an emphasis on the body, laughter, and role-play in the face of trauma.

Trauma in *Midsommar*

Beginning with the first scene of the film, trauma shapes the narrative. The main traumatizing event occurs when Dani learns that Terri has killed herself and their parents. From that point on, Dani is shown to be in emotional distress, constantly on the verge of tears and using medication to cope with her pain. When she closes her eyes, she is transported to horrifying flashbacks of her parents' corpses—a scene, she has never witnessed, but is shown to the audience. The actual scene following their death has the parents being put in body bags by paramedics, so Dani's unconscious edits, reinterprets and even completely rewrites the traumatizing experience in an attempt to give it a meaning but fails to do so. In other words, from the very beginning we are informed that Dani has never faced their deaths the way that might give her closure nor is she able to move on because of this.

In addition, her boyfriend Christian's emotional distance triggers her trauma of sudden loss, therefore she desperately clings on to a relationship where she is obviously undervalued, as her only alternative is loneliness. Apparently, Dani's fear of losing Christian harkens back to Freud's aforementioned example of the "fort/da" game he uses to explain the infant's anxiety of losing her mother and yearnings to have control over her presence. Due to her fear of being alone so soon after she has lost her family, Dani pretends that she is not aware that Christian no longer has any sexual or romantic interest in her. Christian repeatedly refuses to answer her phone calls on the night Dani receives a suicide note as a text message from her sister, shows an interest in the waitress at the bar, and engages in conversations with his friends where he discusses the doomed nature of their partnership. This evidence suggests that their dwindling relationship was effectively over prior to the death of Dani's parents. After the tragedy, Christian's attitude makes it clear that he is still dating her out of pity. Hence, Christian's neglectful behavior and nonchalance towards Dani correspond to Maria Root's concept of "insidious trauma" which Cathy Caruth refers to in her study on traumatic explorations on memory to explain the traumatizing "effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent" or extremely dangerous (1995, 107). Accordingly, what Dani goes through can be described as "a prolonged process in which one experience follows another and where, really, you eventually have a summation, and more than a summation, a piling up of experiences" (Fromm n.p.). This is the reason why whenever Christian dismisses Dani, her facial expressions reveal her emotional turmoil.

Likewise, evident from her depressed state, neither Dani's social life nor her academic life in the form of her own psychology department can help her cope. As a result, she drifts aimlessly or is dragged along with Christian. At one point Dani mentions that she has taken a break from her studies for the semester, but in the process, she turns into an extension of Christian as opposed to a woman with goals or agency. Apart from the apathetic Christian, who goes to parties until dawn while Dani is trying to recover from an immense tragedy, and his friends who definitely do not hold her in high esteem, Dani does not have a semblance of a support system. Apparently, in addition to the lack of interest and care from her boyfriend, the utter failure of the academic environment she is in also feeds into her insidious traumas as they are "rooted simultaneously and inextricably within cultural, historical, domestic, and psychological forces" (Horvitz 55). Dani has become so accustomed to being treated as a nuisance by others by that point that she looks visibly amazed when Pelle treats her kindly and shows a sketch of her that he has drawn. A similar amazement can also be observed in Dani during a later scene at the festival when Pelle remembers her birthday, which Christian, much to nobody's surprise, has forgotten.

Akin to how interpersonal relationships and institutions are rendered as inadequate in the face of trauma, universally accepted scientific methods of healing in the modern world such as medication and therapy do not seem to help her manage her psychological distress. Additionally, the movie conveys a strong sense of mistrust toward medical professionals by mentioning that Terri had bipolar disorder and was receiving therapy before she passed away. Terri's wording in her final communication to Dani strongly suggests that either she has already attempted suicide, or she has discussed the issue with Dani before. As a result, the movie's narrative is critical of the institutions of family, psychology, and modern medicine because Terri could not have survived even with the aid of these support systems. Given these factors, *Midsommar* subverts what is expected from modern societies in terms of dealing with trauma and generates an alternative and unorthodox method of healing: The carnivalesque.

The Carnivalesque in *Midsommar*

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin traces carnivals as locus of "man's second nature", situating laughter as a response to "the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology" (75). Accordingly, in *Midsommar*, the summer solstice festival is very reminiscent to his depiction of the carnivalesque, since it directly, using bodily materiality, foolishness, mockery, depicts a harmonious pagan society in "an indivisible whole" (19). The Bakhtinian carnival is presented in subversive and disturbing humor, parody, and satire in the festival rituals. Role play, dress up, laughter and public mockery, as suggested by Bakhtin, are prominent features of the rituals. Here, role play takes the center stage as Dani ultimately transforms into the May Queen, meanwhile Christian transforms into the Bear at the end, and their friend, Mark morphs into the Fool. All these transformations involve dressing up: A process that paradoxically reduces the body down to its material level: For example, Dani, in her crown and dress made of flowers, becomes one with the soil. Likewise, Christian ends up in the skin of a bear, with only his face and penis are visible, revealed to be a mockery of the superior "man". Finally, Mark, skinned and filled with grass, turns out to be a spectacle of foolery. These transformations not only destabilize the Cartesian duality between body and mind, but they also break down the binary thinking that separates humans from nature. Indeed, in the carnivalesque world of *Midsommar*, there is no place for Enlightenment ideas that privilege man, logos, and mind over nature, emotion, and body.

Similarly, the festival's activities emphasize the potential of the body and fickleness of the mind, subverting these deep-seated dichotomies; for example, attendees engage in a dancing contest after drinking alcohol. The same contest, which is different from the modern world's beauty pageants, determines who the new May Queen will be. In the contest Dani, surprisingly "dances past the fallen women. She does not immediately realize that she's just won the competition. She still looks determined as she continues dancing manically around the maypole" (Aster 101). Indeed, there is no need for cunning tactics or strategies to win; if one's body is strong enough to endure strenuous physical activities, the intoxication of the mind does not alter the outcome negatively. In the same vein, the heavily guarded scripture of this community is a product of the mind of a mentally disabled character, only referred to as "The Disabled". His incomprehensible writings, often come across as random babbling and symbols which point to the notion that official speech is devalued, and "travestied sacred texts [are] turned inside out" (Bakhtin 87) as Hårgans consider what has been documented as the holy messages of a prophet.

Furthermore, the film also presents a strong sense of degradation in relation to what is official and what is institutionalized, as "Christian", Christianity and institutional religion, is mocked by pagans in the festival. In an ironic way, the film reimagines Christians' arrival to the Nordic lands, but this time, as opposed to the official history, pagans do not turn out to be the ones who are assimilated into Christianity. Paganism, throughout this carnivalesque midsommar festival, reigns over the official religion of Christianity:

> CHRISTIAN. Who was he praying to?
> PELLE. Uh - well, that wasn't really "praying." But he was just addressing
> the...everything. The harmony and the balance.
> JOSH. Can you translate what was said?
> PELLE. ...I can get an *exact* translation later.
> CHRISTIAN. (Jumping in) Yeah, please, that would be amazing. (Aster 38) (emphasis original)

The scene given above demonstrates the discrepancy between what is deemed as the official speech and the carnivalesque, since Christian, upon hearing a Swedish chant mistakenly assumes that it belongs to a foreign prayer. This ritualistic scene is reminiscent of the carnival's "talking image of the crowd [...] built exclusively on oaths, in other words, outside the norms of official speech" (Bakhtin 191) which shows the significance of gestures and the transcendence of the crowd. It should also be noted that Pelle, who is originally from Hälsingland, immediately corrects him by underlining the fact that lyrics are about harmony and balance. However, harmony and balance ironically are what constitute the subject matter of a common prayer. Therefore, Pelle in his gesture of correcting Christian draws attention to the fact that the latter is only satisfied when they can categorize, name, and interpret what is supposed to be a thoroughly spiritual experience within the rules of the official speech. Remarkably, Josh and Christian are only interested in the translation of it for their academic purposes. Meanwhile, the rest of the pagans seem to get lost in a transcendent experience that, indeed, brings them harmony and balance. Christian literally jumps in when Pelle mentions that he can provide them a translation of it, which highlights his need to make meaning within the official speech, logos, and usurp what can be exploited for his own gain.

On the whole, the film involves many examples of embracing the grotesque and subverting societal norms in the Bakhtinian sense. In the system of grotesque, as Bakhtin asserts, "copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment" keep their traditional contents, but are given new meanings that challenge "the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25). Thus, there is some strong emphasis on the lower half of the body, dirt and reproductive organs in the film; for example, when Christian is being "groomed" for Maja, he is tricked into consuming a piece of pie that contains her pubic hair. Likewise, it is heavily implied that the drink served to Christian contains Maja's menstrual blood. Furthermore, during the infamous sex scene between Christian and Maja, the involvement of other people and the elderly woman's intrusion invoke a subversion of how reproductive organs and sexual acts are taboo in modern societies. Each of these rituals of the festival is heavily telegraphed using illustrations and projections that depict each step including the love spell, the fool, and the bear. Nevertheless, these grotesque scenes are not rejected by the Hårgans. On the contrary, knowing that all of these events will take place, they cheer for what is shown to them. According to the screenplay of the film, Christian and Josh are also delighted:

> INTERTITLE (in Swedish): Three droplets of menstrual blood for the spell to take effect.
> *Three drops of blood DRIP from between the girl's legs. They LAND in the coffee.*
> IN THE AUDIENCE, Dani and Mark WINCE at this. Christian and Josh (along with the surrounding Hårgans) are delighted.
> ON THE PROJECTOR SCREEN: *The girl brings the coffee to the boy. She smiles mischievously as he takes a SIP.*
> *In the KITCHEN, the girl now props her leg up onto a chair. She takes a pair of SCISSORS and snips between her legs. She pulls a few STRANDS OF PUBIC HAIR from her groin*. (Aster 47) (emphasis original)

Thus, one can argue that for Christian and Josh, watching grotesque scenes is a part of the entertainment this festival brings at first, but as these images stop being merely images and transform into "grotesque realism" that might potentially affect them and their well-being, both men show signs of disgust and subsequently try to escape (Bakhtin 18). Yet, Dani, who winces at the grotesque imagery manages to embrace the fact that in grotesque realism "the bodily element is deeply positive" (19).

Healing through the Carnivalesque

Dani's initial shock and discomfort at the festival are obvious during the first days of the festival. In her early reactions that involve disbelief, revulsion, and fear, she occupies a similar position to her friends. Noticing the peculiar rituals and the disappearance of their friends, Dani tries to flee from the festival but when she realizes that there is no escape at least for a while she gradually begins to adopt a mindset that goes along with the carnivalesque and the grotesque. As soon as she is invited to make pies with other women, Dani's transformation begins, since she stops displaying any symptoms of her trauma and seems to be enjoying contributing to the festival to some capacity. Her eventual transformation into the May Queen stems from this participation in the activities, facing grotesque acts, and finding a support system among others.

In the light of LaCapra's theory of emphatic unsettlement, the scenes where we see Dani react to the various disturbing occurrences in the festival are worthy of discussion. First and foremost, Dani's experience seeing the old people's suicide is a turning point for her traumatized state of mind since it symbolizes the start of her entry into the carnivalesque by accepting what is regarded as grotesque. According to the traditions of this society, the elders must kill themselves in the summer solstice festival. The film comments on how elderly people are sent to nursery homes in Western culture so that there is no witness to their demise. Here in this pagan society, conversely, the elderly people die while everyone else is watching. Based on their reactions, this notion of normalizing death seems alien to Dani and her American friends, and they cannot understand why everyone else is standing there watching people fall from a cliff without any objections. The juxtaposition between the reactions of the pagans and the newcomers showcases how the carnivalesque turns what the latter take for granted upside down. In contrast to contemporary Western societies, where death is dreaded, death here is not only embraced but also post-mortem modifications of the body are accepted. This scene correlates with Bakhtin's take on the "former youth transformed into old age; the living body turned into a corpse. It is the 'mirror of comedy' reflecting that which must die a historic death" (197-8). Since the grotesque is treasured and maintained in the carnivalesque, the inhabitants of Hälsingland during the festival do not find corpses, blood, or the sound of breaking bones repulsive. Moreover, when the fall does not kill the male elderly, a chosen person comes and carries out the finishing blow:

> The man LAUNCHES HIMSELF OFF THE CLIFF. Connie GASPS. The man plummets straight down, landing not only ON HIS FEET, but also on the fresh corpse of his friend. This softens the blow, preventing the fall from killing him. The man, all broken bones now, WAILS in horrible pain.
> The community grumbles with concern. Everyone turns to THREE MEN, each the oldest of their respective generations (the youths, the laborers, and the mentors). They understand what they must do.
> SIMON (CONT'D). Why did that just happen? We need to call an ambulance. (Aster 55)

The spectacle of this "historic death" watched by a group of people also paints a stark contrast to how Dani's parents were put in body bags in the beginning. That is why, when she closes her eyes again, she sees her parents' bedroom, but this time, her mother appears to be asleep and then wakes up. It is worth noting that this instance marks the last scene where Dani is shown to be dwelling in her painful thoughts related to her parents. Thus, the film underlines that witnessing this scene of traumatic suicide in broad daylight without any reservations about it helps Dani face what she has been repressing. When we apply LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement to the scene, it becomes clear that Dani is finally able to let go of her traumatic memories by reacting to a subsequent traumatic event in a way that both allows her to approach it empathically and prevents her from becoming absorbed in what is happening.

In addition, the climactic scene where Dani watches Christian's coitus with another woman through a hole followed by swarming of the Hårgan women who immerse themselves in Dani's cries provides the film its most rigorous example of empathic unsettlement through the carnivalesque. After all, the script calls these women in this gathering as "*sympathetically connected*. It's remarkable, and very unsettling" (Aster 109) (emphasis original). Sexual intercourse, degraded and confined to the private realm in what Bakhtin calls the modern canon, is made public at the festival. Apparently, "[o]ne of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one" (Bakhtin 26), making this public display of copulation in which Christian's body merge with that of Maja a carnivalesque mockery of privatization of sexuality. This union of two people, brought down to their material level of the lower stratum, is not only watched by spectators, but it is also open to other townspeople in case they decide to interfere, recalling Bakhtin's remarks on the carnival, "the collective, growing, and continually renewed body of the people with which it had been linked in folk culture" (23). This sense of collectivity is also present when the Hårgan women try to mimic Dani's reactions, leading to empathic unsettlement that breaks down the barriers between the victim and the witness. Thus, this scene, through the grotesque sexual merging of bodies and the collective moans of Hårgan women, forces Dani to face what she has been denying regarding Christian all along and finally accept that Christian might leave her, but it does not mean that she will be alone. In this sense, "[t]he cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious" (Bakhtin 19).

The blurring of the lines between the trauma victim and the witness can also be observed in the scene in which we see Christian as the Bear towards the end. This scene recalls Rene Girard's "scapegoat mechanism" which postulates that there needs to be a victim who serves as a sacrifice upon whom a group's aggression and blame are projected (42). The community feels relieved, purified, and their social cohesiveness is restored by sacrificing or destroying this scapegoat of their choice (42). When the group members band together to fight a shared foe, the scapegoat serves as the catalyst for unity and reconciliation within the group. Christian's metamorphosis into a scapegoat for the Hårgans begins with Dani's individual anger towards him, then penetrates into the women who feel empathetic towards Dani in this town, and arrives at its destination, which is the core of the whole community. However, the response from the community is also carnivalesque, as it is a convergence of what Bakhtin calls the king and the fool, due to the fact that Christian "is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, [and] burned" (197). Christian, who has been chosen by Hårgan people to prevent inbreeding, represents the king in the beginning as all rituals ostensibly point to the possibility of crowning him as a king, but he ends up being "uncrowned and transformed into a 'funny monster'" (49). In his helpless state inside the skin of a bear, he becomes an absurd embodiment of what happens when "[a]nimal and human organs are interwoven into one indissoluble grotesque whole" (223).

As the flames rise, Dani fixes her eyes on Christian, displaying a range of emotions, including grief and anger as suggested by the sudden movements of her face, but she is quickly able to regain control of them, and then her expression stabilizes. The intensity in her eyes, which are still fixed on Christian, signifies Dani's normalization of death and acceptance of the fact that people can disappear from her life. Empathic unsettlement is thus intimately linked to the trauma victim's need to regain the authority they were previously denied, aside from its therapeutic benefits. In other words, this act of watching the flames serves a purpose similar to that of the "fort/da" game, which provides Dani a "far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experience than was possible when [s]he was merely its passive recipient" (Freud 75).

In the final shot of the film, it becomes transparent that Dani's initiation into the world of the carnivalesque has been completed, as she finally becomes a part of her new community as their queen. Consequently, in this shot "A SMILE finally breaks onto Dani's face" (117), implying that the purification of her psyche and her liberation from trauma might have been achieved, or at least there is hope for healing lying ahead. Horvitz says, "[n]ot until the victim encounters and translates her 'unspeakable' tragedy into 'her' story can she envision a future devoid of violence" (40), and this is what happens to Dani: Through empathic unsettlement these grotesque rituals of the festival bring, she completely loses herself in "her"' own story that challenges her fear of abandonment and the tragedy of death.

Conclusion

Overall, this article examines Ari Aster's *Midsommar* using Dominick LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement and Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque. As the examples provided from the film suggest, *Midsommar* underscores how the carnivalesque, through its mockery, subversion of power dynamics, and emphasis on the body, grotesque, and role play, functions as a catalyst for empathy and alternative modes of healing in the face of trauma. Although literary trauma theory has not been used in dialogue with Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the field, this article demonstrates that a dialectical approach that juxtaposes the two can entirely be fruitful no matter how atypical it may be. Therefore, this analysis of *Midsommar* also invites reflection on the transformative potential of embracing unconventional outlooks to address societal structures, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships that perpetuate and contribute to trauma.

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Corresponding Author: Gamze Yaşayanlar, School of Foreign Languages, Ege University, Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0001-5501-4838

Unravelling Lost Memories and Digging Deep into Meaning in *Midnight's Children*[1]

Gamze Yaşayanlar

Abstract: As one of the most significant authors blending the East and the West, and reflecting his concerns on fragile issues such as the clash of cultures, beliefs, identities, postcolonial and postmodern practices, Salman Rushdie presents a multi-layered novel with a fragmented structure which is very similar to human essence. *Midnight's Children* is a fine example of retelling individual and collective memories, and the human struggle to find meaning in life. The narrator, Saleem delves into his childhood memories and recounts his family saga to his audience with the belief that stories, whether fragmented or distorted, materialize and become more real when narrated. Thus, as Saleem feels that his body is about to collapse, he rushes to complete his stories before he dies. He believes that a life narrated and made meaningful is a life worth living. In this context, Rushdie frames painful historical events present in the nation as fiction and unravels the hallmarks of both individual and collective memory. The aim of this article is to discuss how meaning is conveyed through storytelling and memory in a nation where truth and fragmentation collide but plurality and multiple realities embrace progressive perspectives.

Keywords: memory, meaning, narration, postcolonialism, postmodernism, food, duality, *Midnight's Children*

Introduction

The Indian born British American author Salman Rushdie is one of the most noteworthy authors integrating Eastern and Western social and traditional practices while expressing his concerns about the clash of cultures, societies, beliefs, postcolonial issues of diaspora and migration with a touch of philosophical examination of the human condition. As one of the most prominent authors known worldwide, Rushdie is the winner of the *Booker Prize* for his second novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981. The novel, following an epic structure with the hero Saleem Sinai's quest for meaning, can be seen as a postmodern and postcolonial example of literary theory with its style and narration. The novel opens up an opportunity for the people living on the margin. Their voices reflecting the idea, attitude and feelings of the periphery find a chance to be heard. Rushdie draws a metafictional frame for his novel as the narrator's stories develop with interruptions and postponed endings. The disruption of truth, the slippery ground between fiction and reality, the made-up historical moments and incidents foregrounding the play of memory which operate by selection and manipulation, contribute to its fragmented structure. The objective of this article is to discuss how the human being attains meaning in a world lacking unity and order, and how this meaning is attained through memory. Rushdie skilfully achieves this end by exploring involuntary triggers which take the narrator to his childhood memories, highlighting the importance of narrating stories for perpetuation and meaning for the following generations and questioning the dual nature of human essence. While exploring these concerns, Rushdie also draws attention to the use of local words and phrases when the English language seems to be insufficient to convey the feelings of the postcolonial experience.

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A Postmodern Narrative Framing History as Fiction

Establishing a multi-layered postmodern novel by granting different voices to various characters, Rushdie gives a vivid description of Saleem's past and present life. He presents a world of fragmentation in the history of the nation and memories of the people through the voice of Saleem and his complex yet powerful narration of his story. Saleem's story covers the history of his family in relation to the history of the nation with its rise and fall. His narration depicts a world of intertextual features, relativity of truth, unreliable memories, constructed meanings, political and religious remarks told, discussed and evaluated. This identification is in line with the French philosopher and literary theorist Jean François Lyotard's description of the postmodern condition as:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (Lyotard 248)

As in postmodernism, every form of depiction or representation is reclaimed and approached with doubt while Saleem seeks to tell his life story and explore all the reliable and unreliable details by bringing bits and pieces together in a self-reflexive way. The literary critic Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative* states that "self-reflective narrative often presents the story of its own coming to life, its own creative processes" by employing "the act of reading into one of active 'production', of imagining, interpreting, decoding, ordering, in short of constructing the literary universe through the fictive referents of the words. Reader and writer both share the process of fiction-making in *language*" (86) (emphasis original). Thus, Saleem believes that the narration of his stories, either distorted or factual, imagined or constructed, is the only way to keep them alive and when he gets the listener's consent to continue his story, he goes deep into every detail.

The family saga starts with Saleem's highlighting that he was born at midnight, on 15 August 1947, the exact date of the independence of India from the British rule. The novel gives a description of the destructive partition of the country into India and Pakistan when the British withdrew. The majority of the Hindu population was in India while Muslim majority formed Pakistan. However, it was mostly confusion and sadness for millions who were hesitant about which part of the country they were in. Most of them were also resentful to find out that some important Muslim districts had gone to India and Hindu places to Pakistan. Rushdie highlights the suffering of the refugees and the migrants who could make their way from Pakistan to India and vice versa. It was much more pain and misery for the ones who could not cross the border. Considering all this intense suffering, Saleem believes that his life is mostly linked to the fate of his country, India, as every significant incident or event related to the subcontinent finds a place in his life.

Reflecting on Food and Memory

Featuring voluntary and involuntary memory to attribute meaning to his life, Saleem's purpose is to reach every bit of individual and collective memory related to his family and the nation. With his friend and the baby Aadam, they go to Bombay to challenge one of the snake charmers who declares himself as the greatest charmer in the world. They go to a club where the competition takes place and they are served food accompanied by some chutney. At that instant Saleem recalls the flavour of the chutney and he tracks down the address of the factory where it is produced so that he can get something related to his past. In parallel, Loftus brilliantly reminds her readers that "there is a fascination with anything that succeeds in recalling the past" and quotes Marcel Proust's tea episode in *Swann's Way* to exemplify her statement (33). Consequently, Saleem is not mistaken as he finds out that they are Mary Pereria's chutneys, the nanny he was brought up by. Saleem's taste of the chutney and his feelings which take him back to his childhood coincide with the same nostalgic feelings reminiscent in the tea episode. Proust describes “involuntary memory” as related to senses which reflects the stages of a sensory trigger, awakening memory through recognition and realisation (Tukey 397). Involuntary memory is highlighted as the “intellectual consciousness without a deliberate seeking or desire for the past, the sense of unity supplied by the first taste of *madeleine*”, or in Saleem’s experience the chutney, “a puzzling after the sensation departs—not indifference, but rather an effort at memory and heightened self-consciousness, and then, with the identification of the taste and association with” Saleem’s childhood memories with his nanny Mary Pereria, “the completed self-consciousness and memory” are attained (Tukey 398) (emphasis original). It is important to note that “[o]ur memories of certain objects are governed by our past knowledge of comparable objects or of situations similar to the one we are experiencing. Our memories are *prejudiced*, in the full sense of the term, by our past history and beliefs” (Damasio 104) (emphasis original). Thus, “[t]he brain holds a memory of what went on during an interaction, and the interaction importantly includes our own past […]. The fact that we perceive by engagement, rather than by passive receptivity, is the secret of the ‘Proustian effect’ in memory, the reason why we often recall contexts rather than just isolated things” (104-5). Quite similar to Saleem’s experience, Proust describes his reflection of the Madeleine as follows:

> And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of Madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime flowers, which my aunt used to give me […] immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, […] and with the house the town, […] the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets […] the country roads we took when it was fine. (in Loftus 33)

Saleem’s feelings when he recognizes the distinguished flavour of the chutney confirm Proust’s experience of the Madeleine soaked in tea. When the cues or hints are given to help trigger the memory, remembering the past experience or recollection of a past event takes place. Thus, “the recollective experience of the rememberer depends on the way in which a memory is retrieved” (Schacter 25). Saleem is bewildered by confusing feelings and can scarcely compose himself. In astonishment, he states: “[I]t carried me back to a day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz, and was given the best chutney in the world” (*MC* 637). He believes that “the taste of the chutney was more than just an echo of that long-ago taste – it was the old taste itself, the very same, with the power of bringing back the past as if it had never been away” (637). To Proust, smells and tastes are fragile and “uniquely effective cues for an elusive but powerful memory” (Schacter 27). Proust defines this memory process as follows:

> [W]hen from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised for a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting and hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (in Schacter 27)

David Sutton believes that Proust highlights “the power of sensory parts”, and directs us “to return […] to the whole, of the unsubstantial fragment to reveal the vast structure” while he also “points us to the emotional charge of the moment of consumption for keying, involuntarily, these associative memories” (84). Similarly, Saleem questions after the maker of the chutney with such an excitement that he cannot control himself but bursts out. Saleem’s experience of the chutney taking him back to his childhood as a reminder of his past coincides beautifully with Proust’s explanation of the sensory triggers in life as Proust states, “the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection” (in Loftus 33). This process can be likened to a retrieval of information or experience from the long-term memory. When the individual has enough cues to remind him of his past, as the taste of the chutney in Saleem’s case, or any smell, sight or hearing, they become the triggers, the cues of retrieval and all of a sudden, quite unexpectedly, they rise to the surface.

Long-term memory is the place and district of all information. When some information comes to the surface involuntarily, there is no place for fallibility of memory because “in the process of involuntary memory sensation imitates discovery of a truth […] [which is] purely […] conceptual thought; and the effort of the intellect interpreting, assimilating, integrating from sensation is the essential ingredient of involuntary memory" (Tukey 399). Thus, in involuntary memory, Proust's purpose is to gain insight and the union of this experience with past time is prominent for him. The consequence of involuntary memory is "a changed life, a life exhibiting greater goodness, enlightenment and purity", directed "toward eternal union with the divine in some afterlife" (399). This is what happens in Saleem's story and his reunion with the experience of the past. Saleem wants to see the brand of the chutney or the address possibly written on the chutney jar so that he could search for the factory and trace the taste of his childhood. He does so and there at the factory, he finds his nanny, Mary Pereira, "the only mother [he] had left in the world" as the owner of the chutney factory (*MC* 639).

Saleem starts working at the factory with a job to choose "[r]aw materials, obviously – fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices" for the pickling process, chutnification (*MC* 643). He finds a symbolic value in the process and draws a correlation between the pickling of food and memories. He believes that the pickling process is meaningful because it is a process which preserves the fresh and raw food and extends the period it can be edible. It prevents its being rotten and going bad. In this sense, chutnification of food is similar to narrating a story as it is being preserved in the memory of the collective. In chutnification, food is preserved for later use, and through the narrating process, memory, and consequently beliefs, culture and history are passed on to the next generations.

Attaining Meaning through Storytelling

Rushdie makes Saleem speak and he tries to achieve this end to his story. He wants to transfer all the turmoil the nation goes through in relation to the changes in his personal life through narration. He comments: "[M]y chutneys and kasaundies [tomato chutney] are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings – by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks" (*MC* 44). In line with this viewpoint, the philosopher of literature Peter Lamarque emphasizes that "to narrate is to tell a story", and "fictional narration" is "the telling of stories that are 'made up', 'invented', 'products of the imagination'" (133). Thus, Saleem revisits his past, shapes his experiences and narrates his story as storytelling is an inherent part of all human beings. He depicts not only history, society or culture but also reimagines the past, the present, and the future. Hannah Meretoja summarizes American philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt's perspective on storytelling by stating that it is "a process of sharing experiences in such a way that helps us bear both our pain and our joy" (198) and quotes Arendt's argument that stories lead to a way in which "particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning. It is precisely true that 'all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them,' in the words of Isak Dinesen" (Arendt in Meretoja 198). Thus, especially sorrow, suffering and agony become more tolerable when put in words in a story. The philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin also acknowledges that people are "storytelling beings who desire to be framed and narrativized into coherence, to be characters in a novel" (in Meretoja 185).

Saleem gives the titles of the chapters of the novel to the chutney jars as they reflect his autobiography. He symbolically fills in the jars with his memories of his family, the nation, unrest, disorder, love and magic. What he also believes to be pickled is "the hidden languages […] its humours and messages and emotions" (*MC* 643). Moreover, he includes "memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans … believe don't believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (643). Considering the thirty chapters in the flow of the story, Saleem "chutnifies" all the chapters which comprise his life story. He feels that his stories can have a value of immortality only if they are narrated. Thus, he identifies narration of his stories with the sense of attributing form and essence to them. He explains as follows:

> To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it shape and form – that is to say, meaning. (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity.). (*MC* 644)

Saleem knows that there may be distortions or deformation of meaning in the stories since it is innate to human nature to add or eliminate some facts and being selective in the narration of stories. The process of narration includes the potential of blurring the past experiences and events on the one hand and revealing its unseen parts on the other. Thus, storytelling embodies power in its definition as it breaks "the monopoly of established reality […] to *define* what is *real*" (Marcuse in Freeman 276) (emphasis original). The aim of the storyteller then as expressed by Schachtel, is to "fight constantly against the easy flow of words that offer themselves" (in Freeman 276) with the purpose of finding "those that will say something new and valuable, something that moves beyond the cliché, the stale sentiment, into a region of truth" (Freeman 276). Saleem continues to narrate his story as it is the only way to give shape and meaning to his memories and life.

Saleem's craving to tell his story is Rushdie's concern to reach everyone outside the nation. Rushdie "chutnifies" the history of the nation and Saleem puts it in jars for the next generations. He believes that "[o]ne day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth" (*MC* 644). There is only one empty jar which cannot be pickled as it is about the future. Saleem comments: "I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet. But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty … What cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place" (645).

The Nature of Duality

As Saleem, the narrator and the creator of the family saga and national history struggles to comprehend and communicate his story with the jars of chutney, he runs into his double in wicked Shiva, the warrior who also adds to Saleem's purpose of making sense of his life**.** Salem and Shiva born on the night of India's independence from the British, at the stroke of midnight which enables them with the most magical powers among the children born then. Saleem is born to a needy family and Shiva's parents are wealthy but as Mary switches the babies at birth, they live a life which endows them with unexpected fortunes and difficulties. This switch indicates that Saleem "is 'really' Shiva, and Shiva is 'really'" Saleem, "so that the polar opposition is severely problematized" (Booker 978). Moreover, when pregnant Amina visits the soothsayer, she has a prophesy declaring that "[t]here will be two heads – but you shall see only one – there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees" (*MC* 114). Amina is confused and sorrowful as she thinks that she will give birth to a child with two heads. However, the soothsayer is not mistaken as Amina's biological child is Shiva but as the nanny switches the babies at birth, Amina looks after Saleem as her real son. Both Shiva and Saleem complete each other as opposites. In Indian mythology, Shiva is "the god of destruction, who is also most potent of deities; Shiva, greatest of dancers; who rides on a bull; whom no force can resist" (*MC* 306). Saleem, as the more compatible one, is "afraid of Shiva" because he believes he is the "[m]ost ferocious and powerful of the Children, he would penetrate where others could not go" (393). Saleem is uncomfortable with Shiva's existence and the fact that he has kept his birthright a secret. Behaving like a bandit, Saleem hears "of drowned bodies floating like balloons […] or trains set on fire, or politicians killed, […] it seems to me that the hand of Shiva lies heavily over all these things" (415). In line with the misfortunes millions had to face in history, Shiva depicts a picture of the violent actions as a result of the Partition. Nonetheless, Saleem represents the opposite characteristic of Shiva and he tries to bring the Midnight's Children together for the future of the nation as they "can be made to represent many things […] they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished" (*MC* 278).

Another deconstruction of dualism is presented by Saleem. In the Sundarbans, Saleem gets injured by a spittoon that hits his head in an explosion and this results in an amnesiac situation as he loses his memory. Ironically, it was the only thing that connected him to his past, the only memorable possession. During this time, he is at a military camp in Pakistan and his duty is to smell any danger such as movements of the opposing groups, bombs or troops as he has an unusual and unique sense of smell. He is the "man-dog" hired by the "Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities" when he loses his memory and starts to live like an animal (*MC* 484). He has a very large nose and "he can follow any trail on earth!' […] 'Through water, […] across rocks! Such a tracker […] 'And he can't feel a thing! […] Numb […] head-to-foot numb! You touch him, he wouldn't know – only by the smell he knows you're there!' – 'Must be the war wound!'" (*MC* 486-7). He works for the Pakistani army and his duty is to be in that unit to track and "[t]o root out undesirable elements" depicted as "[s]neaky and welldisguised" as he has "[t]o obey unquestioningly; to seek unflaggingly; to arrest remorselessly" (485). Moreover, the officials who train him call him "buddha" which means "old man" in Urdu because they were younger than him and "there hung around him an air of great antiquity. The buddha was old before his time" (487). Buddha, though pronounced differently, also refers to "a prince, unable to bear the suffering of the world, became capable of not-living-in-the-world as well as living in it; he was present, but also absent; his body was in one place, but his spirit was elsewhere" (487). Thus, Saleem as Buddha, presents a dual nature which also gives clues about how memory, meaning and identity manifest themselves.

Saleem is called the "man-dog" among the soldiers and likened to Buddha who was sitting under a tree with empty eyes and mind. Saleem talks of the buddha as "he" in the third person since he was memoryless and did not present or prove an identity; that is, he could not narrate his own self. When he is bitten by a snake, with the venom being "poured" into his body, the soldiers around him wait for his death, but "[f]or two days he became as rigid as a tree, and his eyes crossed […] [He] was rejoined to the past, jolted into unity by snake-poison […]. The child-soldiers listened, spellbound, to the stories issuing from his [buddha's] mouth" (*MC* 508-9). During this ephemeral state, Saleem was unravelling all his lost memories and histories.

This state of being physically there but mentally not there complies with "Damasio's theory of self which expresses the idea that "a sense of self [is] an indispensable part of the conscious mind" as Damasio defines it as "a feeling of knowing" and "a feeling of what happens" (in Eakin 7). According to Eakin, Damasio names "*self*" as "the feeling of awareness or knowing that these events are taking place. To be conscious is to be endowed with this feeling of knowing that is self" (7) (emphasis original). Buddha is nothing without his story. He is not conscious and he cannot confirm his identity. During memory loss, he lacks his abilities of judgement or being involved in a conversation. Thus, his loss of memory means a fragmentation in his identity as it leaves many plots related to his life story incomplete.

The English Language

As Rushdie foregrounds diversity and ambiguity preserved by memory and meaning, he is also sensitive to the language he uses in the novel. Rushdie aims to illustrate "the process of regaining identity through literature, to confront the realities of the past, to be aware of the collision of reality and fiction, and to start an emancipating process through the pre-adaption of the own language or dialect" (Schröttner 130). Saleem not only "chutnifies" history but the English language as well which he believes will meet his objective of meaning in capturing the essence of the Indian culture and historical memory. English and Indian lexical structures in both receptive and productive skills reveal diverse thinking styles and nuances. In some instances, standard English or the colonising language is not adequate to illustrate the intricacies of postcolonial experience. Indian culture could only be reflected by a blend of grammatical rules, vocabulary, English, Hindu, Urdu, Persian and Arabic words displaying the multiplicity and richness of the culture. Rushdie merges the syntactic and semantic rules into the English language and creates a new blend which is very similar to the people and events that are influencing, merging and leaking into one another.

Saleem feels that one cannot change things easily in the country. He uses words from other languages which seems like "chutnification" of English. He reads on the wall of a mosque "*Hartal*! Which is to say, literally speaking, a day of mourning, of stillness, of silence. But this is India in the heyday of the Mahatma, when even language obeys the instructions of Gandhiji" (*MC* 37) (emphasis original). The words or expressions Rushdie uses include "'ekdum' (at once), 'angrez' (Englishman), 'phut – aphut' (in no time), 'nasbandi' (sterilization), 'dhoban' (washerwoman), 'feringee' (the same as 'angrez'), 'baba' (grandfather), 'garam masala' (hot spices), 'rakshasas' (demons), 'fauz' (army), 'badmaas' (badmen), 'jailkhana' (prison)" (in Thomas 11). He also makes compounds such as "'updownup', 'downdowndown', 'suchandsuch', 'noseholes', 'birthanddeath' […] 'blackasnight'", "godknowswhat" or "whatsitsname" (11). One can assume that when these words are examined, they are generally written in a language other than British English because English is not adequate to convey the feeling or the spirit of the country and the people experiencing them. When the Chinese forces attack the Indian army, Saleem's father comments, "this country is finished. Bankrupt. Funtoosh" (*MC* 419). He feels that the words "bankrupt" and "finished" in English are not enough to express the emotion. He describes the situation with a slang word "Funtoosh" in his own language. It is quite significant that these words are used in the local language of the people in order not to lose their significance and materiality when translated. That may be one of the reasons why Rushdie chooses to use the vernacular or a blend of the languages. At times, he writes the words in capital letters displaying his inner screams, thoughts and emotions as he states: "Roundandroundand […] I heard her shouting: 'The brake! Use the goddamn brake, ya dummy! – but my hands couldn't move, I had gone rigid as a plank, and there LOOK OUT in front of me was the blue two-wheeler of Sonny Ibrahim, […] OUTA THE WAY YA CRAZY" (*MC* 258).

Rushdie also deliberately uses misspelled words or those that do not comply with the grammatical rules on different occassions. He wants to indicate the language used by the locals. This is crucial in the sense that one cannot find pureness in a language as it is always being affected by the experience, knowledge and perception of its people. When there is hybridity in the nation and its traditional and cultural way of life, it is also reflected in its language. Rushdie, in his *Imaginary Homelands*, discusses the appropriateness of the English language to Indian subject-matter. He holds the idea that it is not possible to "simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes" (17). Rushdie further indicates that the writers "who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world" (17). Rushdie argues that the Indian writers face the problem of definition as he identifies them as "translated men" (17). Thus, Rushdie believes that "[t]o conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (17). He states that the British Indian writer does not refuse the English language, he does not have that option of refusal since his children will inevitably speak it and assert an identity. Therefore, despite the struggles and the tension between regional languages, Rushdie recognizes the English language as a unifying language.

Conclusion

Rushdie puts emphasis on the cultural diversity and richness of the country while giving a critique of the upheavals related to political and social structure. He achieves his purpose of attributing meaning and value to the experience of a postcolonial nation through stories, memories and life events of his narrator, Saleem. The similarity of and the parallelism between the chutnification of food and preservation of his stories in memory need to be underscored as well, as Rushdie knows that the stories and the act of storytelling function as indispensable elements both for a nation's historical and cultural identity, and his own self. He also reflects fragmentation in the stories and the unreliability of the narrator as he does not fail to underline that parts of the stories could be distorted since it is an innate characteristic of human nature. With this point in consideration, Rushdie reflects that there is plurality and multiple realities as there are not many truths for the human being to rely on in a postmodern world. Rushdie believes that these stories, whether they are distorted to some extent or not, form the cultural identity of the nation and serve as an idea to raise awareness, establish an environment of inquiry, insight and understanding while making life more meaningful not only for India and its people but also for the Western world and its practices.

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Corresponding Author: Subrata Chandra Mozumder, Department of English, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA.
ORCID: 0000-0003-2579-6335

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.

Subrata Chandra Mozumder

Abstract: In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1955–), a postcolonial as well as transnational feminist and a distinguished professor of women and gender studies, advocates that intersectionality, transnationalism, and decolonization of established pedagogies and practices are the key factors for building cross-cultural feminist solidarity. She thinks that borders have to be transcended and all social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and class-based parameters are needed to consider understanding the oppression as well as the privileges of women around the world. Mohanty says without borders does not mean borderless, rather, it incorporates all the borders, irrespective of race and nation, to get the plural and/or multiple perspectives of feminist movements. She believes it is not the universal notion of sisterhood but the notion of feminist solidarity, which is significant for the emancipation of women from every walk of life.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Transnationalism, Decolonization, Feminist Solidarity, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, Women Studies, Gender Studies

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a postcolonial as well as transnational feminist and a distinguished professor of women and gender studies, advocates that intersectionality, transnationalism, and decolonization of established pedagogies and practices are the key factors for building cross-cultural feminist solidarity in *Feminism without Borders*. She puts forward that borders have to be transcended and all social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and class-based parameters are to be reconsidered in order to understand the oppression as well as the privileges of women around the world. Mohanty reveals that "feminism without borders" does not equal to "'border-less' feminism", but it rather refers to a feminism that incorporates all borders, irrespective of race and nation, to include the plural and/or multiple perspectives of various feminist movements (2). Mohanty believes it is not the universal notion of sisterhood but the notion of feminist solidarity which is significant for the emancipation of women from every walk of life. Alluding to Robin Morgan, Mohanty writes that the notion of universal feminism addresses "a commonality of gender experience across race and national lines" (193), so she posits sisterhood as a "productive pedagogical strategy for feminist cross-cultural work", which "provides a way to theorize a complex relational understanding of experience, location, and history" (238). Rather than commonality, solidarity focuses on

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"differences and unequal power relations" (239). This feminist solidarity is not possible to achieve if we cannot decolonize "masculinist Marxism", "capitalist patriarchy" and "imperial feminism" (4). Alluding to Jodi Dean, the author turns to the notion of "reflective solidarity" which is useful in creating coalition among women across borders (7). This reflective solidarity demands deconstruction and decolonization of feminism, especially the notion of white feminism, which has the potential to pave the way for the "transformation of the self, reconceptualizations of identity, and political mobilization" (8).

Feminism without Borders is divided in three sections comprising nine chapters in total where she expresses her scholarship with explanation and examples, showing reasons why it is important to think in terms of intersectionality and transnationalism to build a reflective feminist solidarity.

Mohanty's first attempt in *Feminism without Borders* is to highlight the impact of hegemonic Western feminism or "Western feminist discourses on women in the Third World" (11). Western feminists want to see the experiences of the women of developing countries through the lens of a "universal patriarchal framework" (20), which is monolithic. It is "the global hegemony of Western [feminist] scholarship" that produces, publishes, distributes, and consumes the information and ideas about the women of the global south (21). Thus, the Western feminist discourses construct the "Third World women as a homogenous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of their traditions, cultures, and beliefs, and 'our' (Eurocentric) history" (192). This construction is a perennial one which is executed by portraying the women of the developing countries as "victims of male violence", "victims of the colonial process", "victims of the Arab familial system", and religious ideologies (23), mostly based on a generalized notion of their subordination, limiting "the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities" (31). This is a problematic representation of women, especially the women of the "Third World". She criticizes Fran Hosken who equates purdah with domestic violence and rape denying the cultural and historical specificity and contradictions when Hosken states, "[r]ape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (in Mohanty 33).

Hegemonic Western feminism aligns the concepts of "reproduction, the sexual division of labor, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy and so on […] without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts" (34). The Western feminists, "by ignoring the complex and mobile relationships between" the women of the global south and "their historical materiality", ignore racism, colonialism, and imperialism interwoven within the oppressive mechanism (37). Western feminist thinkers want to see the images of the Oriental woman as the "veiled woman" or the "chaste virgin", however, their own images are seen as liberated, secular, and self-regulated (42). As such, the Western feminist writers draw a binary line between the First World woman and the Third World woman. Therefore, Mohanty thinks that the notion of universal sisterhood is "vague" in this context (3). Mohanty believes that hegemonic Western feminist discourses need deconstruction and decolonization either to represent the sufferings and experiences of the women of the global south or to listen to the self-representation of the Third World women (169).

Mohanty suggests that Third World women are the victims of the politics of feminism, as they mostly remain in the periphery of the "institutional power structures" (43). She alludes to Audre Lord and pays tribute to her for the representation of how U.S. based feminism clearly demarcates between them and the Third World feminism. Though the term "Third World" has geographical undertones, confining it within the geographical location will only be inappropriate as Mohanty understands the "Third World" as a term that "designate[s] geographical location and sociohistorical conjunctures […] [which] incorporates so-called minority peoples or people of color in the United States" (44). When Mohanty refers to the Third World feminism and the Third World women, she does not confine her concepts within geographical boundaries but she rather contextualizes them in relation to sex, gender, body, race, nation, color, and ethnicity. She argues that we need to recognize "how women in different sociocultural and historical locations formulate their relation to feminism" (49). As the concept of the Third World cannot be delimited to the geographical boundaries, the concept of feminism cannot be fixed within gendered terms only. One becomes woman in relation to her sex, gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Referring to Simon de Beauvoir, Mohanty writes that "no one 'becomes a woman' […] purely because she is female" (55). She emphasizes the "urgent need for us to appreciate and understand the complex relationality that shapes our social and political lives" (55). Without understanding "the complex relationality or intersectionality", we cannot understand the power dynamics or the relations of ruling to the meaning of "multiple intersections of structures of power" (56).

The author herself has the multiplicities of identity; she is a woman, an Indian by birth, a woman of color, an immigrant now a citizen, a professor, and a postcolonial and antiracist theorist—all these identities are important for her, so her identity cannot be confined to be a female only. The advocacy of intersectionality within the very self is articulated when she refers to the "plurality of self" by citing Norma Alarcon and later referring to Gloria Anzaldua's "mestiza consciousness" (80). The politics of Western feminism and/or White feminism does not include the plural or collective consciousness paying attention to sex, gender, race, class, caste, and ethnicity, because Western feminism is the purview of liberal humanism, enabling the hegemonic power structures in its essence. Women can only show their autonomy, resistance, and agency collectively if they organize a solidarity and protest against all forms of domination. She argues that to understand "Third World women's engagement with feminism", we need to consider "anthropology as an example of a discourse of dominance and self-reflexivity and […] the autobiography […] as a discourse of oppositional consciousness and agency" (84). Thus, the subjective identity and subjective agency are interlinked to the collective consciousness and multiple determinants.

One of the reasons why Mohanty questions the very notion of universal sisterhood is because it denotes "the universality of gender oppression" and struggles which she finds to be "problematic" (107). The universality of gender oppression is not as same as "the universal rights of women" (107). The universal rights of women focus on the particularities of women's experiences whereas universality of gender oppression suggests women are homogenously oppressed across the borders. To substantiate her argument, Mohanty refers to Robin Morgan's "Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century" and Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century", revealing that both essays see women from a vintage point which is opposition to "androcentrism" only (107). Morgan's essay assumes that women are a "cross-culturally singular, homogenous group with the same interests, perspectives, and goals and similar experiences" (110). Morgan's notion of universal sisterhood erases "the history and effects of contemporary imperialism", so this model has "dangerous implications for women who do not and cannot speak from a location of white, Western, middle-class privilege" (111). As Morgan sees women "as a coherent group in all contexts", she only evaluates sisterhood on the basis of women's shared opposition to androcentrism, validating women's shared status that grounds them as victims (113). However, Mohanty thinks that "being female" and "becoming feminist" are not the same (49). However, the "feminist osmosis thesis" articulated by Morgan claims them as the same, highlighting that all women are oppressed and so all of them have to react in the same manner (109). Hence, the feminists need to consider women's experiences in the context of local within and outside the borders rather than global, because this local can be a shifting perspective, essential for the emancipation of women of once colonized countries, women of color, and women of the less privileged classes. The "current *intersection* of anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and gay and lesbian struggles" have to be understood, and it is necessary to explore diverse grounds across regions, politics, and issues (120) (emphasis original).

One of the challenges to build collective solidarity and resistance among women across borders and nationalities is the "corporate U.S. academy" (169). Mohanty states that the U.S. academy is a corporatized institution which follows the hegemonic colonial and racial legacy. Therefore, the U.S. academy, otherwise defined by various authors with terms such as "the Knowledge Factory", "the corporate university", "digital diploma mills", "academic capitalism", and "the academic globalization of North American universities" have to be decolonized and deconstructed, for these universities circulate and practice the recolonization process (170). The decolonization of established pedagogies in the U.S. academy is paramount because the U.S. academy "often situate[s] Third World peoples as populations whose histories and experiences are deviant, marginal, or inessential to the acquisition of knowledge" (200). The binary still existing between the centre and the margin in the academy has to be destroyed (201). The classroom can play a vital role in terms of eradicating the binary between the centre and the margin (201-2). Mohanty puts forward that "feminist pedagogies" have always recognized the importance of experience in the classroom (243). So, it can be a place for "the politicization of individuals along race, gender, class, and sexual parameters" which empowers the marginal experiences through the classroom (202). Creating "counterhegemonic pedagogies" can replace the existing "pedagogy of normative pluralism" which defines an individual as the representative of a whole cultural group (204). Mohanty argues that the "white heterosexual masculinity in academy" (207), along with "academic capitalism" (178), and "corporatization of academy" (175) have to be reformed and decolonized to produce knowledge that advocates multiculturalism in order to create solidarity among women across nationalities. In Mohanty's words, "the purpose of liberal education" has to be thought in relation to "antiracist" and "anti-capitalist feminist" perspectives (216).

Mohanty concludes her book by revisiting her earlier essay "Under Western Eyes" by paying particular attention to cross-cultural feminist solidarity. Though her earlier essay focuses on narrow self-interest of Western feminism and the binary between the North and the South and between the Western and Non-Western, her present work departs from the previous one. She now evaluates "feminism without and beyond borders" (234). She visits the formulations of the "*Feminist-as-Tourist Model*" (239), and "*Feminist-as-Explorer Model*" (240), and concludes that "*The Feminist Solidarity or Comparative Feminist Studies Model*" is the most essential and productive pedagogical strategy for feminist cross cultural work (242) (emphasis original). As the lives of women are connected and interdependent, a pedagogical course can be offered to anchor feminist solidarity by focusing on "the interconnectedness of the histories, experiences, and struggles of U.S. women of color, white women, and women from the Third World/South" (242). Mohanty finally reveals that "[a] transnational feminist practice" is only possible if feminist solidarity is built "across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief, and so on" and if the feminists become anti-capitalists, and theorists become feminists (250).

In conclusion, Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders* is a critical masterpiece in which she uplifts the necessity of intersectionality, transnationalism, and the feminist solidarity by decolonizing the recolonizing forces—including that of globalization, environmental racism, capitalism, universal feminism, and universal notion of sisterhood. She speaks from her experience both as a professor, immigrant, U.S. citizen, woman, woman of colour, Indian, and an Indian American. Thus, she redefines the terms "home", and "location" in relation to intersectional feminism. Her challenge against the proposition of "I am, therefore I resist" (77) sheds light on her rejection of the idea that the sole reason of being a woman is being female. To Mohanty, one's experiences as a woman must be considered in relation to her socio-cultural, political, religious, racial, ethnic, national, and class-based borders.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Pelin Gölcük Mirza is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Karabük University, Turkey. She has graduated from Hacettepe University with a B.A. in English Language and Literature in 2015. She started her joint Ph.D. program at Karabük University in the same department in 2019. She was awarded a TUBITAK scholarship to conduct research as a visiting post-doctoral researcher for three months at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK in 2023. She completed her dissertation entitled "Herstories of Scotland: An Analysis of Liz Lochhead's Selected Plays from a New Historicist Approach" in 2023. Her primary research areas include Scottish Literature, Contemporary English Drama, Women Playwrights, and Poetry.
ORCID: 0000-0003-3808-5065/ **E-mail**: pelinmirza@karabuk.edu.tr

Duygu Koroncu Özbilen is an English language instructor at Yıldız Technical university. She graduated from İstanbul University with a B.A. degree in American Culture and Literature. She holds M.A. degrees in the fields of American Culture and Literature and ELT. She completed her first doctoral degree in Educational Management at Marmara University and she is on the verge of completing her second doctoral degree in English language and literature at İstanbul Yeni Yüzyıl University.
ORCID: 0000-0003-0018-6389/ **E-mail**: ozbilenduygu@gmail.com

Dominic Richard holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Edinburgh. His research interests lie in the meaning making mechanics and polysemic strategies of Modernist and contemporary fictions. As such, he focuses on intra- and inter-textual practices. Richard has written on James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Dante, and Robert Frost.
ORCID: 0009-0000-2729-0974/ **E-mail**: drichard@phbs.pku.edu.cn

İsmail Onur Onat graduated from Istanbul University, Department of English Language and Literature in 2018 as valedictorian. He completed his M.A. in 2021 at Istanbul University, Department of American Culture and Literature with his thesis titled "The Representation of Masculinity in the Novels of William Faulkner". Sonat, who is doing his Ph.D. at Ege University, Department of English Language and Literature, is writing his doctoral thesis on theories of temporality and spatiality in graphic novels. Sonat, who has book chapters and publications in various national/international journals, has been working as a lecturer at Haliç University since 2020.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6483-749X / **E-mail**: onursonat@halic.edu.tr

Gamze Yaşayanlar holds a B.A. and M.A. in English Language and Literature from Ege University. She received her Ph.D. entitled "Storytelling: Remaking Maning through Collective Memory and Language" at the same institution in 2023. She is currently working as a lecturer at the School of Foreign Languages. Her academic interests include issues related to identity, memory and the construction of reality along with postmodernism and cognitive literary studies.
ORCID: 0000-0001-5501-4838/ **E-mail:** yasayanlargamze@hotmail.com

Subrata Chandra Mozumder is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of English, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA. He is also workingas an Assistant Professor (On Study Leave) in the Department of English at Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He earned a B.A. (Hons.) and an M.A. in English degrees from the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. He was also awarded the M.Phil. in English for his thesis on the poetry of Judith Wright, Sylvia Plath, and Kamala Das by the same university in 2015. His areas of interest include, but are not restricted to, transnational feminist literature and diaspora studies, contemporary South Asian poetry, modernist poetry, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies.
ORCID: 0000-0003-2579-6335**/ E-mail:** subrata.eng@diu.edu.bd / subrata-chandra.mozumder1@louisiana.edu.